Talked to Death: Show and Tell in Raymond Chandler and John D. MacDonald

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Abstract

Confronted with the gradual erosion of the once-stable signs of the Story—plot, character, motivation, and truth—Raymond Chandler turns to the other main component of narrative, Discourse, to discover a reliable ground, and finds it in the act of narration itself, the enunciation of the speaking subject. In Chandler's fiction the detective's defiant Discourse finally masters the world's sad Story. As a rule, Marlowe's enunciation sticks to and rehearses the basic facts of the story. Marlowe does from time to time engage in personal commentary, statements that make reference to his opinions concerning the characters or events of the fictional world, but he very rarely resorts to ideological commentary, sweeping statements about the culture or society he traverses. He shows readers his world; he does not tell them about it. In The Long Goodbye, however, he begins to badger the reader, indulging in ideological commentaries that convert his comments into lectures. In the Travis McGee novels, John D. MacDonald continues this practice, allowing McGee to assume the magisterial privilege of telling readers any number of things, in effect talking them to death. This essay focuses on Chandler's The Long Goodbye and MacDonald's A Deadly Shade of Gold to discuss the line of filiation between the two authors.

1. Story and Discourse in Raymond Chandler

“Yes, . . . I talk too much. Lonely men always talk too much. Either that or they don’t talk at all.”

Philip Marlowe in Raymond Chandler’s The Little Sister (8)

At the beginning of chapter eight in The High Window, Philip Marlowe’s narration takes a curious and unprecedented turn. Marlowe launches into a three-paragraph denunciation of Bunker Hill, the city his investigation has led him to. “Bunker Hill is old town, lost town, shabby town, crook town,” his diatribe begins (70). He describes in the first paragraph how the once-upscale Gothic mansions have deteriorated and devolved into cheap rooming houses. In the second paragraph, he talks about the “flyblown restaurants” and “ratty hotels” that are scattered throughout the town. The third paragraph consists of a condemnation of the people who live in Bunker Hill, a searing harangue that begins, “Out of the apartment houses come women who should be young but have faces like stale beer” (71). This extended critique of a locale marks a pivotal moment in Marlowe’s narrational history, one that anticipates the narrational practices of John D. MacDonald’s Travis McGee.

In order to explain fully the significance of this moment, we need to take a theoretical excursion. Narrative theorists identify two main signifying systems within a narrative, the Story and the Discourse. The former consists of the sign-vehicles making up
the fictional world and its events, the signs that designate the basic elements of narrative—plot, character, setting. The latter consists of the sign-vehicles that refer to and comprise the speech act of the mediating narrator. Discourse manifests itself in several ways, but, for the purposes of this essay, the most important form can be termed *narrational commentaries*. These commentaries occur at the statement level of the enunciation, when the narrator discourses freely about elements of his world.

In the course of telling a story, the narrator occasionally makes statements of a descriptive or normative nature about the characters, events, or settings. As regards detective fiction the two most important types of such statements are *personal* and *ideological* (roughly corresponding to statements of self and society).* Personal commentaries* make specific reference to the speaker’s opinions, beliefs, judgments, or attitudes concerning the characters or events of the fictional world. The narrator renders an opinion about a specific aspect of that world. The narrator of *Daisy Miller*, for example, tells the reader that Frederick Winterbourne “had a great relish for feminine beauty; he was addicted to observing and analyzing it” (James 53), thereby signaling from the very start Winterbourne’s disinterest and detachment where the opposite sex is concerned.

The second major category of discursive statements can be referred to as *ideological* because they bespeak the ideology that informs the narrative. The narrator makes a value-loaded generalization about some aspect of the fictional world. This kind of commentary presupposes the existence of a reading community that shares the value system, ideational matrix, or episteme in which the statements are rooted. Jane Austen’s narrator, for example, possesses enough sociocultural assurance to begin *Pride and Prejudice* with the categorical assertion that “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” Austen perhaps intends some irony, but the comment indicates an awareness on the speaker’s part of a cultural community for which such statements have validity. Statements such as these operate on two assumptions: first, that the narrator is an expert about his or her world and can therefore pontificate about it; and second, that the statement carries a matter-of-fact validity for the reader. The reader accepts it as “a truth universally acknowledged.”

Chandler’s treatment of Story and Discourse and his deployment of narrational commentaries are groundbreaking for detective fiction in a couple of senses. As I have argued elsewhere, Chandler’s novels record the gradual erosion of the once-stable signs of the Story: they constitute a systematic dismantling of the readability and reliability of

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1 There is a third form of narrational statements, *metalingual commentaries*, consisting of explicit comments on, or references to, the narrative act. For any number of reasons, the speaker chooses to address specifically the particulars of his or her unfolding fiction (or those by others) and thus exposes or explores the enabling codes of fiction. A good example would be the narrator Tristram Shandy. Detective fiction rarely contains this type of commentary. As his essay “The Simple Art of Murder” makes clear, Chandler is committed to “realism” in his detective fiction, which for him means depicting a world that can be summed up synecdochically as “mean streets.” He wants readers to identify wholeheartedly with his detective, to immerse themselves in his adventures as he prowls those streets and tells his story. Metalingual commentary would remind readers that they are reading a narrative and thus distance them from the unfolding action. For a thorough examination of the enunciation of the narrator and the function of personal, ideological, and metalingual commentary, see Malmgren, “Reading Authorial Narration: The Example of *The Mill on the Floss.*”
concepts such as Truth, Justice, Motivation, and Character (Anatomy of Murder 91-112). As a result, basic elements of fiction—plot, character, setting—can no longer serve as a locus of value or reliable ground in Chandler’s fiction. The exception to this process of unzipping or dismantling is the detective protagonist, about whom Chandler is distinctly ambivalent. Part of him wants to turn the detective into a heroic knight-errant: “But down these mean streets,” he tells readers in an oft-quoted passage from an essay, “a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this type of story must be such a man.” For Chandler the detective is a figure drawn from Romance, and he draws attention to the genre of Romance and to the medieval quest tradition by making Marlowe’s name a kind of anagram for Malory and by featuring the painting of a knight-errant on the opening pages of his first novel, The Big Sleep. Chandler ends the above characterization of his protagonist in unqualified terms: “He is the hero. He is everything” (“Simple Art” 237).

Chandler may describe the detective as untarnished, but he is nonetheless aware that the private eye is inevitably personally touched and morally compromised by the sordid world that he traverses. The novelist makes this clear in The Big Sleep, which initially sets Marlowe up as a veritable knight figure, but then chronicles his morally questionable behaviors in the Sternwood case. As dutiful knight, Marlowe undertakes to carry out the wishes of liege lord General Sternwood. But strict adherence to the feudal code of loyalty to his client eventually implicates Marlowe in two murders. Blindly protecting his clients’ interests, he fails to report Arthur Geiger’s murder. In so doing, he causes the murder of Joe Brody, perpetrated by Geiger’s lover. When the captain of police points out Marlowe’s culpability, the latter protests lamely, “I guess I did wrong, but I wanted to protect my client” (108). In addition, Marlowe fingers Harry Jones, someone he likes and admires, by offhandedly asking the hoodlum Eddie Mars if Mars has put a tail on him (Marlowe). Having been alerted to Jones’s intervention, Mars gets hitman Lash Canino to eliminate Jones cold-bloodedly, even as Marlowe helplessly eavesdrops from an adjoining room. In the course of prosecuting his quest, Marlowe thus catalyzes several murders and himself becomes tainted. As author Megan Abbott notes, “In the final paragraphs, Marlowe turns a hard gaze upon himself. All this ugliness happened on his watch. He let it happen. Sometimes he made it happen” (“The Big Sleep”). Knowing this, the demoralized detective makes one last true confession to the reader: “Me, I was part of the nastiness now” (230). Chandler is canny enough to understand that no modern knight passes through his corrupt and corrupting world unblemished.

Ironically then, Marlowe’s strict adherence to his own code inevitably tends to undermine his status as untarnished locus of value. But Chandler is not satisfied with a completely desolate world, one in which all values are undermined, a place apparently without center or anchor, where nothing counts. Once the signs of Story have been undermined, Chandler turns to the other main component of narrative, Discourse, in order to discover a reliable ground. He finds that ground in the act of narration itself, the enunciation of the speaking subject, the unique way that the private detective talks about his world. In Chandler’s fiction, the detective is partially redeemed, not so much by the

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2 At one point in The Lady in the Lake, Marlowe sarcastically pillories his role in discovering the carnage caused by his investigation: “It’s only Marlowe, finding another body. He does it rather well by now. Murder-a-day Marlowe, they call him. They have a meat wagon following him around to follow up on the business he finds” (68).
Story he tells, but by the way that he tells it. This is finally why, for Chandler, first-person narration is the *sine qua non* of his fiction. The narration and the voice that renders it represent an affirmation of signification, an assertion of mastery and control over unruly experience. As one critic says, Marlowe’s “aggressively tough, ‘wise’ language is more than a reflection of his world or his personality: it is a means of dominating that world by defining it in his own terms” (Stowe 379). The “tough talk” of the detective is “a linguistic assertion of power over experience” (Christianson 153). When the case is over, Marlowe’s inimitable voice is what stays with readers—it’s the one thing they can count on. Put simply, in Chandler’s fiction the detective’s defiant Discourse confronts and masters the world’s sordid Story.

2. Marlowe’s Discourse

“You talk too damn much,” I said, “and it’s too damn much about you.”

Philip Marlowe in Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* (25)

In terms of Discourse, we can say that Marlowe’s enunciation remains essentially laconic; it does not contain a lot in the way of *narrational commentaries*. Marlowe generally sticks to and rehearses the basic facts of the fictional story, supplying particularized details about the who, what, why, and where of his ongoing investigation. He clings to the facts in part just because the world he inhabits is so contingent and chaotic that his enunciation struggles to make sense of what happens to him. As one critic says, “The narrative of the hard-boiled detective is a struggle to make meaning” (Christianson 160). A detective in a similar dilemma, Sue Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone, begins one of her narrations as follows: “My name is Kinsey Millhone and most of my reports begin the same way. I start by asserting who I am and what I do, as though by stating the same few basic facts I can make sense out of everything that comes afterward” (*B Is for Burglar* 1). In detective fiction, facts have a solidity and presence that the world lacks. Given the fallen and exigent state of Marlowe’s world, crafting those “few basic facts” into a meaningful narrative is something he is at pains to do.

In general, then, Marlowe prefers the facts of the story to speak for themselves. He does, however, engage from time to time in personal commentary, statements that make reference to his opinions concerning the characters or events of the fictional world. When he meets Vivian Regan in *The Big Sleep*, for example, he sums her up in two short sentences, one descriptive, the other evaluative: “She was worth a stare. She was trouble” (17). Later in the same novel, Marlowe expresses his approval of petty crook Harry Jones’s insight and loquacity: “The little man wasn’t so dumb after all. A three for a quarter grifter wouldn’t even think such thoughts, much less know how to express them” (165). In *The Long Goodbye*, he describes police Captain Gregorius as the “type of copper that is getting rarer but by no means extinct, the kind that solves crimes with the bright light, the soft sap, the kick to the kidneys, the knee to the groin” (44). At the end of *The Little Sister*, he renders this assessment of murderess Dorothy Gonzalez as he leaves her for the last time: “I looked back as I opened the door. Slim, dark and lovely and smiling. Reeking with sex. Utterly beyond the moral laws of this or any world I could imagine. She was one for the book all right” (248).
Personal commentary is thus one of the ways Marlowe demonstrates his mastery over his unruly Story. It puts people in their places. He adds his own idiosyncratic signature to these observations by inserting the telling and distinctive figure of speech. Anyone can encounter a behemoth such as Moose Molloy, but only Marlowe can see him as “about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food” (Farewell, My Lovely 3), using a simile that at once captures the character’s incongruity, taste in clothing, and sense of menace. Marlowe elsewhere describes a publishing house representative as “a guy who talked with commas, like a heavy novel” (The Long Goodbye 82). Encountering an accountant with bristling eyebrows and a receding chin, Marlowe epitomizes his character in a couple of sentences: “The upper part of his face meant business. The lower part was just saying goodbye” (The Lady in the Lake 91). As one critic succinctly puts it, “Marlowe’s wit is his weapon” (Guetti 141).

Marlowe thus uses personal commentaries to orchestrate and channel the readers’ reaction to the specific characters and events of his world, and he adds figurative language and wisecracks to make those commentaries count. But he very rarely resorts to ideological commentary, sweeping statements about the society, culture, or episteme in which he finds himself. Not for him expansive and glittering generalities about the thuggish mobsters, crooked cops, shyster lawyers, or femmes fatales he meets. Not for him the sweeping statement about the “mean streets” his quest leads him down. Marlowe’s procedure is to show readers his world; he does not tell them about it.

This is why the diatribe against Bunker Hill is somewhat disconcerting. Marlowe in effect “goes off” on the town. His commentary drags on for three paragraphs, full of overgeneralizations about the milieu and the inhabitants. “Bunker Hill is old town, lost town, shabby town, crook town,” he states baldly, shifting to the present tense—as much ideological commentary does—in order to indicate that his pronouncement is now and forever the case. The shift from the epic preterit to the present tense is one of the key markers of ideological commentary, signaling that the narrator is stepping outside of narrative time and registering a truth for all time, a “truth universally acknowledged.” In addition, Marlowe’s dropping of the indefinite article makes the town into something generic, a state of being and not a specific locale. Ideological statements move from the specific to the general, from a statement from and about the individual to a generalization about a way of life. Marlowe’s extended diatribe makes such a statement about Bunker Hill. In so doing, it badgers readers, compelling their compliance and complicity. Readers may not usually frequent this part of their world, Marlowe in effect says, but they need to accept as truth what he tells them about it.

*The High Window* came out in 1942. The novels that come before and immediately after contain no such disquisitions. The Bunker Hill moment is all the more significant in that it prefigures what Marlowe does more and more often in Chandler’s postwar novels, *The Little Sister* (1949) and *The Long Goodbye* (1953). These novels feature a narrator who is much less reluctant to engage in the kinds of ideological commentaries that convert observations into lectures. In *The Little Sister*, for example, Marlowe without warning harangues the reader, complaining about freeway drivers, fast-food joints, restaurant customers, and movie stars. The lecture goes on for several pages (79-81) and does not contribute to the story he is telling; it is gratuitous. Worrying that he is coming across as more than a little cranky, he chastises himself in a dissociated way, carrying on a conversation with himself: “You’re not human tonight,
Marlowe. Maybe I never was or ever will be. . . . You’ve got the wrong attitude, Marlowe. You’re not human tonight” (80). For Marlowe, part of being “human” means keeping quiet about one’s superfluous opinions.

Later in the same novel, Marlowe lectures readers about Hollywood (158), about police officers (165), and about office workers (177). Chandler in fact seems to be aware that his narrator is overusing the narrational channel to hector the reader. As a result, he embeds Marlowe’s last lecture, a six-paragraph denunciation of the city of Los Angeles that begins “I used to like this town,” into a one-sided “conversation” the detective has with Dolores Gonzalez. Marlowe bemoans in detail what has happened to his once “goodhearted and peaceful” city, a place where people “used to sleep out on porches” (183). He lambastes the “big money” boys, whose “flash restaurants and night clubs” draw “grifters and con men and female bandits.” He goes after the “luxury trades,” staffed by “pansy decorators” and “Lesbian designers.” When he finishes by eviscerating those that live in the “fancy suburbs,” Gonzalez then makes her sole, understated contribution, “You are bitter tonight, amigo” (184).

The postwar Marlowe is indeed bitter, and that bitterness spills out even more in The Long Goodbye. Critics often refer to it as his “best” and “most novelistic”; Sean McCann, for example, calls it “[Chandler’s] most accomplished work by traditional novelistic standards” (177). But what stands out to me is his overindulgence in ideological commentary. In the course of the novel, Marlowe complains about the long, dull drive from Tijuana to L.A. (37); about cars stolen in L.A. that are swapped out for heroin from Mexico as part of “the good neighbor policy” (43); and about the crooked doctors and lawyers who are “[n]ot too skillful, not too clean, not too much on the ball” (128). He fulminates about the photogenic phonies who hold public office (268); about the ubiquity of crime in L.A., “a city lost and beaten and full of emptiness” (274-75), and about the banality of small town life—“You take it, friend,” he says, in an apparent direct address to the reader (249). He rattles on about a tedious and boring “day in the life of a P.I.” (158), in the process undercutting the “glamor” of the job: “What makes a man stay with it nobody knows. You don’t get rich, you don’t often have much fun. Sometimes you get beaten up or shot at or tossed into the jailhouse. Once in a long while you get dead” (158). Marlowe here reverts to a generalized “you”—as he does elsewhere—to indicate the universality of the comment. The “you” draws readers in and makes them complicit in the judgment rendered. This is what it is like for all detectives, he informs readers. It should be noted that most of these lectures do not contribute significantly to the unfolding action.

The commentaries in the novel that particularly stand out have to do with doing jail time (eight paragraphs, 51-53) and with blonde-haired women (89-90). Marlowe depicts jail time, one of the hazards of his profession, as the ultimate experience of depersonalization: “In jail a man has no personality. He is a minor disposal problem and a few entries on reports” (52). There is no conversation between cellmates: “He says nothing and you say nothing. There is nothing to communicate” (52). The entire experience is humiliating and demoralizing. The disquisition about blondes enumerates and describes nine different types, from the “small cute blonde who cheeps and twitters”

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3 Cf. T. R. Steiner: “Chandler’s The Long Goodbye seems to me the masterpiece that [Ross] Macdonald wanted for hardboiled detective fiction, the substantial work congruent with the mainstream novel” (180).
(89) to “the gorgeous show piece who will outlast three kingpin racketeers” (90). His list is so stereotyped and misogynistic that both critic Katy Waldman and author Megan Abbott have recently called him out for it. Could Marlowe reply, he would probably say that he is just telling the truth. As the cases of doing jail time and the kinds of blondes make clear, Marlowe is demonstrating to the reader his profound and wearying knowledge of women and the world.

Near the end of the novel, Chandler spares his narrator the enunciative burden of blatant ideological commentary by handing off two lectures to characters that Marlowe encounters. Detective Bernie Ohls is given the chance to sound off on gambling, and he tells Marlowe that gamblers “pander to a disease that is every bit as corrupting as dope” (350). When Ohls finishes his three-hundred-and-fifty word peroration, Marlowe sarcastically asks if getting it off his chest has made him feel better. Just as long-winded as Ohls is industrial magnate Harlan Potter, who unburdens himself to Marlowe on the “menace” of the free press and the “venal” power of money. Potter closes his denunciation by admitting that he is “beginning to sound like an editorial that has forgotten the point it wanted to make.” And so he is. What Marlowe draws from Potter’s lecture is the conclusion that “he [Potter] hated everything” (235). What the reader draws from all the speeches in the novel is the conclusion that Chandler is both “editorialist” and curmudgeon, someone who has pretty strong opinions about the world he is depicting—he hates almost everything—and who makes sure that these opinions get incorporated into his narrative.

This overload of ideological commentary is perhaps a response to the increasing sordidness of the postwar world the detective occupies. As one critic puts it, “In Chandler’s world evil is fundamentally tied to an overwhelming sickness in the society at large” (Rabinowitz 240). In the later novels, the ones written after World War II, the “sickness in the society” seems to be getting even worse: the world seems to be getting dirtier, the venality more widespread, the streets a little meaner. Or perhaps Marlowe is just more aware of, and opinionated about, the world’s corruption. In any event, Marlowe begins in these novels to indulge in ideological commentary to underscore his indictment of that world. The result is a text that in places hectors the reader.

Following in the discursive footsteps made by Chandler in his later novels, John D. MacDonald fashions a character named Travis McGee who really does find the world pretty awful. McGee’s is a “cold half-lit world where always the wrong thing happens and never the right” (Chandler, The Little Sister 80), and he invariably lets the reader know all about it.

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4 Sean McCann argues forcefully that Marlowe’s worldview did change drastically in the postwar era: “Nearly overnight, the United States had come to seem to Chandler less a society riven by hierarchical class antagonism than one built on a shallow, comfort-driven, and market-oriented consensus” (173). His chapter on Chandler bears close reading.
3. The Narration of Travis McGee

A tired looking ambulance crew—Poisonville gave them plenty of work—brought a litter into the room, ending Reno’s tale. I was glad of it. I had all the information I needed and sitting there listening and watching him talk himself to death wasn’t pleasant.

The Continental Op in Dashiell Hammett’s Red Harvest (215)

As argued above, the value in Chandler’s fiction rests in the protagonist’s narration—its insight, candor, courage, and wit. In a fallen and desolate world, Marlowe’s narration is the last, best, and only ground. Chandler writes inverted romances, and in “this subversion of romance, the knight’s only unequivocal victory is textual, the written, retrospective narrative of this subversion” (Fontana 165). Marlowe uses language “to assert control over one’s self and over situations, and to make sense of the chaotic and fragmented quality of experience—to dominate the world” (Christianson 153). In Chandler’s fiction, then, Marlowe’s enunciation, the “tough talk” embedded in the words on the page, serves as the story’s ultimate ground.

Some of the authors of detective fiction who follow Chandler are uncomfortable with his reliance on Discourse as the ultimate redeeming ground, in part, perhaps, because they are unable to match his discursive gifts. They need to find a locus of value, not solely in the detective’s speech act, but somewhere “out there,” in the fictional world. Naturally enough, they find that locus in the detective protagonist himself, whose “lonely questing figure” becomes for them an “absolute value” (Knight 287). These authors systematically heroicize their protagonists. Because conventional definitions no longer obtain in his world, the detective finds himself creating “his own concept of morality and justice” (Cawelti 143), one that the reader gives assent to. The detective serves as the untarnished origin of meaning and value in his world and becomes the only grounded sign, the sole entity present to itself. In the end, this kind of detective earns the sobriquet, Knight.

Acknowledging detective fiction’s indebtedness to the medieval romance, George Grella defines “its central problem” as “a version of the quest, both a search for the truth and an attempt to eradicate evil” (104). In general, Philip Marlowe is a knight who pursues both objectives, but for some of those who come after him the second object becomes paramount. The world they move in does not feature one perplexing murder and one antisocial perpetrator. It has become so corrupt and wicked that their narratives become orchestrated attempts “to eradicate evil.” The errant detective sallies forth, not so much to solve mysteries as to vanquish villains. As Grella remarks, the author of such fiction seems to be “more preoccupied with the character of the hero, the society he investigates, and the adventures he encounters, than with the central mystery, which gets pushed aside by individual scenes and situations” (115). In some novels, in fact, there is no “central

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5 Popular authors who fall in this category are Ross Macdonald, Robert Parker, Mickey Spillane, and, of course, John D. MacDonald.
mystery.” The plot does not need one because it is too busy with the heroic adventures of its knightly protagonist. In this case, the narrative genre slides from detective to thriller. The thriller necessarily heroicizes its protagonist (e.g., James Bond), if only to make sure that he rises above the evil in the Manichaeian world surrounding him.

The knight/detective in this kind of fiction lives up to a Chandler dictum: “He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world” (“Simple Art” 237). Sole proprietor of meaning and value, the detective possesses and demonstrates mastery of his world, both physically and verbally. The authors of this fiction generally use first-person narration to reinforce and amplify the detectives’ presence and centrality. In some cases, however, those authors are tempted by their detectives’ preeminence to invest their narrators with Author-ity, the privilege of speaking like an Author about their world. These detectives inflate the Discourse of their narrations, going beyond factual descriptions of that world and launching into extended value-laden disquisitions. In other words, they indulge in ideological commentary. This kind of abuse is built into the narrational economy, where the hero looms as the largest figure of all and speaks in the first person. Such a set-up encourages an exaggerated sense of Self on the part of the narrators, a condition that manifests itself in a license to unburden themselves of opinions and judgments. John D. MacDonald’s Travis McGee is a case in point.

McGee makes no bones about his role as knight-errant. He not infrequently refers to himself as a knight: he is a “tinhorn Gawain” (Tan and Sandy 52), one of the “tinhorn knights on a stumbling Rosinante from Rent-A-Steed” (Tan and Sandy 134). Like knights of old, he undertakes quests for Objects of Value. But his is an “ironic Knighthood” with a “spavined steed, second-class armor, a dubious lance, [and] a bent broadsword” (Deadly Shade of Gold 41), his precarious condition precipitated by the fallen nature of the modern world. The objects of value in this sort of world are more profane, not in the class of the Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail. McGee is, as he reminds the reader several times, a “salvage consultant” (Tan and Sandy 94), a euphemism for treasure hunter, someone who takes fifty percent of any treasure his quest unearths.

At the same time, however, there is a moral dimension to his endeavor; it is no accident that “salvage” and “salvation” share the same derivation. As Grimes remarks, “McGee continues to behave as if the title ‘salvage consultant’ was just technocratese for ‘savior’” (105). McGee tells us that he aims to “scrub clean the wide grimy world” (Tan and Sandy 51). As he says in A Deadly Shade of Gold, he is looking for the “chance, now and again, to lift [his lance] into a galumphing charge against capital E Evil, his brave battle oaths marred by an occasional hysterical giggle” (41). The phrase “deadly shade of gold” describes well the objects of McGee’s several quests, and we shall use the novel of that name for our “tutor text” (the concept is Roland Barthes’s, from S/Z [13]).

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6 For an overview of McGee’s various assertions of his role as “solitary knight in tin armor,” see Larry E. Grimes (104 ff.).

7 I have chosen this novel because it is illustrative of MacDonald’s practice. I could have used almost any of the other twenty Travis McGee novels. A Tan and Sandy Silence (1971), for example, is full of McGee lectures. McGee spends much of the first four chapters warning readers about the dangers of being kept by a “moneyed widow” (20), a fate he connects with giving in to inertia and death. He holds forth on the attractions of beach bunnies (26), the proliferation of condominiums (26-27), the ineffectiveness of social action (51-52), “color prejudice in the islands” (60), Darwin and sexual attraction (71), the problematics of casual sex (90-91), and the secret to operating an Austin Moke (92-93), all within the first hundred pages of the novel. Most of these topics are peripheral or unrelated to the unfolding action.
narration, we shall see, contains any number of “tutorials.”

The first form those tutorials take is personal commentaries, which McGee is more than willing to indulge in. In the first two chapters of *Deadly Shade*, for example, he extols the qualities of his 1936 Rolls (Miss Agnes), informs readers that Nora Gardino’s “figure is superb, and her legs are extraordinary” (11), raves about the “superior” shopping center that Nora’s shop is located in (13), and characterizes his friend Sam Taggart as a prime example of a walking contradiction (15-16). McGee hammers the reader with these kinds of personal evaluations throughout the novel.

What really distinguishes McGee from Marlowe, however, is the former’s willingness to propound ideological pronouncements. Grella informs us that the modern knight needs “a sure knowledge of his world” (106), and Travis McGee possesses a vast fund of knowledge of that sort. He is a veritable fount of wisdom, and he has no qualms about sharing it with the reader in *A Deadly Shade of Gold*. In discursive asides, he tells the reader how to open a beer can (6), how to disguise one’s handwriting (64), and how to spot a good cop (67). He expounds on the number of girls in Fort Lauderdale that summer (5), magazine articles by Southern liberals (39), and the modern large university (44-46). He expatiates on the “sterile and incomparable fluorescent squalor” of New York City (49), the admirable qualities of Cuban emigres in Miami (67), the best weapon to carry (87), the short attention spans of newsmen (200), and the perverted values of the very rich (245). He explains why being in bed with a woman “is dangerous country” (108) and why life in general is “like a big ship”: “You have to drop the dead ones over the side. An insignificant little splash, and the ship goes on” (123). There is no bottom to what he knows about his world.

Grella informs us that the knight’s knowledge of his world must be embedded in “a keen moral sense” (106). That certainly applies to McGee, whose wide knowledge of the world informs his trenchant moral assessment of it. His concerns include “the role of man in modern society, the decay of morals, the new permissiveness, [and] group standards versus inner values” (73-74). His general opinion is that “man is . . . a wretched piece of work” (189). He complains that humans are, unfortunately, herd animals who all “turn to face the wind” (187). At the global level he espouses the “virus theory of mankind,” describing an earth where a “little cave-dwelling virus mutated, slew the things that balanced the ecology, and turned the fair planet sick” (37).

His bête noire, he tells us in capital letters, is “the Totally Adjusted Community,” where the “mavericks” and “cultural mistakes” have been “weeded out” (46-47). This regimentation has been fostered by the “life-adjustment educators” and the “hucksters of consumer goods,” who have taught us “to march in close and obedient ranks” and are “doing their damnedest to make us all think alike, look alike, smell alike and die alike” (205). In dire circumstances, a more nameless “They” acts ruthlessly against those that stray from the herd: “They kill off the good ones. They gut the dreamers” (72). He feels so strongly about all this that he shouts out his countervailing credo in capital letters: “The Only Thing in the World Worth a Damn is the Strange, Touching, Pathetic, Awesome Nobility of the Individual Human Spirit” (41).

At one point McGee says that he doesn’t need “object lessons” and “sermonizing” but maybe other people do (96). *A Deadly Shade of Gold* proves that there is no “maybe” about it. In it, as in his other novels, McGee assumes the magisterial privilege of hectoring his readers. His narrations are so full of lectures, advice, and judgments that it sometimes seems that MacDonald is more interested in delivering opinions than in
telling a story. For example, MacDonald confesses that he added the character Meyer, in large part, just so that he could enfold more ideological commentaries into the narrative, converting them from discourse into dialogue: “I brought in Meyer about the fourth book because there were too many interior monologues” (qtd. in Hirshberg, John D. MacDonald 59). With both McGee and Meyer dissertating away, in some McGee novels the Story being told struggles for dominance with the Discourse that enfolds it. Not infrequently, Discourse predominates.

A Deadly Shade of Gold contains a good example of this dynamic. There is no overriding reason why McGee’s pursuit of the gold figurines need take him to Mexico. It could just as easily have gone from Florida to Hollywood and villain Claude Boody and from there to Los Angeles and villain Calvin Tomberlin. Of course, the addition of the Carlos Menterez episode does allow McGee to make a three-fold passage deeper and deeper into the sink and stink of corruption surrounding the figurines—from Menterez to Boody to Tomberlin. But, more importantly, Menterez gives author MacDonald a Cuban connection, something he very much wants and needs. Deadly Shade was published in February 1965. It was therefore composed in the months following the failed Bay of Pigs operation. McGee, in fact, makes offhand reference to the operation as “the big picnic” (220). The introduction of the Menterez segment makes it possible for MacDonald, his mouthpiece McGee, and other characters to expatiate about the Cuban situation. McGee gets to enjoy male bonding (a McGee specialty) with Paul Dominguez and Raul Tenero, the former of whom discourses about the Bay of Pigs (219-20), the latter of whom gives a long lecture on the quality of life under Fulgencio Batista (68-70). The Cuban connection also allows McGee to participate in a male/female bonding (another specialty) with Connie Melgar, who lectures McGee about those who pretend to struggle against the “liberal-socialist-commy conspiracy,” but who are actually “moles” serving the designs of international communism (227). Author MacDonald longs to discourse about Cuba and communism, and the Cuban angle enables him to do so—in the form of the dialogue of characters and not the labored opinions of McGee. It is a case where, as Jonathan Culler neatly puts it, “the supposed priority of event to discourse is inverted” (183). Another example of this inversion might be the visit McGee makes to the university to learn more about the figurines, a trip that gives him the chance to sound off about an institution that he clearly does not respect. The modern university is “a place to train ants to invent insecticides,” where “tailored golfers” give “brilliant lectures” suitable for publication in Reader’s Digest. McGee pays a visit to the university just so that he can unload on it. The unfolding of the plot submits to the author’s discursive demands. In other words, Discourse drives the Story—the show exists to serve the tell.

Over time McGee’s discourses create an idiosyncratic persona, a character profile of particular ideas and values. Part of the persona McGee projects in his enunciation is that of besieged white masculinity, and at times his target audience seems to be other embattled white males. In fact, he not infrequently serves up a chauvinistic program meant to appeal to that audience. His primary target is women, many of whom are systematically belittled. Some of them are mindless “sun bunnies,” stereotypical “genus playmate californius,” who need to be amused (Deadly Shade 100); others are “dull little” girls that one keeps on the side (16). Even the intelligent women have an innate need to please men (35), and all the women that McGee meets eventually succumb to his

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8 “Interior monologues” is MacDonald’s way of referring to McGee’s authorial disquisitions.
personal charm and attractiveness. He sleeps with nearly all of them (he makes more than fifty conquests in the twenty-one novels in which he appears) and writes off the one who resists him in *The Deadly Shade of Gold*, Shaja Dobrak, as “unused [!] and prideful” (37). One of his female conquests in the novel tells him, “if there are any good guys at all, you’re one of them” (190), but his actions towards women undercut that claim. His attitude towards women, in fact, sometimes seems driven by misogyny and fear. In places in both *A Tan and Sandy Silence* and *A Deadly Shade of Gold*, for example, he brutalizes and terrorizes women who happen to get in his way. In short, MacDonald’s McGee resorts to both violence and rhetorical excess to man-handle the women in his world.

Raymond Chandler published *The Long Goodbye* in 1953; the first McGee novel, *The Deep Blue Goodbye*, came out in 1964. In between those two events, on July 2, 1957, MacDonald wrote a letter to Raymond Chandler saying that he (MacDonald) had taken up writing detective fiction after he had been “firmly fired from several jobs” (qtd. in Hirshberg, *JDM* 7). The similarity between the two titles suggests that MacDonald does indeed follow in the footsteps made by the later Chandler. Summarizing the line of filiation between the two authors, we can say that the authoritative voice of Marlowe becomes the authoritarian jeremiad of McGee, that Chandler’s laconic and understated Investigator becomes MacDonald’s loquacious and overbearing Ideologue. In Chandler, Discourse serves to embroider the Story; in MacDonald, it drives the Story. Ironically enough, the magisterial privileges that McGee assumes as proprietor of his world undermine and eventually sabotage his standing as moral arbiter. Even as he is espousing an individualistic ideology, McGee is propounding a totalitarian set of values. In fact, he is dictating them. We go from discourse to diatribe, from wisecrack to harangue; from authority to authoritarianism, from Odysseus (the quest figure) to Hector (the bully). The result is something that approaches a self-righteous screed.

Turning back to Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye*, we should note that some critics have claimed that it is the disquisitions in the novel that qualify it as “novelistic.” According to Frank McShane, “[Chandler] enriches *The Long Goodbye* with comments of all sorts about the society in which Marlowe lives” (205). “Chandler has been criticized for interrupting his plot with these apparently extraneous, often splenetic, interludes,” another critic acknowledges, but that critique of *The Long Goodbye* is short-sighted because it “demonstrates rather traditional expectations of detective mysteries and totally neglects the larger story that Chandler has here set himself to tell” (Speir 67). The ideological commentaries, in other words, make the detective novel something else, something “enriched” and “larger.” Chandler himself endorses this opinion. Referring to the sociological and philosophical heft of the novel, he says, “But alas, one grows up, one becomes complicated and unsure, one becomes interested in moral dilemmas, rather than who cracked who in the head” (*Raymond Chandler Speaking* 233). As one critic concludes, “Chandler’s comments on *The Long Goodbye* show him aware of having written a less hard-boiled Marlowe and, in so doing, a more complex version of the detective novel” (Smith 193).

MacDonald seems to agree with this line of thought. He deliberately sets out to write something that is more novelistic. In his “Introduction” to a special issue of *Clue* devoted to his writings, he declares that “[n]o one can tell me that it is not within my authority to try to move my suspense novels as close as I can get to the ‘legitimate’ novels of manners and morals.” Critic Edward Hirshberg endorses this move, adding that
McGee’s “penchant for speculation about the social evils . . . adds a substantial depth and significance to MacDonald’s work, both as a teller of tales . . . and as a serious novelist” (“JDM as Social Critic” 134). In order to create “legitimate novels of manners and mores” and to earn the sobriquet “serious novelist,” MacDonald goes on to tell us just what he is going to do: “I shall continue with my sociological asides, with McGee’s and Meyer’s dissertations on the condition of medicine, retirement, facelifting, ear mites, road construction, white collar theft, apartment architecture, magazine editing, acid rain, billyrock, low fidelity, and public service in America today” (“Introduction” 73-74). “Ear mites” and “billyrock,” indeed. What MacDonald gives as part of his grand novelistic show, the reader takes as intrusive ideological tell. After finishing a McGee novel and listening to his various “dissertations,” the reader may well feel talked to death.

Works Cited


