

## KANT ON DETECTIVE FICTION\*

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"Chief Inspector-Detective Alleyn wants you in the study," said Nigel . . .

"Oh!" said Bruce, rousing himself. "Thank you, sir, I'll come along. It'll be a bit of a change after these urbashus borders. I'm not a great nature-lover myself."

"No?"

"No. Altogether too 'ap'azard to my way of thinking. Sloppy. That's Nature."

Ngaio Marsh, *A Man Lay Dead*  
(New York, 1980), ch. 5, p. 176

"And where are you going next?" he asked him over his shoulder.

"Birmingham," answered the actor, puffing a cigarette. "Didn't I tell you I was a Futurist? I really do believe in those things if I believe in anything. Change, bustle and new things every morning. I am going to Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Hull, Huddersfield, Glasgow, Chicago—in short, to enlightened, energetic, civilized society!"

"In short," said Muscari, "to the real Paradise of Thieves."

G.K. Chesterton, "The Paradise of Thieves,"  
In *The Wisdom of Father Brown*  
(Harmondsworth, England, 1970), p. 41

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## Prologue

The title of this essay is unavoidably provocative to both students of Kant and—although probably less so—to devotees of detective fiction. It should be compared to Dorothy Sayers' 1935 Oxford lecture, "Aristotle on Detective Fiction,"<sup>1</sup> in which she analyzed the formal literary characteristics of the genre. But while the title of her lecture might do little more than evoke a bemused smile, the title of mine seems to be an oxymoron, as it were, which shocks both our moral and our literary sensibilities. Can there be any connection between Kant's stern moralism, on the one hand, and the ostensible rampant immorality of the detective story (especially the American hard-boiled type, on the other? My contention is that there can, that its ostensible immorality is the cloak for a stern moralism—that indeed stern moralism and rampant immorality imply and require each other—and that this reflects the legacy which Kant and his companion and operative, Hobbes, have bequeathed to us. It is surely no accident that one of Kant's earliest followers in England, Thomas De Quincey, wrote an essay—now little read—called "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts,"<sup>2</sup> in which the speaker ironically accuses Kant's ethical principles as possible accessories to murder while ironically affirming his own morality, as a prelude to an argument which is ironically grounded in Kant's views regarding the beautiful and the sublime:

Before I begin, let me say a word or two to certain prigs, who affect to speak of our society [i.e., the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder] as if it were in some degree immoral in its tendency. Immoral! God bless my soul, gentlemen! what is it that people mean? I am for morality, and always shall be, and for virtue, and all that; and I do affirm, and always shall (let what will come of it), that murder is an improper line of conduct, highly improper; and I do not stick to assert that any man who deals in murder must have very incorrect ways of thinking, and truly inaccurate principles; and, so far from aiding and abetting him by pointing out his victim's hiding place, as a great moralist of Germany [i.e., Kant] declared it every good man's duty to do, I would . . . have him apprehended . . . . But what then? Everything in this world has two handles. Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle . . . or it may also be treated *aesthetically*, as the Germans call it—that is, in relation to good taste.<sup>3</sup>

This is a statement which summarizes an attitude implicit in the tradition of political philosophy initiated by Machiavelli and Bacon and grounded by Hobbes and Descartes, a tradition which first culminated in the teachings of Rousseau and Kant regarding self-legislation and the rights of man, a tradition which especially in Kant's formulation pervades all subsequent thought and finds expression not only in the abstruse philosophical tradition which eventuates in linguistic analysis and existentialism, but also in so-called popular literature or low culture. This is the tradition of legitimated presocial murder, on the one hand, and inviolable duty, on the other. De Quincey's speaker makes the following remark:

[55]

The first murder is familiar to you all. As the inventor of murder, and the father of the art, Cain must have been a man of first-rate genius.<sup>4</sup>

If Machiavelli was the Cain of the modern tradition, Hobbes gave him an earthly home in the state of nature (*Leviathan*), Descartes exalted his will (*Passions of the Soul*, third part, articles 152 and 153), Spinoza gave him a cosmic home which is mathematically and universally rule-governed (*Ethics*), Rousseau generalized his will (*Social Contract*), and Kant identified that will with (practical) reason and made the unsocial sociality of humans the basis for an unending asymptotic approach to its political realization.<sup>5</sup>

De Quincey's speaker clearly sees the connection between philosophy and murder as intrinsic to the post-Machiavellian tradition:

In . . . assassinations of princes and statesmen there is nothing to excite our wonder. Important changes often depend on their deaths . . . . But there is another class of assassinations, which has prevailed from an early period of the seventeenth century, that really *does* surprise me: I mean the assassination of philosophers. For, gentlemen, it is a fact that every philosopher of eminence for the two last centuries has either been murdered, or at the very least been very near it—insomuch that, if a man calls himself a philosopher and never had his life attempted, rest assured there is nothing in him . . . .

The first great philosopher of the seventeenth century (if we except Bacon and Galileo) was Descartes; and, if ever one could say of a man that he was all *but* murdered—murdered within an inch—one must say it of him. [Here follows an account of Descartes' encounter with murderous pirates on the Zuyder Zee.] And the next great philosopher of Europe undoubtedly *was* murdered. This was Spinoza.

I know very well the common opinion about him is that he died in bed. Perhaps he did, but he was murdered for all that; and this I shall prove . . . . [Here follows a detective-like reconstructive account of Spinoza's death at an early age at the hands of an alleged physician who prescribed for him an alleged healthful meal and then vanished.]

Hobbes—but why, or on what principle, I never could understand—was not murdered. This was a capital oversight of the professional men in the seventeenth century; because in every light he was a fine subject for murder . . . . However, gentlemen, though he was not murdered, I am happy to assure you that (by his own account) he was three times very near being murdered—which is consolatory . . . . For, in a most abusive letter . . . he wrote . . . insinuating that he was likely to be murdered for his religion, which would have been a high joke indeed—Tom's being brought to the stake for religion!<sup>6</sup>

Such an account of modern philosophy deserves a place next to the copy of Duke's *Celebrated Criminal Cases of America* on a corner of which rests the alarm clock in Sam Spade's apartment.<sup>7</sup>

## I

But what has this to do with Kant? It may seem to have little to do with the author of the *Fundamental Principles*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, narrowly conceived in isolation from the author of *Perpetual [56] Peace*, *An Old Question Raised Again*, and *Conjectural Beginning of the Human Story*, where Kant's wry hardheadedness emerges most clearly. For the satirical motto, "perpetual peace," for which humans must hope and strive to attain, is built on the burial ground painted on the Dutch innkeeper's sign.<sup>8</sup> As Kant observes:

One cannot suppress a certain indignation when one sees men's actions on the great world-stage and finds . . . everything in the large woven together from folly, childish vanity, even from childish malice and destructiveness. In the end, one does not know what to think of the human race, so conceited in its gifts. Since the philosopher cannot presuppose any individual purpose among men in their great drama, there is no other expedient for him except to try to see if he can discover a natural purpose in this idiotic course of things human.<sup>9</sup>

And yet without this idiocy, the human race will never progress, because it will never develop the capacities which it requires for political and moral perfection. The war of all against all, then, is the necessary precondition for progress, and it is only through war with its attendant preparations and anxieties that humans will come to see the desirability of striving to achieve global peace. War must become so burdensome and so threatening that it becomes intolerable enough to humans that they decide to abolish it.<sup>10</sup> The likelihood of this is extremely small. For even though human beings are like trees in a forest, in which the struggle of each tree to nurture itself at the cost of all other trees produces upright trees,<sup>11</sup> still "from such crooked wood as man is made of, nothing perfectly straight can be built."<sup>12</sup> In other words, human beings are not like trees, because it is possible for them simultaneously to be in a forest and to "live in isolated freedom [and] put out branches at random and grow stunted, crooked, and twisted."<sup>13</sup> Even when human beings are together, then, they can—cannot help being—nasty, brutish, and solitary.<sup>14</sup> And even if that can at some infinitely distant future time be altered politically, that still does not guarantee the triumph of morality. The cunning of nature<sup>15</sup> extends only to the political but not to the moral, only to the public but not to the private:

The problem of organizing a state, however hard it may seem, can be solved even for a race of devils, if only they are intelligent.<sup>16</sup>

Perpetual peace, then, even it were practicable, could be little more than justice among thieves. De Quincey, this time speaking in his own name, states the difficulty clearly:

The problem of a Perpetual Peace, were it only for its impracticability, taken in connection with the reasons for that impracticability, will forever retain its interest; that is to say, so long as it is not absolutely *demonstrated* to be a desperate problem; and such a demonstration, considering that the objections are purely moral, is at least as impossible as the problem itself. With the prevailing tone of thought in this country, . . . the mere entertainment of such a problem . . . is apt to throw the same sort of suspicion upon the sanity of a man's good sense as among geometricians *justly* attaches to the problem of squaring the *circle*, or among mechanicians to the problem of a *perpetual* [57] *motion*. But, in reality, this is very unjust; for the two mathematical problems are *demonstrably* impossible; that is, necessarily unattainable . . . . But the formal problem of a Perpetual Peace is only accidentally unattainable . . . . For what makes such a problem impracticable at present? Simply the moral nature of man in its present imperfect development. The impracticability is therefore commensurate with that obstacle. As that wanes, this will wane . . . . Properly speaking, therefore, a Perpetual Peace should be classed, as to feasibility, with the great geographical problems of the advance of the Pole, attainments of North-east or North-west passages, determination of the course of the Niger, much rather than with the mechanical problem of a perpetual motion.<sup>17</sup>

So, on the political plane, the most that can be realistically expected with regard to the moral law is not morality, but legality in the form of a global polity composed of a federation of states, each of whose citizens is either a satan or indistinguishable from a satan.<sup>18</sup>

## II

But what has this to do with detective fiction? In Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, Sam Spade is described in the first paragraph as a pleasant blond Satan.<sup>19</sup> He is a detective, i.e., by definition a noncrook. But with the exception of Effie Perine (his secretary), Detective Sergeant Tom Polhaus, and Sid Wise (his lawyer), the world which he inhabits is a world full of crooks, in particular Miss Wonderly/Leblanc/Brigid O'Shaughnessy and the band of sexually amorphous cutthroats led by Casper Gutman, a.k.a. the fat man. This is a world of perpetual war, the state of nature which—as Rousseau observed—is in reality the world of civil society as we know it:

The philosophers who have examined the foundations of society have all felt the necessity of going back to the state of nature, but none of them has reached it . . . . All of them, . . . speaking of need, avarice, oppression, desires, and pride, have carried over to the state of nature ideas they had acquired in society: they spoke about savage man and they described civil man.<sup>20</sup>

And in the decisive respect, namely in the ability to preserve oneself by killing others in order both to prevent one's own death and to make the life which one is thus preserving as comfortable as possible, every civil man is equal to every other.<sup>21</sup> Every human being, then, may not be able to read *Paradise Lost* with understanding, but every human being is able—and willing—to burn it to warm himself on a cold winter night. Or, to put it in terms of the detective novel, while Wilmer the gunsel may be a cheap hood capable of only gaudy patter such as, "Keep on riding me and you're going to be picking iron out of your navel,"<sup>22</sup> when betrayed, he can also shoot and kill Casper Gutman, a man who has been like a father to him.<sup>23</sup> Not that this is surprising after the father has been willing—however reluctantly at first—to sacrifice the son in order to preserve himself:

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The boy looked at Gutman. Gutman smiled benignly at him and said: "Well, Wilmer, I'm sorry indeed to lose you, and I want you to know that I couldn't be any fonder of you if you were my own son; but—well, by Gad!—if you lose a son it's possible to get another—and there's only one Maltese falcon."<sup>24</sup>

One could not imagine a prettier Abraham and Isaac, and yet in a world whose closest approximation to a divinity is the private detective,<sup>25</sup> when he has you over a barrel, you must let the fall-guys fall where they may. For the modern milieu is a war of all against all, in which there is "no *Mine* and *Thine* distinct; but onely that to be every mans, that he can get; and for as long as he can keep it."<sup>26</sup> And the savage wilderness in which this war occurs finds its demetaphorized incarnation in the "mean streets" of the modern urban jungle.<sup>27</sup> In general terms, this is the deterministic universe of modern natural science, a universe of bodies in motion, in which human beings as slaves of passions and desires, or inclinations (as Kant calls them), move and are moved as billiard balls on a table.<sup>28</sup>

And yet the human billiard ball seems—as sometimes happens in the movies—to be capable of independent, undetermined action. This is the lesson of a story—not included in the film version of the book—which Sam Spade tells to Brigid O'Shaughnessy, although since it is clear from what we learn later that he already knows that she has killed his partner, Miles Archer, and that he will see to it that she takes the fall for it, he is telling it more to himself:

Spade sat down in the armchair . . . and . . . without an introductory remark of any sort, began to tell the girl about a thing that had happened some years before in the Northwest. He talked in a steady matter-of-fact voice that was devoid of emphasis or pauses, though now and then he repeated a sentence slightly rearranged, as if it were important that each detail be related exactly as it had happened . . . .

A man named Flitcraft had left his real-estate-office, in Tacoma, to go to luncheon one day and had never returned . . . . His wife and children never saw him again. His wife and he were supposed to be on the best of terms. He had two children, boys . . . . He owned his house . . . , a new Packard, and the rest of the appurtenances of successful American living.

Flitcraft . . . was worth . . . two hundred thousand dollars at the time he vanished. His affairs were in order . . . . "He went like that," Spade said, "like a fist when you open your hand."

"[Five years after that,] I was with one of the big detective agencies in Seattle. Mrs. Flitcraft came in and told us somebody had seen a man in Spokane who looked a lot like her husband. I went over there. It was Flitcraft, all right. He had been living in Spokane . . . as Charles—that was his first name—Pierce. He had an automobile-business . . . a wife, a baby son, owned his home . . . and usually got away to play golf . . . ."

[Spade and Flitcraft] talked in Spade's room . . . . Flitcraft had no feeling of guilt. He had left his first family well provided for, and what he had done seemed to him perfectly reasonable. The only thing that bothered him was a doubt that he could make that reasonableness clear to Spade . . . make its reasonableness explicit. He tried now. "I got it all right," Spade told Brigid O'Shaughnessy, "but Mrs. Flitcraft never did. She thought it was silly. Maybe it was . . . ."

"Here's what happened to him. Going to lunch he passed an office-building that was being put up—*just the skeleton*. A beam . . . fell eight or ten stories [59] down and smacked the sidewalk alongside him. It brushed pretty close to him, but . . . a piece of the sidewalk . . . flew up and hit his cheek. It only took a piece of skin off, but he still had the scar when I saw him. He rubbed it with his finger—well, affectionately . . . . He was . . . more shocked than really frightened. *He felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works*" . . . .

"The life he knew was a clean orderly sane responsible affair. Now a falling beam had shown him that life was fundamentally none of these things. He . . . could be wiped out . . . by . . . *accident* . . . . He knew then that men . . . lived only while *blind chance* spared them . . . . He said he knew before he had gone twenty feet from the fallen beam that he would never know peace again until he had adjusted himself to this new glimpse of life . . . ."

"He went to Seattle . . . . For a couple of years he wandered around and then . . . settled in Spokane and got married. His second wife didn't look like the first, but they were more alike than they were different . . . . I don't think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove . . . . *But that's the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling.*"<sup>29</sup>

So, the moment of the falling beam is the moment of freedom surrounded by the sameness and predictability of the groove which preceded it and followed it. But the moment, however brief, is emblematic of the possibility of something beyond the mechanistic drive toward comfortable self-preservation. And one would like to think—although there is nothing in the narrative to support it explicitly—that it was from this meeting that Sam Spade decided to leave the agency in order to become a private detective, to live the life of the falling beam, to be the man to go "down these mean

streets . . . who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid . . . [to be] the best man in his world and good enough for any world."<sup>30</sup>

But once one has been scarred by one's freedom, to what does one turn one's will? Kant would say that one turns it to the practically rational, i.e., willful, exercise of duty. Sam Spade would agree. Therefore, despite his immersion in the mean mechanistic streets, one of whose aspects is represented in the grooved sameness of the life of comfortable self-preservation and the other of whose aspects—the more fundamental—is the life of boundless acquisitiveness pervaded by the fear of violent death and the means to stave it off—despite this immersion, he adheres to an ethics of duty shorn of inclinational distractions. That is, he is a Kantian moralist, insofar as one can be in a non-peaceful world. After all, San Francisco is not Königsberg, and although Kant would restrict the designation "moral" to someone who is the best in any world of rational beings, we are not in any world. And duty, however adjusted to time and place, is still better than the brutish surrender to inclinations. Sam Spade's adherence to this ethic is especially clear at the end of the narrative when he informs Brigid O'Shaughnessy that he knows that she killed Miles Archer and that—whether he loves her or not, indeed even if he does—he is going to send her over for the murder:

His voice was soft, gentle. He said: "*I'm going to send you over. The chances are you'll get off with life. That means you'll be out again in twenty years. [60] You're no angel. I'll wait for you.*" He cleared his throat. "*If they hang you I'll always remember you . . . .*"

She smiled back at him, gently. "*Don't, Sam, don't say that even in fun . . . .*"

Spade laughed . . . . He croaked: "*Don't be silly. You're taking the fall . . . .*"

"*That is not just,*" she cried . . . .

He cleared his throat huskily and said: . . . "*I don't care who loves who. I'm not going to play the sap for you . . . . You killed Miles and you're going over for it . . . . I can't help you now. And I wouldn't if I could . . . .*"

His eyes burned madly. He said: "*Listen. This isn't a damned bit of good. You'll never understand me, but I'll try once more and then we'll give it up. Listen. When a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it. Then it happens we were in the detective business. Well, when one of your organization gets killed it's bad business to let the killer get away with it. It's bad all around—bad for that one organization, bad for every detective organization, bad for every detective everywhere. Third, I'm a detective and expecting me to run criminals down and then let them go free is like asking a dog to catch a rabbit and let it go. It can be done, all right, and sometimes it is done, but it's not the natural thing . . . but that's enough. All those on one side. Maybe some of them are unimportant. I won't argue about that. But look at the number of them. Now on the other side we've got what? *All we've got is the fact that maybe you love me and maybe I love you . . . . But suppose I do? What of it? Maybe next month I won't. I've been through it before—when it lasted that long. Then what? . . . . Well, if**

I send you over I'll be sorry as hell—I'll have some rotten nights—but that'll pass. Listen . . . . If that doesn't mean anything to you forget it and we'll make it this: *I won't because all of me wants to . . . .*"

"Look at me," she said, "and tell me the truth. Would you have done this to me if the falcon had been real and you had been paid your money?"

"What difference does that make now? *Don't be too sure I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be.* That kind of reputation might be good business . . . ."

Spade set the edge of his teeth together and said through them: "I won't play the sap for you."

[When Spade returns to his office, he speaks briefly to his secretary, who has been reading the morning newspaper.]

"You did that to her?"

He nodded. "Your Sam's a detective."<sup>31</sup>

So, although the formulation may be crude, we have here all the basic elements of Kantian ethics: acting for the sake of the law, the radical subjectivity of inclinations, doing one's duty especially when it conflicts with one's inclinations, and universalizing one's maxim. And this is not mitigated by the presence of prudential considerations (e.g., whether an action is good or bad for business), because from what we know about Sam Spade, his business is none too good: he has little money, a shabby office, a simple apartment. And he is an ascetic man, ore or less.<sup>32</sup> And if he is a tarnished angel, he is nonetheless an angel, even an avenging angel. And this too is not out of tune with the spirit of Kant's writings, for however much Kant exalts humans in their freely willing, practically rational self-legislation, still they are divided beings straddling two realms. As Richard Kroner, speaking of Kant's moral pessimism, says:

[61]

Although Kant endeavors to adjust the Christian idea of the forgiving and redeeming God to his moral Weltanschauung, it cannot be denied that the God of wrath and vengeance is more in accord with his outlook. This Weltanschauung does not veil or mitigate the dreadful fact that in God's world evil exists and that the good man no less than the wicked must suffer . . . .

Kant's moral pessimism is nevertheless compatible with a certain moral optimism . . . . He would insist that we can live a worthy life if we struggle against the moral evil in our breast . . . .<sup>33</sup>

The private detective may be seen as the agent of such a struggle, as an active force in trying to effect the political legality which may ultimately pave the way for a closer approach to morality.

### III

No doubt, the vision of Immanuel Kant carrying a gun is somewhat unsettling, and yet the gist of Kant's philosophy of history is that history is a strictly determined process which is immoral at every moment and has for its goal a morally neutral polity, and

which yet has a moral meaning and a transcendent purpose. And the actions of any—and every—individual, even if these actions are inclinationally impelled, contribute to the species achievement of that purpose.<sup>34</sup> And if this is not a Machiavellian justification of the means by the end, it is at least a call to be undisturbed by the means on the basis of a divination of the end. History, then, is a slaughter-bench,<sup>35</sup> but it is in the service of an eternally unreachable, eternally peaceful banquet. Kant himself forcefully states the difficulty in the second definitive article for a perpetual peace:

When we consider the perverseness of human nature which is nakedly revealed in the uncontrolled relations between nations (this perverseness being veiled in the state of civil law by the constraint exercised by government), we may well be astonished that the word “law” has not yet been banished from war politics as pedantic . . . . But the homage which each state pays (at least in words) to the concept of law proves that there is slumbering in man an even greater moral disposition to become master of the evil principle in himself (which he cannot disclaim) and to hope for the same from others. Otherwise the word “law” would never be pronounced by states which wish to war upon one another . . . .<sup>36</sup>

So, war politics adumbrates peace politics, and when immorality pays lip service to morality, it points—however feebly—to its goal (unknown to itself until it eventuates) of true service to morality. In other words, the instruments of interpersonal and societal interaction are guns and bullets, but nature has so contrived that these guns and bullets will ultimately be turned into plowshares, that sowing the grain of blood will reap the harvest of peace. And this is precisely the enterprise in which the Continental op engages in Hammett’s *Red Harvest*. The society of the novel is [62] a town in which gangsters (in collusion with the political leaders) rum rampant. The short, fat, middle-aged, and anonymous operative of the Continental Detective Agency is hired to “clean this pig-sty.”<sup>37</sup> The town is named, as the Continental op tells us in the first paragraph, Personville:

I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship in Butte. He also called his shirt a shoit. I didn’t think anything of what he had done to the city’s name. Later I heard men who could manage their r’s give it the same pronunciation. I still didn’t see anything in it . . . . A few years later I went to Personville and learned better.<sup>38</sup>

The name “Personville” has been construed correctly as a reference to the artificial person which Hobbes’ commonwealth is said to be.<sup>39</sup> And to bring peace to Personville is something which the Continental op is eager to do once the town’s representatives have tried to eliminate him:

I made a speech [to Max “Whisper” Thaler]: “No. I don’t like the way Poisonville has treated me. I’ve got my chance now, and I’m going to even up . . . . There was a time when I wanted to be let alone. If I had been, maybe now I’d be riding back to San Francisco. But I wasn’t. Especially I wasn’t let alone by that fat [cop] Noonan.

He's had two tries at my scalp in two days. That's plenty. Now it's my turn to run him ragged, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. Poisonville is ripe for the harvest. It's a job I like, and I'm going to it . . . . I've got a mean disposition. Attempted assassinations make me mad."<sup>40</sup>

However, the job of taming the town requires fighting poison with poison:

"It's right enough for the Agency to have rules and regulations, but when you're out on a job you've got to do it the best way you can. And anybody that brings any ethics to Poisonville is going to get them all rusty."<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the op must immerse himself in the town in order to cure it, and that means "stirring things up,"<sup>42</sup> a method which may be crude and brutal, but which is nonetheless effective, as he reveals in conversation with Dinah Brand:

"Is that what you were up to . . .?"

"That was only an experiment—just to see what would happen."

"So that's the way you scientific detectives work. My God! for a fat, middle-aged, hard-boiled, pig-headed guy, you've got the vaguest way of doing things I ever heard of."

"Plans are all right sometimes," I said. "And sometimes just stirring things up is all right—if you're tough enough to survive, and keep your eyes open so you'll see what you want when it comes to the top."

"That ought to be good for another drink," she said.

We had another drink.

She put her glass down, licked her lips, and said:

"If stirring things up is your system, I've got a swell spoon for you."<sup>43</sup>

So, the divine detective, making his own laws as he goes,<sup>44</sup> proceeds to clean the town, but not without placing his integrity in danger by becoming infected by the very means which he himself employs. That is, he too becomes poisoned:

[63]

I . . . complained:

"This damned burg's getting me. If I don't get away soon I'll be going blood-simple like the native . . . . I've arranged a killing or two in my time, when they were necessary. But this is the first time I've ever got the fever. It's the damned burg. You can't go straight here. I got myself tangled at the beginning . . . . I had to swing the job the best way I could. How could I help it if the best way was bound to lead to a lot of killing? . . . . Play with murder enough and it gets you one of two ways. It makes you sick, or you get to like it . . . . It's this damned town. Poisonville is right. It's poisoned me."<sup>45</sup>

But he keeps stirring, and as a result the criminals kill each other off, and at last report the town, "under martial law, was developing into a sweet smelling thornless bed of roses."<sup>46</sup> Presumably such a behaviorally purified civil society would provide the breeding ground for the emergence of morality. Perhaps even a nation of devils acting in accordance with the law for a sufficiently long period of time will become a nation of angels. Perhaps.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Delivered 5 March 1935; reprinted in *Unpopular Opinions* (London, 1946), pp. 178-90.

<sup>2</sup> 1827, in *Selected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Philip Van Doren Stern (New York: Modern Library, 1949), pp. 982-1089.

<sup>3</sup> De Quincey, "Murder," pp. 983-84.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 987.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History*, 4<sup>th</sup> thesis.

<sup>6</sup> De Quincey, "Murder," pp. 992-99.

<sup>7</sup> Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (New York, 1972), ch. 2, p. 10; cf. ch. 19, p. 180; also cf. Hammett, *The Thin Man* (New York, 1972), ch. 13, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, in *On History*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, 1963), p.85.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, *Idea for a Universal History*, in *On History*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> Kant, *Idea*, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Dutton, 1950), I, 13, p. 104.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Kant, *Idea*, 8<sup>th</sup> thesis, pp. 21-23.

<sup>16</sup> Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, p. 112.

<sup>17</sup> De Quincey, "Kant in His Miscellaneous Essays," in *Works* (New York, 1878), vol. 9, pp. 482-83.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York, 1963), pp. 121-22.

<sup>19</sup> Hammett, *Maltese Falcon*, ch. 1, p. 3; cf. p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* [= *Second Discourse*], in *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. Roger L. Masters (New York, 1964), p. 102.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 13, p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> Hammett, *Maltese Falcon*, ch. 12, p. 107.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 20, p. 196.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 19, p. 175.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. G.K. Chesterton, "The divine detective," in *A Miscellany of Men* (New York, 1912), pp. 279-83; also cf. William Ruhlmann, *Saint with a Gun* (New York, 1974). The divine [64] holiness of the detective finds explicit expression in much of detective fiction. There is much more in common than would appear at first glance between the Simon Templar who frequently refers to criminals as the ungodly and the Mike Hammer who takes upon himself the role of Jehovah-like judge, jury, and executioner of divine vengeance. In this category would also belong—among others—the soiled Galahad Philip Marlowe, the knight-errant beach-bum Travis McGee, and the divinest detective of all, Nero Wolfe who with his Archie-angel Goodwin purifies the world with as little departure as possible from the house on West 35<sup>th</sup> Street which contains his perfect circular and immobile godhead.

<sup>26</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 13, p. 106; cf. Hammett, *Maltese Falcon*, ch. 13, p. 114.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. G.K. Chesterton, "Defence of Detective Stories," in *The Defendant* (London, 1901), pp. 118-23.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Gutman's narrative of the black bird's history: Hammett, *Maltese Falcon*, ch. 13, pp. 109-14.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 7, pp. 54-57; italics mine.

<sup>30</sup> Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," in *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York, 1972), p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Hammett, *Maltese Falcon*, ch. 20, pp. 191-96: italics mine.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Chandler, "Simple Art," pp. 20-21.

<sup>33</sup> R. Kroner, *Kant's Weltanschauung*, trans. John E. Smith (Chicago, 1956), pp. 59-60.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Kant, *Idea*, pp. 11-12, and 9<sup>th</sup> thesis, pp. 23-26.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York, 1956), Introduction, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, p. 99.

<sup>37</sup> Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest* (New York, 1972), ch. 5, p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 1, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction; cf. Steven Marcus, "Introduction," in Dashiell Hammett, *The Continental op* (New York, 1975), p. xxiii note.

<sup>40</sup> Hammett, *Red Harvest*, ch. 8, pp. 62-63.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 15, p. 109.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 10, p. 79; cf. "The Golden Horseshoe," in *C. op*, p. 81.

<sup>43</sup> Hammett, *Red Harvest*, chs. 10-11, pp. 79-80; cf. "The Whosis Kid," in *C. op*, pp. 230, 210, and 218.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Hammett, *Red Harvest*, ch. 15, p. 109.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 20, pp. 142-45.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 27, p. 199.