Introduction

BY

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IF YOU LOOK AT pictures of Raymond Chandler, like the ones you'll find in this volume, you see a rather staid man, foppish in youth, scholarly in maturity, a pipe invariably in mouth or hand—someone who resembles one's image of an accountant far more than a purveyor of crime and violence to the masses. Yet along with Dashiell Hammett, it was Chandler who transformed the hard-boiled detective story into a form flexible and resonant, and provided a new mythology for California's new urban coastal populations.

For Chandler was both an accountant *and* a purveyor of crime, a staid and bookish contemplative and a clinician of sin. He once said that if he ever wrote a nonfiction book, "it would probably turn out to be the autobiography of a split personality." These splits permeate Chandler's life and work, at once revealing and essential to his particular genius. He was a man of two continents, two centuries, and two languages. Born in Chicago, educated in England, trained in classical literature, and bred on an Edwardian literary sensibility, he came to America to stay in 1912. He was a successful businessman, drank himself out of a job, and then, in his forties, taught himself to write detective novels. He struggled all his life to write "serious" literature but now his claim to immortality rests on the ways he transformed tough-guy fiction into a chronicle of the quiet desperations of the city of Los Angeles. His critical taste remained rooted in sentimental traditions of fantasy and romance, yet his power as a novelist comes from the way he gave voice—plaintive and raucous voice—to failed lives of self-denial, poverty, and greed. And even as Chandler proclaimed himself an aesthetic snob, he helped to create a genre grounded in working-class longing and despair, and a hero—Phillip Marlowe—with fiercely democratic sympathies.

Chandler depended on that "split personality" of his as a touch-

stone: a way to remain an exile in his Southern California world. In his finest novels, like *The Big Sleep*; *Farewell, My Lovely*; and *The Long Goodbye*, he was able to mine his own ambiguous position for its cultural resonance. Although he lived in Southern California for almost fifty years, he remained an outsider, and articulated the needs of a generation of travellers like himself, anxious to discount their frustrated pasts, eager to remake themselves in this fresh and seemingly boundless California sunshine. He revealed a Los Angeles still inchoate, its new history still untranscribed, and created his legendary city as a mirror of some of his own anxieties and perceptions as a sojourner. The newcomers—primarily midwesterners—who populate his books share his own sense of a doubleness to their lives, their personalities nurtured by one set of historical and geographical conditions, confronted by new times and new circumstances. These were Chandler's citizens and subject, and in his novels the anxieties and discontinuities of their stories invariably emerge in terms of submerged secrets and suppressed acts of violence, resulting in blackmail, or revenge.

Chandler's own contradictory traits—his European heritage and class-consciousness absorbed in his attraction to the nascent California culture—took more sedate forms than they do for his characters. But one feels the discordances, the doubleness, in everything he wrote: in the mixtures of illusion and despair, hope and defeat, that provide plot for his dark tales; in his language, so lush yet slangy, the street jargon always burnished with a classical sheen; and most especially in the way he realigns the detective tradition with its forgotten antecedents, like the epic, quest, and medieveal knight errant traditions. This grafting of old forms and new times is Chandler's grace as a novelist.

The "split personality" that distinguishes Chandler's fiction is also part of the intelligence one encounters in Chandler's essays, letters, and other casual writings. Despite the faint echoes in the novels of his own experiences, and the frequent moments one feels Chandler's prejudices bleeding into Phillip Marlowe's commentaries, Chandler's fictions are determinedly not autobiographical. It is in his letters that Chandler tells us what little we know of his attitudes to events in his life, and in his letters too that we find some of his richest commentary and most judicious self-assessments. Adopting the pose of Phillip Marlowe in his

novels allows Chandler to give voice to a part of his sensibility as it limits other aspects; as he himself notes, "I suppose in my letters I more or less revealed those facets of my mind which had to be obscured or distorted in what I wrote for publication."

These multiple "facets" of Chandler's personality fill his correspondence. Never much of an extrovert, Chandler became more and more reclusive, particularly after he and his wife Cissy moved to La Jolla, California (near San Diego) in 1946. Cissy's failing health, and Chandler's habit of staying up nights to care for her, provided him with both the seclusion and time to compose lengthy and elaborate responses to his many regular correspondents. Letter writing seems to have provided Chandler with a perfect form for his personality: at once intimate yet distant, controllable while a depository for intuition, contemplative if also available for the occasional angry or frustrated rant. Unlike what Chandler himself often described as his slow-paced rhythms as a novelist, he dictated most of his letters and composed them in the heat, so it seems, of a particular mood or subject. His letters became his release from isolation. Although some of Chandler's correspondents were also people he saw socially, others were almost strangers whom he rarely, or never, encountered except on the page; as he himself realized late in his life, "all of my best friends I have never met." So the letters become, as his biographer Frank MacShane notes, "a writer's notebook, a record of Chandler's range and growth." They are full of fine observations —witty commentaries on the times; pointed, often pungent, remarks about other writers; and vivid renditions of events in his own life, from his travels, to film work, to feelings about his beloved cat Taki.

One finds these attributes in abundance in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*. This volume, originally published in 1962, was the first and for many years the only collection of Chandler's letters and occasional writings available. In the years it has been out of print, Frank MacShane's edition of Chandler's *Selected Letters* and the second volume of Chandler's works in the Library of America series, *Later Novels and Other Writings,* have been published. Yet even given these volumes, and despite its editorial shortcomings, *Raymond Chandler Speaking* remains the fullest compact, and inexpensive, collection of Chandler's self-commentary available, and it contains many pieces found nowhere else.

The bulk of the book consists of excerpts from Chandler's correspondence, supplemented with some self-contained commentaries from Chandler's notebooks and papers ("Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel," "Notes on English and American Style," a "1939 Plan of Work," and notations about some famous actual criminal cases), two essays which first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the 1940s ("Writers in Hollywood," and "Ten Per Cent of Your Life"), and two previously unpublished pieces of fiction: "A Couple of Writers," and the first chapters from *The Poodle Springs Story*, a Phillip Marlowe novel Chandler left unfinished at his death in 1959.

Neither work of fiction is particularly powerful in its own right, though both are valuable additions to the Chandler canon. Each stumbles over the representation of an intimate relationship between a man and a woman rather than focusing on the isolated figure of Phillip Marlowe, who dominates the great novels; they confirm our suspicion that it is only in the character of the loner that Chandler taps into his own imaginative strength and vision. The notebook excerpts and magazine articles are of more interest because they reveal another facet of Chandler's gifts: his abundant skills as a critic, formal theorist, and social analyst. There is a pointed series of remarks, for example, on the details of speech variations between American and English usage. The two *Atlantic Monthly* essays explore the difficulties of a professional writer's life: the problems of artistic integrity in the film industry, where individual artistry is engulfed by the conflicting plans of others; and the altered position of the writer in relation to his or her agent, which Chandler sees as moving from a relationship of trust based on artistic and personal commitments to one of salesmanship in which the art and artist are transformed into commodities. Perhaps most valuable of all are Chandler's notes on the mystery genre—a list of imperatives for the writer in which Chandler elaborates a set of rules or conditions essential to a quality mystery, and concludes with some pride that the mystery novel is "a form which has never really been licked, . . . [which] is still fluid, still too various for easy classification, still putting out shoots in all directions."

But it is the excerpts from Chandler's letters rather than the anthology of occasional writings that make this book so essential, and so readable. They range in size from a few sentences to sev-

eral pages, though most are brief, and are edited to provide succinct, and distinct, commentaries by Chandler on aspects of his craft and world: his personal background; the mystery story as a genre and its practitioners; writing, film, TV, and publishing; and his own fiction. The mixture of ruthless pruning and careful selection to maintain a thematic approach allows the book's editors, Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker, to display Chandler's intelligence and verbal gifts at their invigorating best. As Chandler himself freely admits, even in his fiction his best work is scenic and syntactic rather than found in plot construction or more extended narrative sequences. These same skills make him a superb correspondent, where the unbridled letter form displays his sharp wit and clarity of phrase and sentence to advantage, and provides latitude for an opinionated man like Chandler to let loose. Again and again one finds acute remarks and pungent aphoristic wisdom. The pages of this volume are filled with fine sentences and telling observations, and reading through the pieces one is impressed by Chandler's sagacious, serious, thoughtful approach to his artistic vocation, and to his surrounding artistic community. The scattered comments accumulate and resonate with each other, providing not only a transcript of Chandler's perceptions but a kind of haphazard documentation of a time.

The careful selection and precise cuts and splices create a compelling collection, but they also represent incompletely the ongoing record of a life lived. Inevitably, one would like a larger sampling of that "split personality" that is Chandler's unique position as a writer and reader, citizen and exile. Gardiner and Walker's thematic approach achieved their primary objective of creating a book at once readable and focused. But letters are relational and occasional as well as thematic, so we lose something of Chandler's personal intimacies with particular individuals, and some of the feel of chronological shifts of mood and attention, that other organizational structures might have provided. In addition, Gardiner and Walker's patchwork method of construction resulted in some inconsistent editorial principles at times: a letter reprinted with the first and second half reversed in order; an irregular use of ellipses to indicate excisions, sometimes leaving a reader to conclude he or she is seeing a continuous document when in actuality there are omissions or sections from different parts of a letter that have been joined together by the editors.

The volume appeared in 1962, we must remember, just after Chandler's death. Though Chandler was well established by then as a novelist of gifts, he still struggled with literary judgments that distinguished between "popular" arts and artists, and "high" culture. Those distinctions have, properly, faded with the years, and Chandler's artistic stock has risen in value appreciably. But at the time, Gardiner and Walker were making a case for Chandler's critical acumen, for his virtues as a writer aware of the consequences of his artistic decisions, and for the incisiveness of his intellect as it confronted issues of form, politics, character, and language.

The free editorial privilege that Gardiner and Walker took in preparing *Raymond Chandler Speaking* for publication—a freedom few editors would take upon themselves these days, when issues of representation and selection are central critical, and cultural, questions—makes it impossible to turn to this book as the single, definitive source for Chandler's actual words. At the same time, it is our most accessible, and often our only, source for many of his most interesting comments on his work and his time. Many of Chandler's more caustic, or maudlin, or abusive comments are not available in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*. Some of Chandler's more defensive statements—as in a response to someone accusing him of anti-semitism—are ignored in favor of a view of Chandler as a by and large self-possessed, deeply thoughtful, quite knowledgeable and fair-minded critic of his own work, his Hollywood world, the world of publishing and the work of other mystery writers.

These critical limitations acknowledged, it is hard not to treasure this collection. For all of its editorial inconsistencies and its gestures to excise the more unappealing aspects of Chandler's personality, *Raymond Chandler Speaking* remains our most intimate picture of this complex, sometimes surly, frequently brooding man. If the "split personality" is muted, it emerges still, as if lurking in the ellipses—between the lines, in the literary posturing, among the acerbic comments on trends in the arts, alongside the generous homages to other writers, amid the self-scrutiny. We tend to want our artists with more of their warts showing these days than back in 1962. Whether this impulse to disparage artists comes from our desire to humanize or to belittle the artistry is never quite clear, but certainly represents a very different sense of

the ties of life and work than reigned during Chandler's era, or than one sees in his self-assessments. *Raymond Chandler Speaking* offers an abundant, engrossing self-portrait. There are enough turns and contradictory assertions to complicate the judgment, and enough moments of startling insight to confirm one's feeling that Chandler was a writer of acute self-knowledge, and acutely painful self-doubt: at once able to claim that he managed to "recreate a worn-out medium," and that he "never wrote anything really worth" his wife Cissy's attention—"no book that I could dedicate to her." It is this texture of pride and shame, realization and uncertainty, that makes Chandler's letters what they are, a mosaic of a writer's mind contemplating its labor.

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