

Manfred von Pentz

PROWLING THE MORAL HIGH GROUND



If I wasn't hard, I wouldn't be alive. If I couldn't ever be gentle, I wouldn't deserve to be alive.

Phillip Marlowe

Recently I took a few days out to organize my library. It was then that a brittle and much yellowed paperback passed through my hands, and I could not but leave the shelves to themselves, sit down and be haunted once again by one of the finest writers the world has so far produced.

Because this was *The high Window*, my first Chandler ever, and I remember to this day how it had touched a chord deep in my young heart. I don't know anymore who gave it to me, or if I

bought it myself with the few pennies scraped up while breaking my back on a construction site during summer holidays. It is in German, of course, has an unassuming cover, and belonged to a much sanitized pulp-fiction series long since ashes and dust. Flipping through it after so many years, I realized to my surprise how well it had been translated. An insight based on the fact that only a decade later, and once my English began to improve, I knew almost by heart whatever the great man had written in life.

Chandler is not just one more detective writer. He is a craftsman so brilliant, has an imagination so wholly original, that no consideration of modern American literature ought to exclude him.

Elizabeth Bowen



Fair praise extended by a fine contemporary, and it doesn't even touch the central issue. Yet if you look him up in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, all you'll find is a few lines that commend his books as „outstanding examples of regional writing and the hero as an impecunious but honest and courageous upholder of ideals in an opportunistic and sometimes brutal society“. Though whatever these ideals may consist of, you'll never know. The whole vitae is limited to six sentences in total and a lot shorter than that of an obscure Indian astrophysicist on the same page who formulated the currently accepted theory on the latter evolutionary stages of massive stars.

Or was it the former?

However that may be, I always wondered why a writer, once much acclaimed and treasured by millions of sober and intelligent readers, could be treated so dismissively by an encyclopaedia that claims to be the most comprehensive and sophisticated of them all.

Now I know better.

Because Phillip Marlowe is a perfect paradigm of the quintessential *White Hero*, and therefore dangerous. The last thing our hostile pseudo-elite needs as a glowing role-model for the impressive masses is a plucky and insolent dick with clearly defined morals. Inscrutable ones, in fact, unbending and incorruptible, and sustained by a healthy common sense that can see through the lies and deceptions of a whole age without going over the top.

“There ain’t no clean way to make a hundred million bucks. Maybe the headman thinks his hands are clean, but somewhere along the line guys got pushed to the wall, nice little businesses got the ground cut from under them and had to sell out for nickels, decent people lost their jobs, stocks got rigged on the markets, proxies got bought up like a pennyweight of old gold, and the five percenters and the big law firms got paid hundred-grand fees for beating some law the people wanted but the rich guys didn’t, on account of it cut into their profits. Big money is big power, and big power gets used wrong. It’s the system. Maybe it’s the best we can get, but it still ain’t any Ivory Soap deal.”

What is more, this shoddy low-budget shamus without any connections in high places has not only the nerve to take on whoever needs to be taken on, the big guys included, but owns a good and great heart as well. Though not that you notice it straight away. It operates somewhat under the surface, and those who haven’t got one themselves would never notice it’s there. But we do, and that is why we are so delighted when he puts up a fight for the downtrodden and abused, and never mind if that leaves him occasionally at odds with his customers. Meaning when he has no qualms to deliver the plain and naked truth, even if that can be pretty devastating.

“You are just that kind of guy. For a long time I couldn’t figure you out at all. You had nice ways and nice qualities, but there was something wrong. You had standards and you lived up to them, but they were personal. They had no relation to any kind of ethics or scruples. You were a nice guy because you had a nice nature. But you were just as happy with mugs or hoodlums as with honest men. Provided the hoodlums spoke fairly good English and had fairly acceptable table manners. You are a moral defeatist. I think maybe the war did it and again I think maybe you were born that way.”

This was written in the Forties, at a time when most people thought the world was still in order, that their elected representatives could be trusted within reason, that law and justice prevailed in a general sort of way. But already then the good old ways were coming to an end.

“I used to like this town,” I said, just to be saying something and not to be thinking too hard. “A long time ago. There were trees along Wilshire Boulevard. Beverly Hills was a country town. Westwood was bare hills and lots offering at eleven hundred dollars and no takers. Hollywood was a bunch of frame houses on the inter-urban line. Los Angeles was just a big dry sunny place with ugly homes and no style, but good-hearted and peaceful. It had the climate they just yap

about now. People used to sleep out on porches. Little groups who thought they were intellectual used to call it the Athens of America. It wasn't that, but it wasn't a neon-lighted slum either."

All this has changed in a few decades only.

"Now we get characters like this Steelgrave (a racketeer whose real name was Weepy Moyer and who'd snuffed out Moe Stein) owning restaurants. We've got the big money, the sharp shooters, the percentage workers, the fast dollar boys, the hoodlums out of New York and Chicago and Detroit. We've got the flash restaurants and nightclubs they run, and the hotels and apartment houses they own, and the grifters and con men and female bandits that live in them. The luxury trades, the pansy decorators, the Lesbian dress designers, the riff-raff of a big hard-boiled city with no more personality than a paper cup."

And Tinsel Town succumbing slowly but surely to the riff-raff that runs it today.

„Some Hollywood big shot, probably. Some wizard of the slobbery kiss and the pornographic dissolve.“

Thus during Chandler's time the type was there already, but less brazenly odious and more suavely laying the groundwork for what we have today. Namely a bunch of unabashed propaganda schmucks who are relentlessly churning out undisguised declarations of war against the White Christian majority. And this solely by means of the power of their billion bucks portfolio, and without any reliance on real armies that will be needed to defend them in the looming conflict they are stoking so relentlessly. Just look at the sordid posse and its grovelling creatures when they confer on each other their silly Oscars. Doesn't it look uncannily as if they are all dancing on a volcano?

But back to our dick.

"One of these days", he said (the movie agent Ballou), "I'm going to make the mistake which a man in my business dreads above all other mistakes. I'm going to find myself doing business with a man I can trust and I'm going to be just too goddamn smart to trust him."

A rare breed these days, *men you can trust*. Somehow liberal education and daily example have made them redundant, mere halfwits like Don Quixote who'll never stand a chance to topple the windmills. That's at least what is unabashedly insinuated by the mass media when we are shown the obscenely rich of today who all seem to be prototypical moral defeatists and find it perfectly natural to flaunt their ill-gotten plunder whenever the occasion offers. And thus deepen the abyss between themselves and the ordinary folks who are either too dumb to get rich or, unbelievable yet true, refuse to be as ruthless and grasping as these much touted grifters and glitterati.

Which is one of the reasons why a man like Phillip Marlowe can't be dismissed as an anachronism, but continues to haunt our conscious hopes or subconscious dreams to this day. Because deep down the majority of people, and certainly those with a Christian background, believe that live and let live is a fundamental human requisite for the survival of mankind in general. Thus he has a powerful ally among his readers, namely an innate awareness of what is wrong and what is right, and that this understanding constitutes a cornerstone of their existence, no matter if they are

firm believers or agnostics like himself. Which helps him to unravel the highly complex stratagems he's taken on for a few bucks only, and to make sure that sanity and decency triumph in the end.

Now you may say that all this sounds a bit too starry-eyed by half, because look at what's happening today, and how could we ever overcome the powers that are, even if we had Marlowe's stamina and intelligence. The latter would indeed be wishful thinking, since he is merely a romantic champion invented by one of the finest writers ever. But it doesn't mean that his ethics and scruples are in any way outdated or meaningless. We can elevate him, at least in private and without much publicity, to an acceptable ideal, even a leading light, simply because he's been gumshoeing and plotting and surviving in a world that is essentially our own.

We are many, and our detractors are few, and if we unite in the knowledge that what happens right now is an absolute anachronism indeed, that those who rob us and manipulate us and send us into criminal wars are in fact Chandler's hoodlums, only with slightly different nicknames, we stand a chance to defeat them one day.

„He wasn't listening. He was frowning at his own thoughts. *“There's a peculiar thing about money”*, he went on. *“In large quantities it tends to have a life of its own, even a conscience of its own. The power of money becomes very difficult to control.”*

And : *„Man has always been a venal animal. The growth of populations, the huge costs of wars, the incessant pressure of confiscatory taxation – all these things make him more and more venal. The average man is tired and scared, and a tired and scared man can't afford ideals. He has to buy food for his family. In our time we have seen a shocking decline in both public and private morals. You can't expect quality from people whose lives are subjected to a lack of quality.”*

But these are the words of an old and very rich man who long since has lost all his illusions. Because they don't take into consideration what will happen when the average man is finally pushed too hard against the wall, when he had to sell his nice little business for a few nickels, when he can't buy food for his family anymore.

„If suspense and menace didn't defeat reason, there would be very little drama.“

As for our dick, his stratagems may be too farfetched where some are concerned. Yet his romantic competence is also substantial, and not that easily dismissed.

“She'll be always high on nerves and low on animal emotion. She'll always breathe thin air and smell snow. She'd made a perfect nun. The religious dream, with its narrowness, its stylised emotions and its grim purity, would have been a perfect release for her.”

Thus after he saved her from evil and drove her home to safety and said good-bye for good...

„...I had a funny feeling as I saw the house disappear, as though I had written a poem and it was very good and I had lost it and would never remember it again.“

As for myself, later on I'll take another glance at the old paperback that turned up by just a lucky chance. And perhaps it will do to me what happened sometimes to its implacable hero.

„I sat very still and listened to the evening grow quiet outside the windows. And very slowly I grew quiet with it ... „

