

Journal of American Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/AMS>

Additional services for *Journal of American Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



John Paul Athanasourelis, *Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe: The Hard-Boiled Detective Transformed* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012, \ \$40.00). Pp. 208. isbn 978 0 7864 4215 7.

STEFANO TANI

Journal of American Studies / Volume 47 / Issue 01 / February 2013 / E15
DOI: 10.1017/S0021875812002447, Published online: 12 February 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021875812002447

How to cite this article:

STEFANO TANI (2013). Journal of American Studies, 47, E15 doi:10.1017/S0021875812002447

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Journal of American Studies, 47 (2013), e15. doi:10.1017/S0021875812002447

John Paul Athanasourelis, *Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe: The Hard-Boiled Detective Transformed* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012, \$40.00). Pp. 208. ISBN 978 0 7864 4215 7.

There are at least four detectable stages in that specific genre named criticism of a novelist. The first is the one of the forerunner, the critic who discovers the forgotten author; in the second stage the author reassessed is studied and written about by a substantial number of scholars and journalists (very good, good and less than good contributions); if steps one and two work, the writer is canonized (edition in the most prestigious series of the country). At this point, everything on him has been truly said and done at least for a while, and here comes the fourth stage, the one of surreal criticism: the author is no longer the one studied so far, he is a figment of the critic's imagination – a critic who, in order “to open new paths,” invents a writer that never existed.

John Paul Athanasourelis in *Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe: The Hard-Boiled Detective Transformed* argues that “Chandler's ideology is that of Deweyan radical democracy in contrast to the rugged individualist stances of other hard-boiled writers. Unlike Dashiell Hammett, whose Continental Op, in particular, affirms the acquisitive and vengeful ethos of the American frontier, Chandler fashioned a hero who is conscious of his positive social role.” “Marlowe sometimes thinks of himself as an outsider to society, but his conscience is that of a community member and his actions are heightened examples of civic action.” “His choice of profession is motivated by a wish to negotiate; his view is consistently social and interactive” (9, 16, 18). It is worth quoting Raymond Chandler himself about the social skills of his character: “P. Marlowe has as much a social conscience as a horse. He has a personal conscience, which is an entirely different matter” (*Selected Letters*, 43). And indeed it is a very personal one: Marlowe in his stories always acts as a dubious demigod, dispensing his own private justice: in *Farewell, My Lovely* he arranges a meeting between Velma Valento and Moose Malloy, knowing very well that the lady will come armed and either she or he will get killed; in *The Little Sister* he lets Dr. Lagardie take the elevator to go and kill Dolores Gonzales; in *The Long Goodbye* he knows that murderess Eileen Wade will commit suicide and lets her do it. Marlowe is not social, but sociable, because, in order to pump information from suspects and witnesses, he needs to talk to them, to be pleasant, to take them off-guard with his charm. Besides, he is a narcissist: he likes to be liked, he loves his wit, his final retorts; he sacrifices to the pleasure of having the last word any negotiation. Let us not forget that he is an unreliable I-narrator, and that he represents himself.

Athanasourelis's two-hundred-page one-idea book is riddled with unnecessary plot summaries and information on the hard-boiled genre; to make his point, the author compares Marlowe even with such characters as Race Williams by Carroll John Daly and Mike Hammer by Mickey Spillane. Obviously, even Marlowe looks like a Good Samaritan in comparison to these cartoonish thugs. Athanasourelis's obsession is “rugged individualism,” a term that recurs in every other page of his essay like a negative mantra: according to him, Marlowe does not deserve such a label, which instead accommodates the pioneer, the forerunner of the detective, the above-mentioned brutes, the Continental Op and most of the hard-boiled detectives. Marlowe, instead, is “an advocate, a diplomat, and a peacemaker in the mean streets of

L.A.” (88). So, if Marlowe is such a holy social worker, is he smooth, or is he rugged? Let us ask Chandler again: “To me Marlowe is the American mind; a heavy portion of rugged realism, a dash of good hard vulgarity, a strong overtone of strident wit, an equally strong undertone of pure sentimentalism, an ocean of slang.”¹ Marlowe is indeed a rugged individualist: preachy, righteous, judgemental, he cares only about himself. His forte is his (Chandler’s) self-representation: his sense of humour, his jokes, his bitter-sweet way of telling his stories cover like a magical patina the moralist and the egotist beneath; Marlowe’s craft is in misleading his reader, keeping him from understanding who Marlowe really is. And since Marlowe, according to Chandler, is the American mind, this may come through more obviously to a non-American critic.

John Paul Athanasourelis is an American critic, and, in a quite American fashion, a very self-sufficient one: in his text as well as in his one-space four-page bibliography his reader cannot find cited a single essay by a foreign scholar (let him be French, German, Spanish, Greek, or Italian), which is very provincial and, alas, very rugged.

Università degli Studi di Verona, Italia

STEFANO TANI

¹ Quoted in Frank MacShane, *The Life of Raymond Chandler* (New York: Dutton, 1976), 207.