(Re)writing, Role Play and Revelation in Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective*

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The Singing Detective is a six-part, 1986 BBC television serial written by the dramatist Dennis Potter. It tells the story of Philip Marlow (Michael Gambon), a failed writer of pulp detective stories confined to a hospital bed suffering from an acute form of psoriasis. Tormented by feverish hallucinations, he attempts to reconstruct mentally the plot of one of his novels, "The Singing Detective," only to find the story become entangled and conflated with traumatic childhood memories, notably his mother's extramarital affair and eventual suicide. Philip's memories are refracted through the purportedly lowbrow and antithetical popular genres of his 1940s childhood: the *film noir* and the musical. The former sees the hero playing the role of a hardboiled sleuth – indeed, his name references Philip *Marlowe* of Raymond Chandler's crime novels. The latter is manifest in Philip's hallucinations, as characters spontaneously break into choreographed song and dance routines.

The question we will ask is: to what extent is *The Singing Detective* a radical rewriting of the detective genre? While the serial seems to parody and deconstruct the tropes of the genre, does it ultimately reject or affirm them? In particular, we will see how Potter alludes to the *whodunit*'s synergy with psychoanalysis, weaving a parallel identified by Freud himself into the series' narrative. As sessions with the hospital psychiatrist enable Philip to unravel the mysteries of his childhood traumas, restaged as a crime in his novel and nightmares, we might ask who the real detective of the story is, the hero or his therapist? It is, after all, the latter who brings about a full recognition and revelation of Philip's trauma, the primal scene of his mother's infidelity and death.

And if this is the case, does the serial not finally uphold the core values of the *whodunit*, that patient enquiry will result in revelation?

Drama and the television play

Before examining how *The Singing Detective* sought to engage with the tropes of the detective story, it is important to understand how its formal experiments also challenged the television conventions of the day. Although Dennis Potter was also a novelist, screenwriter and playwright, he enjoyed an almost unparalleled status as an *auteur* of British television drama in the 60s and 70s. Following John Osborne's era-defining play *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, a more democratic, class-conscious theatre had emerged in Britain. This dominant "aesthetic and cultural mix which is associated with […] gritty Northern working-class realism" (Caughie: 95) also characterized much British television drama. Although his work is not explicitly, or *radically*, political, Dennis Potter, like many of his generation of TV writers, were from "Oxford and Cambridge: scholarship boys […] who had been uprooted from their class and educated alongside the elite," and who often "took as their theme the dislocations of class mobility" (Caughie: 85). A beneficiary of the grammar school system, Dennis Potter would often return to the rural Gloucestershire of his childhood in the 1930s and 40s as a subject matter for his work. Despite this, Potter largely eschewed the kitchen sink aesthetic, framing his thematic preoccupations with non-naturalistic devices.

The popular format for writers of TV drama in the 60s to the early 70s was the *television play*, notably the BBC's *The Wednesday Play* (1964–70) and *Play for Today* (1970–84) and ITV's *Armchair Theatre* (1956–74). Stand-alone dramas often focused on contemporary social issues, these were literally plays insomuch as one scene could be filmed for up to twenty minutes on a single set, the focal point being the acting and psychological realism. Unlike in cinema and due to the BBC's "theatrical tradition," it was the television writer rather than the director that was "seen as the primary author" (Porter 1984: 10). This characteristic of British television drama from the 60s to early 80s "placed

its writers in a favoured position" (Millington: 120), and *auteurs* such as Dennis Potter gained fame and enormous creative freedom. They also enjoyed a relationship with viewers unimaginable today, with the BBC and ITV long enjoying a broadcasting duopoly. As John Caughie explains, the government-commissioned Pilkington Report of 1962 also gave those working in the medium license "to 'push the boat out' and take audiences where they had not been before," which "served to enshrine in television drama notions associated with […] an art which is provocative and moves us on, but which is *nevertheless* situated within a popular medium for a mass audience" (Caughie: 128). Thus, an avowedly avant-garde serial such as *The Singing Detective* boasted "an audience of about eight million people in Britain for its first episode (around one in seven of the total population), and six million people were still watching the last episode six weeks later" (Caughie: 20).

The Singing Detective is also significant as in many ways it heralds the end of the television play. During the 80s a "flurry of new recording and editing technology" saw the multi-camera studio production largely abandoned in favour of a single-camera operation, the result of which being that television writers "were able to think in terms of cinema" (Rose: xv-xvi). The serialization of British drama also enabled producers to build audiences around a story arc in a way that was impossible with the stand-alone play. Broadcast in 1986, *The Singing Detective* also came in the final years of the BBC-ITV duopoly, already threatened by the arrival of Channel 4 in 1982, as the competition was opened to ever-greater numbers of broadcasters.

Reading, writing, metafiction and metatheatre

The Singing Detective's challenge to naturalism lies foremost in the constant play of temporal levels and shifts between fantasy, memory and reality, making it initially disorientating. The story that emerges from Marlow's past, and its connection to both his novel and the present, thus requires attentive detective work from the viewer. His nightmares and novelistic fantasies centre around a convoluted plot involving espionage, Russian prostitutes and Nazi scientists. Marlow plays

the role of a hardboiled sleuth as naked female bodies are fished out of the Thames, each time bearing a new face: that of Philip's mother, his wife, or characters from his novel. Scenes return repeatedly to the train compartment Philip shared with his mother *en route* to London after the breakdown of his parents' marriage; to his beloved treetops in the Forest of Dean; or to the Underground platform where his mother's pleas for him to "come back" are subsumed by the menacing cacophony of an incoming train. In the third episode, we hear Philip – the boy, not the adult – murmur in voice-over: "Round and bloody round. The same bits all the time. […] Summat's bloody wrong!" (episode 3, 15 min. 40 sec.).[1] The confusion is exacerbated by similarly-named characters who appear at different temporal levels of the narrative and by the use of the same actor to play several roles. Gradually, however, "a new internal logic dictates the way that the obsessive images come and go" (Hunningher: 236–37), namely the unravelling of Marlow's neurosis.

Also vital to the *The Singing Detective*'s discourse is the theme of reading and writing, a trope perhaps more commonly associated with postmodernist literature and particularly metafictional novels which "draw attention to the process of the construction of the *fictive* 'world' through *writing*" (Waugh: 102, italics in original). As a patient in a neighbouring hospital bed coincidentally reads the eponymous novel, Marlow himself seems to be rewriting it, vocalizing internally what could be a film treatment, punctuation marks and stage directions included. Meanwhile the hospital psychiatrist Dr Gibbon conducts his own detective work on his patient's *case* by reading and interpreting the titular novel for *clues* to Marlow's condition. Besides metafiction, the serial's focus on (re)writing also betrays the influence of theatre and cinema, notably the French *nouvelle vague*:

> The directors of the French new wave were especially fond of […] scriptural metaphor, scarcely surprising given that many of them began as writer-critics who saw writing articles as expressive *écriture*. Indeed, the New Wave itself formed part of a continuum of experimentation which included the *nouveau roman*, absurdist theater and other experiments in music and the arts. The writing metaphor, in any case, facilitated a displacement of inter-

> est from realism to textuality, from the situation of the characters depicted to the act of writing itself. (Stam, Burgoyne, Flitterman-Lewis: 109)

While we will return to *The Singing Detective*'s debt to experimental theatre and cinema, the focus on narration recalls a particular characteristic of the detective story remarked upon by critics of metafictional rewritings of the genre. This is that the fictional sleuth's investigation "mirrors" that of the reader who must "piece together the disparate signs that might eventually solve the mystery" (Nealon: 117). The serial explicitly and self-reflexively recognizes this paradigm. As one of the "mysterious men" that pursue the eponymous detective in Marlow's imagination puts it: "it's a clue. Everything – all things mean something. All things *point*" (episode 6, 43 min. 18 sec.). This echoes what many critics have identified as a further particularity of the detective story: "Everything that is described or merely mentioned is significant because it has the status of a potential clue. […] nothing in a detective story is insignificant because at worst it will mislead" (Porter 1981: 43). In *The Singing Detective*, Marlow goes as far as denouncing this trope, exclaiming at one point: "All solutions, and no clues. […] That's the bloody Novel – He said, she said, descriptions of the sky – I'd rather it was the other way around. All clues. No solutions. That's the way things are" (episode 4, 23 min. 04 sec.). With this statement Marlow recalls similar arguments made by hardboiled author Raymond Chandler, who eviscerated the golden age detective novel of Agatha Christie in his polemic essay "The Simple Art of Murder": "The murder novel has also a depressing way of […] solving its own problems and answering its own questions. There is nothing left to discuss" (Chandler: 92).

No-one could say that *The Singing Detective* leaves nothing left to discuss but there is still a feeling that the viewer finally has all the elements he/she needs to make sense of the mystery. Indeed, we are told as much in another self-reflexive statement, this time from the hospital registrar in a failed attempt to win Marlow's confidence: "It must be hellishly ticklish to work out a plot in a detective story, I should think. I suppose you have to scatter clues all over the place" (episode 1, 55 min. 08 sec.). This is true of the serial as a whole, each allu-

sion and lip-synched song adding further clues to the source of Marlow's anguish. As Hunningher observes: "the Registrar is right. Potter does scatter clues all over the place. There are clues about sex, family, treachery, guilt, illness, creativity, death, and they point to […] the fundamental psychological significance of Marlow as a whole character" (Hunningher: 238).

A further particularity of the classic detective story is the stark separation of story and narrative. According to Tzvetan Todorov, the detective story expresses this "duality" in terms of the original crime and the investigation, the first of which is "absent" but must be recovered by the detective, whose temporal and spatial reconstructions are narrative in nature (Todorov: 57–58)[2]. *The Singing Detective* plays with this notion of the absent story of the crime in various ways. Firstly, the primacy of plot in the genre is alluded to by Philip: "The worst thing about a detective story is the plot. The best thing too. No, what am I talking about? It's the *only* thing" (episode 4, 21 min. 48 sec.). One such plot sees Marlow imagine that his wife, Nicola, is scheming to steal the screenplay of his eponymous story and sell it to a Hollywood studio. This narrative thread is a classic trope of postmodernist rewritings of the genre, sometimes referred to as "metaphysical detective stories" (Merivale and Sweeney: 8), which often subvert the absent story of the crime through the theme of missing texts. Many take inspiration from Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter", in which the prototype fictional detective Auguste Dupin is tasked with recovering stolen royal correspondence, the sensitive contents of which the reader never learns. The reference is made overt in the serial when Nicola's co-conspirator alludes to "his bloody script that we've purloined!" (episode 4, 38 min. 36 sec.).

The recovery of the hidden story through the organizing work of narrative is also foregrounded in the series through the theme of authorship. When his wife asks him to consider returning to writing work, he replies: "I *have* been working […]. I've been turning [the novel] into something else" (episode 4, 17 min. 08 sec.). Marlow's struggle for authorial control is also allegorized by his detective fantasies. After all, fictional sleuths traditionally claim mastery over the past

by finally revealing the *what*, *where*, *when* and *why* of the mystery. It is also a familiar trope of some metafictional novels that revolve around "characters who manipulate others explicitly as though they were playwrights or theatrical directors," a process which leads to "obsessive and uncontrolled practices of self-fictionalization" (Waugh: 118–19). This is certainly the case for Philip in the serial, as he juggles a series of narratives and finds himself at times with a godlike, or indeed devilish power over his characters. After Nicola's questions about his screenplay arouse his suspicions, Marlow begins to whisper to himself the lines of a dialogue, in which each punctuation mark is vocalized: "No luck full stop No good full stop Talk about difficult exclamation mark I had to give it up because he was getting very suspicious full stop" (episode 4, 25 min. 46 sec.). When Nicola is then shown meeting Mark Finney, her apparent lover and co-conspirator, she repeats the dialogue, and the scene is revealed as a fantasy authored directly by Marlow from his bed.

Mark Finney later seems to become conscious of his fictional status, an awareness that is manifested as a feeling of entrapment. That this is expressed as paranoia at being *observed* is no coincidence, given the detective premise: "I tell you, it gives me the creeps. I mean, I half expect [Marlow] to be out there somewhere, looking at me. […] He seems to know too much. He's got hold of too many details" (episode 4, 34 min. 32 sec.). A similar realization dawns on the two absurd "mysterious men" stalking the hero in Marlow's mental reconstruction of his novel. They gradually realize they are superfluous to the plot, complaining finally that their "roles are unclear," and that they can't return home because "that's off the page" (episode 6, 1 hr. 03 min.). Here we can not only trace literary devices such as metafiction but also the influence absurdist theatre from the likes of Tom Stoppard. As Patricia Waugh argued:

> The characters in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) know the script to be a machine, an alternative to destiny, as do Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* […]. The device is an obvious theatrical strategy because of the *prima facie* existence of the script in drama. In fiction, characters normally know of their condition through knowledge of their relationship

> to an author. [Dennis] Potter's novel *Hide and Seek* (1973), for example, begins with its oversexed 'hero', Daniel, trying to explain how his life has been imposed upon by a morally sick author who has imprisoned him in 'This Dirty Book'. (Waugh 1984: 7)

Ironically Waugh does not mention that Potter was first and foremost a *dramatist* and only wrote four novels. The fact that *Hide and Seek* contains a number of ideas that are more fully developed in *The Singing Detective* reinforces the view that Potter was best suited to television drama and that his attacks on naturalism were, as Waugh identifies, *theatrical* strategies. As Steve Vineberg argues, Potter's work "lives on that edge between realism and anti-realism, theatrical illusion and blatant theatricality" (Vineberg: 29).

The detective story, art and popular culture

Despite the allusions to experimental theatre, cinema and literature, the serial's engagement with more popular forms, from the detective story itself to the Hollywood musical, is vital to its discourse. *The Singing Detective* cannot, however, be said to revel in the ubiquity of popular culture. Gibbon senses that Marlow wants to transcend genre fiction to do something *serious*: "You didn't set out to mimic that sort of stuff, now did you?" (episode 2, 20 min. 20 sec.). While the hero reacts with typical hostility to this suggestion, he concurs discreetly elsewhere, citing the lyrics to the Cole Porter song *Anything Goes*: "Good writers who once knew far better words now use only four-letter words" (episode 5, 44 min. 50 sec.). Similarly, Marlow is hurt by the aspersions cast upon his work by his therapist: "It's not a *novel* is it, properly speaking? Not what Lawrence would call the one bright book of Life" (episode 2, 13 min. 40 sec.). Tellingly, Potter and D. H. Lawrence share similar backgrounds, with the representation of coal-mining fathers among the autobiographical touches that imbue *Sons and Lovers* and the television series.

Marlow's struggle to transcend genre is indicative of a wider discourse about rising above the influence of what Fredric Jameson identifies as the "whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch"

(Jameson: 2–3). Jameson saw it as a facet of late capitalism that postmodernist cultural productions would "no longer simply 'quote'" the lowbrow, "but incorporate [it] into their very substance" (Jameson: 3). In *The Singing Detective* the play of genre isn't as frivolous as it might seem. Marlow's ambivalence towards popular culture is also tied to questions about class and social mobility. In his detective guise Marlow pays tribute to his father's working men's club performances by moonlighting as a singer, a fact sneered at by his client and adversary Mark Binney: "Tastes differ. You're more at home in dance halls, I dare say" (episode 3, 24 min. 40 sec.). Meanwhile the hero's manner of speaking is an absurd British pastiche of his hardboiled heroes, referred to in Potter's script as "Chandleresquerie" (Potter 1993: 15), and by the eponymous sleuth as "unhelpful, paperback-soiled, little side-of-the-mouth, mid-Atlantic quips" (episode 3, 22 min. 30 sec.). Full of clichés and allusions, a typical Marlow utterance would be: "OK. So what's the story? Who's the dame? […] Where's the body? There's always a body, too" (episode 2, 11 min. 5 sec.). The tropes to which Marlow refers are those enshrined in S. S. Van Dine's infamous "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" from 1928, which stipulated that: "There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel, and the deader the corpse the better" (Van Dine, 219). The unashamedly lowbrow manner of speaking, however, points not towards the formal detective story of the English school but American literary traditions from which the hardboiled detective novel derives. As Dennis Porter explains, the literary "fashioning an American vernacular […] was consciously ideological," as authors from Mark Twain to Dashiell Hammett responded to the "need to make the language of a class-conscious monarchy suitable for the use of democratic people living under a republic" (Porter 1981: 133).

In speaking in this way, Philip also avenges himself against his mother's family in London who mocked his regional dialect when he was forced to relocate there with his mother. "I byunt going to talk at all!" Philip seethes, "I be going to kip my mouth shut!" (episode 4, 4 min. 30 sec.). Potter himself experienced a similar sense of displacement when forced to lodge in the capital temporarily in 1945 while

waiting for a council house in the Forest of Dean, and where he "was mercilessly teased because of his accent" at a local school (Kynaston: 63). We sense in Philip's struggle to find a voice an affinity with his hardboiled heroes who reject standard English. As Marlow's bewildered nemesis Mark Binney complains: "Isn't it possible for you to talk properly, in ordinary, decent English?" (episode 3, 23 min. 10 sec.).

The location of the detective genre between high and low culture is also evoked when the hero complains that the name Philip Marlow was a curse for him: "You'd think my mother would have had more sense than to call me Philip, wouldn't you! […] What else could I have done except write detective stories? She should have called me Christopher" (episode 1, 30 min. 20 sec.). The allusions to Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Christopher Marlowe are significant. As John Caughie argues: "It is no accident that Marlow takes his name both from a fictional detective and from one of the cruellest of Elizabethan tragedians" (Caughie: 175). Chandler was himself at the forefronts of debates about the artistic merit, or lack thereof, of detective fiction. Having himself denounced the "golden age" detective novel of Agatha Christie, Chandler received unlikely praise from a self-confessed "addict" of the genre, poet W. H. Auden: "Mr. Chandler is interested in writing, not detective stories, but serious studies of a criminal milieu, […] and his powerful but extremely depressing books should be read and judged, not as escape literature, but as works of art." (Auden: 408)

The Singing Detective's musings on the boundaries between high and low culture also extend beyond allusions to *film noir* to the Hollywood musical. As Steven Vineberg observes, "musical comedy, with its manufactured optimism and its aura of romance, is *noir's* perfect opposite" (Vineberg: 30). Yet the juxtaposition isn't as paradoxical as it might seem, both are popular genres of Philip's 1940s childhood, and could be said to underline tensions in his psychological makeup. The heroes of hardboiled fiction are unsentimental loners who scorn women and never speak of tender feelings, while Hollywood musicals champion spontaneity and emotional expressiveness. This opposition goes to the heart of Marlow's torment: how can he let go of the past

and embrace the present, stop seeking blame and revenge and renew himself creatively?

Marlow hallucinates characters breaking spontaneously into song and dance routines, lip-synching to popular songs of the era. In this we can trace the influence of Brecht, whose "alienation effect" – a technique that "piles on songs, music hall patter, narration, direct address to the audience, and strips of expressionistic drama" – aims to keep an audience "on the prickly edge of surrender to the narcotizing lull of fiction, continually aware of the tricks and mechanisms of theatre" (Vineberg: 29). In Potter's case the trope had already become familiar to his audiences, having used it extensively in his serial *Pennies from Heaven* (1978), which fuses a tale of suburban sexual frustration with a *Bonnie and Clyde*-type crime caper. As Graham Fuller argues, the two dramas, alongside 1993's *Lipstick on Your Collar*, form a "trilogy about the mediating effects of popular culture in, respectively, Thirties, Forties and Fifties England" (Fuller: 80). Where Potter's characters struggle to express themselves, popular song intercedes but also somehow cheapens the sentiment, highlighting "the growing influence of mass culture in general on the lives and minds of its characters" (Creeber: 503).

Initially, and certainly to the uninitiated, the use of music might be said to be alienating in a Brechtian way. It is, after all, "the very familiarity of television which enables it […] to act as an agency for defamiliarization" (Fiske and Hartley: 19), particularly at a time when naturalistic modes were so dominant. The fact that Philip cannot hear his father's real singing voice in his memories of the working men's club, only popular recordings of the songs, highlights both the temporal gap between past and present and the unreliability of memory. While "the obvious disjunction between the actor's voice and the singing voice of the original recording (heightened by male characters often miming to female vocals and vice versa) foregrounds the artificiality of these musical intrusions" (Creeber 1996: 503), the bittersweet quality to the songs could not be said to undermine the representation in quite the way that it does in, say, the films of Jean-Luc Godard. In *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), for example, the abrupt musical sequences are as

jarringly discontinuous as the director's famous jump cuts, suggesting a possible influence of the *nouvelle vague* on Potter's aesthetic. However, Godard arguably had more in common with Brecht's epic theatre which condemned "the illustrative, culinary function of music," by using melodies and lyrics which "were designed mutually to discredit rather than complement each other" (Stam: 213–14). Like Potter's contemporary John McGrath, whose 7:84 theatre group productions in the 70s mixed "pop and pub culture, music-hall and Brechtian techniques," the serial's use of song is arguably too seductive and therefore "not Brechtian in its reliance on an emotional identification" (Thomsen: 158 & 163). Tellingly, McGrath and Potter worked together for the BBC on the first series of the literary review show Bookstand in the early 60s.

Yet the musical sequences also raise issues about class and social mobility. During a memory of his father singing at the club, the adult Philip appears among the crowd in his hospital pyjamas, unable to applaud due to the psoriasis that has caused his hands to clench up. "I can't clap my hands – I *can't do it* – ! Not even for my dear old Dad" (episode 2, 56 min. 48 sec.), he laments, before the menacing figure of a miner leans over Philip again to accuse him of not wanting to applaud: "You byunt interested in clapping thee fayther, now be ya? Thou's never did give the poor bugger credit when him was alive! Got too big for thee boots, disn't?" (episode 2, 57 min. 10 sec.). It is implied that Philip later became embarrassed by his working-class origins and his father's singing, but that – the latter now dead – it is too late for him to rectify the mistake.

Guilt, sin and psychoanalysis

Themes of guilt and (original) sin abound throughout *The Singing Detective*. Marlow's revelatory therapy sessions with Gibbon underline a synergy between the detective genre and psychoanalysis that has been highlighted by a number of critics. Dennis Porter, for example, argued that "the psychoanalytic case history is a mystery story"

which raises "a problem whose solution is furnished at the end" (Porter 1981: 243). Freud himself made this analogy in 1906:

> In both [the criminal and the hysteric] we are concerned with a secret, with something hidden. […] In the case of the criminal it is a secret which he knows and hides from you, whereas in the case of the hysteric it is a secret which he himself does not know either […]. The task of the therapist […] is the same as that of the examining magistrate. We have to uncover the hidden psychical material; and in order to do this we have invented a number of detective devices … (Freud 1906: 108)

Potter seems to have been deeply aware of these parallels, depicting in Marlow a man whose detective fantasies indicate a displacement of childhood trauma. Thanks to Dr Gibbon's stewardship, Marlow acknowledges his regret for having run away from his mother in London following a confrontation about her affair, a scene that gathers resonance as it is replayed in fragments throughout the serial. It is implied that this event led to her suicide by drowning in the Thames. That a prostitute suffers a similar fate in Marlow's novel is a coincidence seized upon by his therapist: "I'm just a little surprised that […] you would so exactly replicate such a traumatic event in your own life in the pages of a [book]" (episode 6, 7 min. 24 sec.). Elsewhere his mother's death is also restaged as the murder of a German spy, played by the same actress, whom his detective alter-ego fails to save. As Freud remarked of the compulsion to repeat: "the patient does not *remember* anything at all of what he has forgotten and repressed, but rather *acts it out*" (Freud 1914: 394). The link between role play and trauma is most stark in the scenes exploring Marlow's childhood. In one scene, the camera locates the young Philip in the tree canopy from where he witnesses his mother's infidelity. Addressing the viewer directly (one of many such asides designed to undermine the fourth wall conventions of drama): "When I grow up, I be going to be – a detective. [….] I'll find out things! […] I'll find out *who did it!*" (episode 2, 54 min. 25 sec.).

While Philip's detective role-playing can be seen a defensive cloak into which he seeks escape from his trauma, Gibbon implies the same might be true of his illness: "Chronic illness is an extremely good shelter. Have you ever seen it in those terms?" (episode 3, 19 min. 30 sec.).

At times Marlow's skin condition indeed seems to suggest a carapace into which he retreats from the probing medical staff. Yet at others, his hypersensitive skin could be said to betray his trauma with a porosity that recalls Didier Anzieu's notion of "moi-peau":

> La peau […] c'est l'interface qui marque la limite avec le dehors et maintient celui-ci à l'extérieur, c'est la barrière qui protège de la pénétration par les avidités et les agressions en provenance des autres, êtres ou objets. La peau enfin […] est un lieu et un moyen primaire de communication avec autrui, d'établissement des relations signifiantes ; elle est, de plus, une surface d'inscription des traces laissées par ceux-ci. (Anzieu: 61-62)

Just as Marlow's skin could be said to the surface upon which his trauma is written, an "interface" between his subconscious and the exterior world, a similar porosity compromises his detective fantasies. That is to say, Marlow's traumatic memories and the physical pain of his present predicament make frequent incursions into, and distortions of the hardboiled narrative.

In the final episode Marlow confesses to another childhood incident which figures large in his memories. It is revealed that he shifted the blame onto a fellow pupil for having secretly defecated on his primary school teacher's desk, a crime for which the latter was severely beaten. Worse still, this schoolmate suffered from learning difficulties and began to believe he committed the offense after all. The gradual unravelling of *The Singing Detective*'s mysteries, anchored by Marlow's sessions with Dr Gibbon, suggests that the serial's rewriting of the detective story is not as radical as it first appears. As critic Dennis Porter suggests: "the best detective stories are constructed […] in the knowledge of the paradox that the circuitous and even painful path in fiction […] is also the path of pleasure" (Porter 1981: 41). Here the critic appears to be drawing on Freud, who observed "the postponement of gratification […] and the temporary toleration of unpleasure on the long and circuitous road to pleasure" (Freud 1920: 135).

Gibbon attempts to convince Marlow that childhood is by nature mysterious, and that we should accept that this is part of the human condition: "Irreducibly beyond elucidation. […] Impossible to

unravel I mean. […] There are *always* things which puzzle us as children […]. They are mysteries. They remain so. Even to a writer of detective stories!" (episode 3, 16 min. 30 sec.). Yet in many ways *The Singing Detective* contradicts this common-sense thinking. It is difficult *not* to conclude that the hero has finally achieved a form of catharsis; there is finally a sense that Marlow's childhood has been *unraveled*, with a denouement that unifies a number of loose plot strands.

The Freudian theory that *The Singing Detective* most closely evokes is that of the primal scene. Philip does not comprehend at first what he is observing in the woods between his mother and her lover Raymond Binney, pleading in voice-over: "Wos him a-doing? Was him doing to our Mam? Mum! Mum! Shall I go and fetch Dad? Mum …" (episode 3, 47 min. 58 sec.). This recalls Freud's case study *History of an Infantile Neurosis*, also known as "The Wolfman" on account of the patient's fairy-tale inflected dreams. The man in question is led to remember an incident in early childhood where he awoke in his cot to witness his parents copulating in the same room, a "primal scene" he misconstrues as "an act of violence" (Freud 1918: 230). In a paper entitled "Detective Stories and the Primal Scene", Geraldine Pederson-Krag argues that:

> The reader addicted to mystery stories tries actively to relive and master traumatic infantile experiences he once had to endure passively. Becoming the detective, he gratifies his infantile curiosity with impunity, redressing completely the helpless inadequacy and anxious guilt unconsciously remembered from childhood. (Pederson-Krag: 16)

Just as Philip dreams of becoming a detective so that he can unravel the mysteries of his mother's infidelity, Pederson-Krag argues that children become de facto detectives investigating the mysteries of parental sex, whether it be through ambiguous clues or actually witnessed scenes of lovemaking. For Philip, the ambiguity of the scene in the woods is reinforced by his mother's torment; shortly after having sex she guiltily breaks down in tears. Also distressing to the boy is the animal behaviour of her lover, who compares her breasts to apples and teasingly threatens to bite them: "I could bit tha', my babby. Sweet as an apple" (episode 3, 47 min. 38 sec.). One of several biblical referenc-

es in the series, the scene clearly evokes the fall from paradise and the motif of the forbidden fruit. The event also represents the ruin of Philip's childhood innocence and the Garden of Eden that is for him the forest, his hideout in the canopy akin to the tree of knowledge. When he is obliged to accompany his mother to London, he laments his expulsion from paradise, comparing the capital bitterly to his beloved Gloucestershire: "Chunt like whum though, be it! […] There yunt no place like the Forest: Where cost thou go up here? Where be the trees? And the oaks? The elms?" (episode 4, 4 min. 58 sec.). The parallel between the detective story and the expulsion from paradise echoes W. H. Auden's reading of the Golden Age detective story, which depicts "an innocent society in a state of grace […] and where murder, therefore, is the unheard-of act which precipitates a crisis" (Auden: 407–08). For Auden, the detective's naming and shaming of the culprit is suggestive of the scapegoat that takes on the sins of others so that society can return to harmony.

The serial's abundance of Oedipal motifs – both the Greek tragedy and the complex as defined by Freud – is again suggestive of Potter's deconstructive engagement with the detective genre. As critic Dennis Porter explains, while the Bible teaches us that "the curiosity to know is a sexual curiosity," Oedipus confirms "the Bible's authority in the matter" insomuch as it proposes "a connection between sex and detection, between the activities of the riddle solver and those of the incestuous son" (Porter 1981: 240). In a memory of Philip's train ride to London with his mother, in which she attracts the eye of soldiers in the carriage, this connection is made explicit. When she starts to cry and one of the soldiers tries to comfort her, Philip intervenes furiously: "Doosn't thous touch her! Kip thee hands off our Mum! […] I shall tell our Dad! Him ool kill you! […] And the man in the woods!" (episode 3, 50 min. 02 sec.). The threats of violence hit an unintended comic note, however, as Philip's mention of "the man in the woods" has the soldiers sniggering at the boy's indiscretion.

As we have seen, *The Singing Detective*'s renewal of the detective story is staged as a story about rewriting and role play. The hero must separate fact from fiction by abandoning his guise of the hardboiled

sleuth to confront the true mysteries of his childhood, reimagined as crimes in his novel and nightmares. In its discourse on the boundaries between high and low culture, the serial also succeeds in examining the sometimes painful dislocations of class and social mobility while questioning the mediating effects of popular culture on the individual. Rather than revel in the ubiquity of Jameson's "schlock and kitsch", however, the serial charts its hero's attempts to transcend the detective story while showing how the detective story can be revitalised and transcend popular culture. Despite its play of styles and deconstructive approach to the genre, *The Singing Detective* ultimately provides solutions to its mysteries. Marlow's confrontation with the truth engenders an improvement in his skin condition and a reconciliation with his wife. Therefore, rather than negating or subverting the process of revelation implied by the detective narrative and the psychoanalytical sessions with Dr Gibbon, the serial ends by affirming them.

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[1] In order to transcribe the regional dialect in scenes representing Marlow's childhood in the Forest of Dean we consulted the script for *The Singing Detective*, published by Faber and Faber in 1986.

[2] Translated and summarized from the original French: "A la base du roman à énigme nous trouvons une dualité […]. Ce roman ne contient pas une mais deux histoires : l'histoire du crime et l'histoire de l'enquête. […] la première, celle du crime, est en fait l'histoire d'une absence : sa caractéristique la plus juste est qu'elle ne peut être immédiatement présent dans le livre."