Thomas Berger's Comic-Absurd Vision in *Who Is Teddy Villanova?*

By David Madden

To date, Thomas Berger's critical reputation is based primarily on his immensely successful *Litle Big Man* (1964) and to a lesser extent on his "Reinhart trilogy" (*Crazy in Berlin,* 1958, *Reinhart in Love,* 1962, and *Vital Parts,* 1970). Often referred to by that oblique term, "black humor," Berger's fiction has more accurately been described by Ihab Hassan as one with a "comic-absurd vision. . . continually presented under the aspect of hyperbolic, surreal, or grotesque irony. . ."; it is a vision extending over twenty-two years and ten novels. One of the most accomplished of these works, and ironically one of the most ignored, is his 1977 parody of the hard-boiled detective novel, *Who Is Teddy Villanova?*

In choosing the form of the detective story, Berger places his work in the company of other contemporary ironic detective fictions such as Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet,* Norman Mailer's *An American Dream,* Thomas Pynchon's *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49,* Richard Brautigan's *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel 1942,* Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo,* and John Hawkes's *The Lime Twig.* By imitating, and at the same time inverting, many of the hard-boiled detective story's conventions, Berger manages to sustain his unique comic-absurd vision and illustrate the artistic and cultural disparity between the values of the writer of detective fiction and those of the novelist in post-World War II America.

Although *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* owes debts of gratitude to such disparate figures as Racine, Henry James, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Ross MacDonald, and Dashiell Hammett, Berger relies most strongly on the hard-boiled tradition perfected by Raymond Chandler. For this reason, then, I would like to begin this discussion with a brief examination of Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* to establish some of the hard-boiled detective story's conventions and to create a framework within which to compare Berger's ironic imitation.

To begin, the setting in *Farewell, My Lovely* is Los Angeles and its suburb Bay City (a pseudonym for Santa Monica), favorite symbols for Chandler of the decadence and corruption of modern American life. Each of the novel's characters may be defined in terms of this setting, and each offers testament to the golden dream gone sour. Theirs is a place of glamour and danger, where the rich and influential own the city, the police, and almost every citizen.

Against this ubiquitous corruption stands the lone figure of the cynical, world-weary, but honorable Philip Marlowe, private eye. Unlike the amateur detective Dupin, in Poe's classic tale of ratiocination, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Marlowe is a professional who willingly chooses his life of loneliness, because he simply cannot accept the various modes of existence his environment offers. He remains in this world for the fundamental reason that there is nowhere left to go.

In most ways, Marlowe is an ordinary man, lacking the element of genius that distinguishes a man like Dupin; nevertheless, he solves his cases through dogged persistence and dedication. He accepts as inevitable the diffuse evil of the area and manages, through the strength of his personality, to move freely through all social levels. However, unlike the denizens of the city, Marlowe is the novel's one truly and intensely moral man, living by a self-created and self-sustaining moral code. He is the last the honest, rugged individualists and refuses to permit money, sex, or friendship to deter him in his investigation.

Marlowe, whose name reminds one of the author of the Arthurian legends, stands as a modern knight,

searching, before all else, for the Truth, and the novel records that quest. He avenges the wronged, protects the weak, defends the innocent, and always maintains his own tough, slightly (but only slightly) tarnished integrity. He encounters and accepts pain stoically and answers it flippantly. The novel is told in his voice, and its style is taut, lean, and rich in witty and elaborate metaphors.

In *Farewell, My Lovely,* the plot details Marlowe's search for a former nightclub singer after her ex-boyfriend, the gigantic Moose Malloy, stops him on the street and coerces him into conducting the investigation. Moose has been incarcerated and now wants to locate his "Little Velma." After a series of interviews with former colleagues and friends, Marlowe determines that Velma has vanished forever.

Simultaneously, he is employed by the precise, effeminate Lindsey Marriott, to act as a bodyguard in the return of some stolen jewels. After he is knocked unconscious and Marriott is murdered, Marlowe interviews the owner of the jewels, the sexually flamboyant Mrs. Lewin Lockridge Grayle. Although she poses as a temptation and a threat to the detective, Marlowe remains uninvolved with her.

Conversely, he is extremely involved with his case and must pay the inevitable price for this involvement. At one point he is drugged and beaten by a Hollywood spiritualist, then turned over to the corrupt Dr. Sonderberg and two Bay City policemen, who continue to drug him until he eventually escapes. The novel closes with Marlowe's journey to a gambling ship anchored off shore, where Moose Malloy has been hiding after a pair of recent murders. There Malloy confronts Mrs. Grayle (the lost and now discovered Little Velma), who shoots Moose and then flees. Marlowe tells us that she reappears in Baltimore, where she worked again as a nightclub singer, shot a detective, and then killed herself.

The novel's plot is tortuously intricate and at times confusing, and because the story is told from the protagonist's point of view, the audience shares in his confusion and gropes desperately with him for the solution to the story's many puzzles. The work observes such classical detective plot conventions as the audience's introduction to the detective (in this case to a man who inhabits a broken-down office and cheap flat), the presentation of the crime and clues, the investigation, and the announcement and explanation of the solution. There are, however, a pair of essential differences, which John G. Cawelti explains by noting:

> Significant differences appear in the way this pattern is worked out in the hard-boiled story. Two are particularly important: the subordination of the drama of solution to the detective's quest for the discovery and accomplishment of justice; and the substitution of a pattern of intimindation and temptation of the hero for the elaborate development in the classical story of what Northrop Frye calls "the wavering finger of suspicion" passing across a series of potential suspects.[1]

It is this quest for justice which underscores the hard-boiled detective's moral position in the world. His commitment goes beyond the classical detective's interest in merely solving a challenging puzzle, to one of an actual ethical and emotional bond with his clients or those he feels most in need of his help. Philip Marlowe is also unlike Dupin in the way he assumes both a moral stance against the criminal and attempts to mete out an improvised form of justice that the incompetent, corrupt police force cannot effect.

It follows, then, that the criminal and his accomplices continually seek to thwart or mislead the detective. To this end, Marlowe is drugged and beaten by a pair of quacks and by some crooked cops. Mrs. Grayle, seeking to maintain her new identity, tries unsuccessfully to seduce the detective, and other, more honest, police try to dissuade Marlowe from continuing the investigation because of the widespread corruption he will reveal. In spite of their threats or coercion, the hard-boiled detective always remains firm and incorruptible, as he continues his quest for justice in one small corner of a degraded world.

To speak now of what happens in *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* is rather difficult. By turns the novel is extravagant and prolix and contains repeated changes in actions, identity, and meaning; at the same time, it records the attempts of one highly educated man to create order and rationality in a world that continually eludes and frustrates him. The story opens with his introduction, "Call Me Russell Wren," which signals not only the narrative perspective but also the ironic intentions of the author. Wren, a former graduate student and instructor of English, is a rather ineffectual shamus, whose impoverished means force him to sleep in his office, thereby avoiding his apartment and the prospect of paying his long-overdue rent.

In the first chapter he meets an immense thug, Gus Bakewell, who represents one Junior Washburn and warns Wren to "tell Teddy Villanova to lay off Junior Washburn."[2] After Bakewell threatens him, Wren finds the giant's corpse first in an elevator, then on the couch in his office, and later in the bathtub of his apartment. A pair of imposter police beat Wren in his office and take the body, and subsequently other officers ransack his apartment and further threaten him. In the interim, Donald Washburn II appears and gives Wren a handsome retainer to investigate the sexual proclivities of his errant wife, Freddie.

During an investigation that takes him to a Greenwich Village yogi, who claims to have never heard of Fredericka Washburn, Wren is arrested by still another cop, posing as a cabbie, and is just as quickly freed by a gay goon squad (the Gay Assault

Team), who righteously proclaim, "We protect *any* man from the police. Men have always been the niggers of society..." (124). Wren next proceeds to sleep fourteen hours on a sidewalk in a discarded "Barca-Lounger," awakens to trade articulate ripostes with a wino (whom he labels "the Diogenes of muscatel"), encounters once again the first pair of fraudulent police, who are quickly gunned down by another black cop, now posing as a pimp.

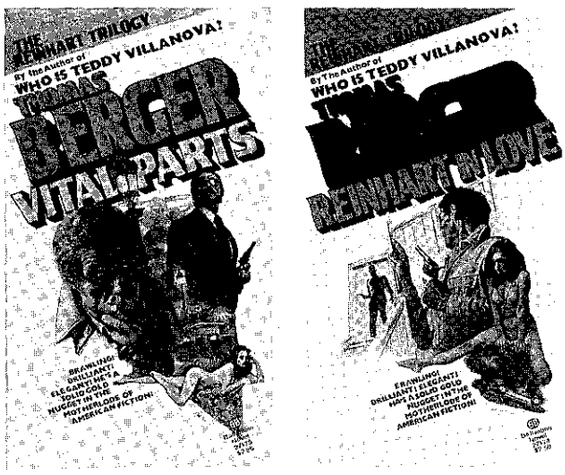
When Wren retreats to his girlfriend's apartment, he is sexually teased by her roommate and discovers a nude Washburn in the bathroom. Bakewell then appears, and the two inform Wren that there is no Teddy Villanova and they have been seeking, like the criminals in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon,* a lost, erotic statue by Leonardo da Vinci. Feeling a gun at his back, Wren finds his girlfriend, Natalie Novotny, now a gay Treasury Agent; after Washburn and Bakewell leave, she reveals her plan to entrap the two in a counterfeiting ring. After she too confirms there is no Teddy Villanova, the couple leave the apartment, Natalie is arrested, and Wren is picked up by a busload of child prostitutes and a Russian vice squad chauffeur.

They travel to Wren's apartment, and after further confusion, the detective eventually discovers that his landlord, Sam Polidor, is Teddy Villanova and has been trying to frighten Wren out of his lease in order to sell the building for an astronomical sum. He explains that all the principals involved have been actors making a film in which Wren plays an unwitting part. Nevertheless, just before he and his secretary, Peggy Tumulty, end the novel by romping in bed, Wren receives a phone call from someone in Bavaria claiming he is Teddy Villanova. At this point neither Wren nor the befuddled reader has any answer to the question posed by the novel's title.

For Wren, however, the answer seems to reside somewhere in the New York City he inhabits. Reminiscent of Marlowe's Los Angeles, Wren's New York is a world of seeming corruption and decadence in which danger lurks everywhere. Where Marlowe responds to his city with the cynicism of a soured romantic, Wren accepts his world and rationally attempts to describe and evaluate its multiple features. His attitude is composed more of bemusement than of bitterness, and this response is clearly illustrated when Wren steps off a curb to hail a cab.

> Whatever, when I reached First Avenue, in civilization's contemporary Western capital, depraved, debased, degraded, and declining though it be, and under constant Vandal seige, I stepped into a gutter full of filth and lifted my arm, not to wave an oriflamme but rather to hail a taxi (191).

The contrast here between the signalling of a cab and the waving of a standard of the early kings of France perfectly demonstrates Wren's logical, erudite assess-



ment of his environment. A description of a pay phone offers another opportunity not only to confront directly a declining world but to view the way the cultivated mind deals with this decay.

> Averting my eyes, I slunk to the corner, where one of the new public-phone arrangements stood: two instruments hanging on a panel exposed to the weather. Involved in a conversation, you might have your pockets picked—or, in certain areas (and this might well be one, many deviates being diet cranks as well), be quickly, deftly sodomized while making an apology for dialing a wrong number. Paranoid fantasies, perhaps, but New York is a bad place in which to offer the unguarded spine (111).

It is traditional that detective stories set a chaotic outer world such as this against the quiet, isolated one that the detective inhabits. Usually this ranges among a romantic garret room, estate, or even office; however, for Wren, that isolated place comprises the world of the individual mind. Berger continually demonstrates the ways an overly precise, scholarly, refined intellect attempts to handle and make some sense of a world that is beyond definition or understanding. Accordingly, Wren is less at home in the world of New York than he is in the private world of the intellect, a world shaped by elegant and luxurious verbal constructions.

His love of language, as shown in his many careful, verbal arabesques, defines a major difference between this detective and a man like Marlowe. Where Marlowe speaks in an essentially terse, idiomatic way, Wren is loquacious and annoyingly articulate and takes extreme delight in precious linguistic structures. He is not, like Marlowe, a man of the streets, a product of the world; rather, Wren is a product of the isolated world of the university. There is absolutely nothing tough about him. His prose is indirect and euphemistic; witness, for instance, this description of his first meeting with Bakewell:

> He spoke in a singular manner, scarcely opening his oral aperture; yet I suspected, from the swelling above and

below, that his upper row of teeth was nowhere near the lower; that is to say, not in the malocclusion of the "tough" style of address, but in the uncertain suspension of poorly fitted dentures. It was impossible for me to estimate the age of a man that large (7).

Later, after he is threatened, rather than tell us, as Marlowe would, that his assailant "slugged my mouth into my ass," Wren summarizes, "...then he asserted that on further interruption by me he would kick me so vigorously as to bring my mouth and my rectum into juxtaposition, though to be sure he used different locutions to construct that vivid image" (11).

Wren does, like his seventeenth-century architect-namesake did in constructing elaborate English cathedrals, construct his own vivid images and in so doing reminds us further of the disparity between his style and that of Chandler's hero. Marlowe's characteristic stylistic devices are the ornate metaphor and "the slangy, hyperbolic simile."[3] For example, when he first sees Moose Malloy, Marlowe remarks, "Even on Central Avenue, not the quietest dressed street in the world, he looked about as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food."[4] Wren also tries his hand at the exaggerated metaphor, but like all his verbal formulae, it is highly self-conscious. For instance, on finding Bakewell's body, he comments:

If he was not as dead as the cold lasagna on which the tomato sauce has begun to darken, I was a Dutchman. The gaudy and, in the absence of blood, inappropriate metaphor actually came to mind at the moment, as a willed ruse to lure me away from panic—the fundamental purpose of most caprices of language, hence the American wisecrack—but it failed (20–21).

Additionally, the novel teems with literary allusions which Wren tosses off with self-congratulatory delight. These many allusions and this complicated, often derivative, style have led one reviewer to remark:

Berger's style, which is one of the great pleasures of the book, is something like S. J. Perelman's—educated, complicated, graceful, silly, destructive in spirit, and brilliant—and it is also something like Mad Comics—densely, sensuously detailed, unpredictable, packed with gags. Beyond all this, it makes an impression of scholarship—that is, Berger seems really to know what he jokes about. This includes really not only Hammett and Chandler, but also Racine, Goethe, Ruskin, Elias Canetti, New York and the ways its inhabitants behave. Essentially, then, Berger's style is like itself insofar as it is like other styles. And his whole novel—in its wide ranging reference to cultural forms both high and pop—is like a huge verbal mirror. Its reflections are similar to what we see in much contemporary literature—hilarious and serious at once.[5]

As I suggested earlier, one of the basic differences between the classical and the hard-boiled detective results from the amateur status of the one and the professional status of the other. Wren is a professional in name only; like Marlowe, he comes to his job after failing elsewhere, and also like his counterpart, he lacks the magical intuition of the classical detective. However, he fails to match Marlowe's ability to move freely throughout the corrrupted world he inhabits and ultimately solve the novel's mystery. Ultimately, Wren is the quintessential schlemiel; he is bested by criminals and victims alike, and even his wise-cracking secretary is better equipped to deal with the complex network of clues than her employer.

Lacking Wren's paranoid perspective, Peggy is capable of seeing the world and the mystery's clues with clarity and distance. Eventually realizing some conspiracy is afoot, she surrepticiously tails the private eye and forces him to accept her as a partner rather than as a secretary. Wren suffers indignities, insults, beatings from criminals, police, derelicts, gay girlfriends, and imitation yogis and is forever incapable of bettering any of these figures. He is the perpetual victim, everyone's patsy.

Yet throughout it all, Wren manages to maintain, to a limited degree, something of Marlowe's rigorous moral code. He is, basically, trying, in his own desperate, ridiculous way, to discover the truth at the heart of the mystery. Unlike anyone else in the novel, Wren conscientiously attempts to bring to this chaotic world some small measure of order. Although he eagerly accepts the money that Marlowe would normally reject, Wren is also motivated by compassion and protection. For instance, when he thinks Boris, the vice-squad cop, fondles Peggy's exposed thigh, Wren protectively barks, "This wench is my ward... Toy with her fine foot if you like, but eschew her quivering thigh and the demesnes that there adjacent lie" (217). Later, after the mystery appears solved and he is congratulated for his part in the film's production, Wren modestly answers, "The character is essentially a moral leper, yet human like us all, *mon semblable, mon frere*" (239). Finally, for all his scholarship and erudition, Wren remains a fundamental innocent; his is the innocence of the gullible, the unwitting, the irrepressibly trusting.

All of this is to say that Wren is a hopeless romantic, a quixotic figure who relentlessly fights his many empty and paradoxically significant battles. As Cawelti points out, "...below his surface of alienated skepticism and toughness, [Wren along with his hard-boiled counterpart] tends to be as soft as they come."[6] Wren is a marshmallow and admits as much when he compared himself to the stereotype of the tough detective.

Actually I am a complete maverick in the bourgeois world and in no way conform to its mores and norms.

However when viewed dispassionately, as I realized later, Peggy's assessment of me was dead accurate. The only real

maverick is the criminal, and like most people I am but the occasional breaker of minor ordinances (31).

Pitted against this all to vulnerable hero is not the master criminal of the classical story or a vile and corrupt member of the community's ruling forces. Instead we have Sam Polidor (a.k.a. Teddy Villanova), a paunchy, brash, middle-aged, parsimonious landlord, who forever intimidates Wren into grudgingly accepting the building's decrepit conditions. Initially, Sam appears as little more than a cynical New Yorker declaiming against society's abundant ills, speaking with the harsh directness and grittiness that Wren lacks. At one moment, when complaining about the building's condition, he moans, "Your winos come and go like a fart. You can't count on them. That's why I lock the inside door. See, it's open again. You people never listen to nothing" (23). Because he feels exploited, Sam is completely willing to exploit others and explains his ethic to the naïve Wren, "Take my word for it, you don't come into a buck in this day and age without getting a little shit on your hands" (236).

In an ironic reversal of the typical detective story, *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* ends with the criminal, the mastermind behind the mystery, carefully explaining the complications of his intrigue to the dumbfounded detective. Thus we learn that Sam has actually tried to coerce Wren into leaving the building and terminating his lease. He has sold the building for a few million dollars but must force Wren out before he can collect. Nearly all of the novel's characters, with the exception of Peggy, have worked in concert with the landlord as actors, simultaneously satisfying Sam and filming Ziggy Zimmerman's *The Reformers,* which includes an unsuspecting Wren. After he agrees to settle with Wren for six thousand dollars, Sam admits that he is Teddy Villanova, a name he took from a police show walk-on on "Teee-Veee!"

Unlike the traditional criminal in the hard-boiled story, Sam Polidor neither has "some connection with a larger criminal organization" nor is he "particularly vicious, perverse, or depraved," but a simple man, trying desperately to make a quick buck.[7] He is, however, similar to the hard-boiled criminal in running, albeit loosely, a gang of cohorts and thugs, and he does appear to control the police (in this case, actors) to further his own ends.

One of those cohorts, the gargantuan Gus Bakewell, enters like Moose Malloy, beats the detective, and involves him in the unfolding mystery. Like many such members of gangs in hard-boiled detective stories, Bakewell functions as the strongman, both a physical Atlas and an intellectual pygmy. He is, naturally, the ultimate tool, carrying out the boss's dirty work and finally becoming the fall guy.

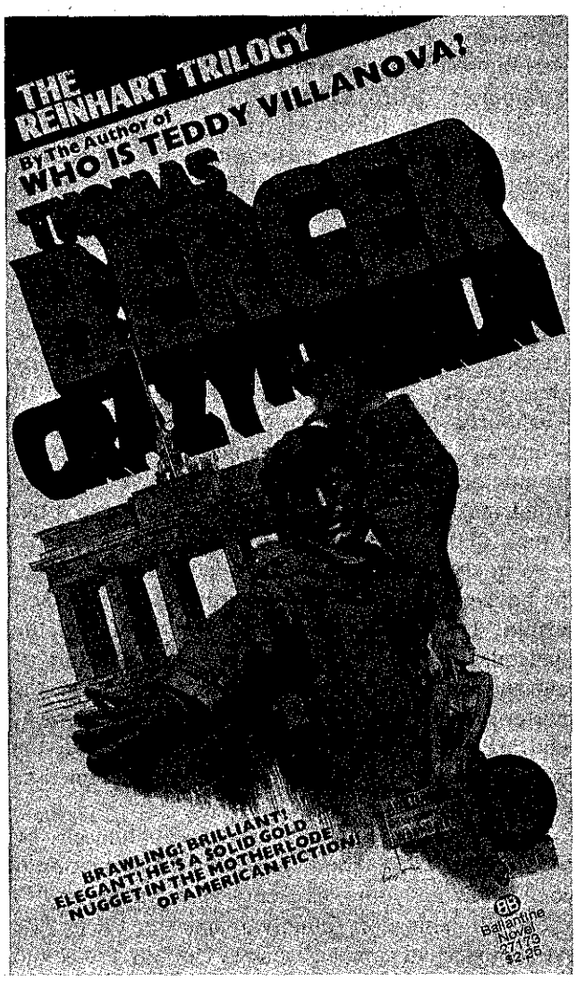
In his dilettantish, vaguely effeminate way, Donald Washburn II is the novel's Lindsey Marriott. He fulfills the role of sending the detective on a deceptive mission, one which will deflect the private eye's interest from the story's fundamental mystery. Washburn's desire to have his wife investigated corresponds closely with Marriott's attempt to secure the stolen jewels. In each novel, the detective's deceptive investigation eventually leads him, in the most circuitous manner, to the central crime. Washburn also operates as a comic and intellectual foil for Wren. Throughout their encounters, the two play games of verbal one-upmanship. A comic example of this occurs when Washburn hires the detective to investigate his wife. "'Excuse me for what might appear as impertinence,' I said to Washburn. 'But does your wife happen to be Teutonic?' 'Too *tonic?*' he replied in what seemed genuine bewilderment. 'Your queries have now, I'm afraid, taken a definite turn towards the cryptic, Wren'" (53).

As in the traditional hard-boiled detective story, the police in his novel are certainly competitive and hostile, but rather than simply symbolizing the inadequacies and limitations of the institutions of law and order, these men are accomplices of the master criminal. Besides the two initial policemen, who are later gunned down on Fifth Avenue, the fiction presents such investigators and patrolmen as Zwingli, Knox, and Calvin.

Detective Zwingli (who introduces himself by proclaiming, "'I'll show you my identification, if you'll show me yours, as Henry James might say'") affects Wren most profoundly by sparking the private eye's intellectual competitiveness. Quoting Percy and Hopkins, he challenges Wren to a quote identification quiz in an attempt to verify his educational credentials. Zwingli also manages to draw a confession from Wren after praising his unfinished play.

> I was touched. In fact, I was devastated. . . . No one, not even the liberal-lawyer's wife, had so lavishly praised my work. In fact, but for Daphne Leopold, for such was her name, no one had ever made upon it a judgment that could actually have been as in any way favorable (84).

Zwingli further surprises Wren by admitting he is a heroin addict and will drop murder charges if the private eye hands over his suspected cache of the drug. At this moment Wren's secretary enters and vouches for his integrity; Zwingli takes the detective aside and smirks, "Looks like a hot piece of poontang" (98). His addiction and lechery are complimented by his assistant, Knox's, physical cruelty. During their interrogation, Knox gleefully avails himself of every opportunity to punch, slap, and kick Wren into bruised submission. Their patrolman flunky, Calvin, searches the apartment and unnerves Wren by "assum[ing] a darky accent when talking to his colleagues" (94).



Taken together, these three figures represent the nadir of the official corruption that Hammett and Chandler anatomized in their novels, and the ironic use of their various names underscores their moral characteristics. Named after Swiss, English, and German leaders in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, they possess little of the ethical and spiritual zeal that changed religion, societies, and history. As a dope addict, a sadist, and a pimp-killer, these men typify the corruption of authority which marks, as Wren at one point overstates it, "this Sodomist time and Gomorrhean place" (62). Their ironic dimensions are broadened even further when the audience learns, at the work's close, that they act as advisers on the biographical film, *The Reformers*. They are, as one critic has noted, not merely "stupid or incompetent, [they] are brutal and degraded."[8]

Sexual temptation, the other traditional obstacle which thwarts the detective's investigation, comes in the form of Wren's lover of three weeks, Natalie Novotny. Although he is puzzled, even slightly disturbed by her less than enthusiastic ardor during lovemaking, Wren is positively crushed by her admission that she is neither an airline stewardess nor a heterosexual. Cawelti is again helpful in defining this aspect of a detective novel when he writes:

> Sex tends to be represented in a double-edged way in a hard-boiled story. It is an object of pleasure, yet it also has a disturbing tendency to become a temptation, a trap, and a betrayal. . . . The function of the woman in the hard-boiled formula then is not simply that of appropriate sexual consort to the dashing hero; she also poses certain basic challenges to the detective's physical and psychological security.[9]

This is certainly the case with Wren; he has been karate-chopped, turned over to a pair of assailants, and finally sexually discarded. The enormity of his betrayal is too much for him to comprehend and he pleads:

> "Tell me it isn't so, Natalie! . . . I refer to your asserted Sapphism. Confirm my sense that you spoke in jest—strange japery, but these are unique terms, in which truth eludes the direct aim, but is reached by torturous irony, yes? By bad taste, even: I mean no offense in my impersonal characterization of the age. Honest feeling is dumb unless it speaks through the mask of guile and other negative tempers" (185).

The other woman in his life, his secretary, also gets the best of him. Wren creeps about his office in the fear that she will demand her long overdue back pay, and he must later accept Peggy's demand that she be instated as a full partner in the firm. Neither polite nor articulate, she annoys and intrigues Wren, and he regards her as a stereotype of the middle-class, Irish Catholic spinster, all the while fantasizing about her sexuality.

> . . . [U]nless she had lost her *fleur* while competing in the high hurdles as a parochial school-girl, she was yet in formidable possession of it. My theory was that Peggy believed in her entering my chamber [office] might be constructed as a suggestion, even though she carried a file of unpaid bills, that in reciprocation the temple of her body might be invaded (3–4).

Though he finds her relatively plain and thoroughly chaste, Wren cannot avoid noticing her "elaborate pair of breasts" which, when later thrust forward, "cause [Zwingli] to recoil in more fear, I think, than lustful awe" (4 & 97). In this way, Peggy resembles the customary "desirable and disturbing female [who] is usually presented as blonde and big-breasted, or rather. . . aggressive-breasted, since the favorite metaphorical description has the woman's large breasts thrusting against her clothing."[10]

Usually the chaste, semi-idealized female can never act as the detective's sexual partner in a hard-boiled mystery. But in Berger's complicated and incongruous world, Peggy provides the novel's last in a string of surprising and hilarious ironies. Lying nude on Wren's couch, she cajoles him:

"I've given this a lotta thought, Russ," she said from the supine. "I think it's the only thing that will make a man of you. . . . Come *awn,*" Peggy complained, horse blinding herself with her hands. "I've got a Mama Celeste Deluxe pizza in the oven, and its done in twelve to fifteen minutes, depending on if you want the crust crisp or chewy" (246).

The astonished Wren can only obey and conclude the story by reflecting:

I draw the curtain across the episode that followed—requiring neither the huzzahs nor the jeers of a bawdy audience—except, perhaps ungallantly, to lift the fringe and reveal the only absolute fact (as it was the most startling) yet established in the Villanova case: Peggy was not, as the pizza went to cinder, serving her novitiate in venery (247).

At this point, the audience questions, if it has not begun to do so before this, the veracity of Wren's perceptions. Each chapter offers a new and conflicting twist to the multiple mysteries in the novel, and with each of these puzzles comes another of the detective's tortured attempts to rationalize the coincidental. Ultimately, we are left with the strong suspicion that most, if not all, of these events are the creations of Wren's frustrated, but certainly fertile, intellect. Peggy, in fact, speaks for many of the work's characters when she chides, "Are you being weird again, Russ? Just tell him the facts. Nobody's asking for Shakespeare" (97).

But Shakespeare is exactly what Wren is looking for. In a world that is as threatening, deceptive, chaotic, and absurd as this one, Wren seems to insist that only the imagination, in all its whimsy and inventiveness, can effectively offer some solace. As Walter Goodman explains, "The rational mind can find no purchase in a civilization gone out of control. Where accidents are the rule, where each event is problematic, existence becomes precarious."[11] Confronted by such circumstances, Wren demonstrates the need for the imagination to take over, and if it cannot supplant the reality that assaults it, the imagination can at least compete, wildly and extravagantly, with that reality.

In his attempt to show the twisted, degraded, irrational side of existence, Berger's novel offers a series of existential attitudes that indicate the importance of the parodic mystery for him. In his hands the hard-boiled mystery becomes a fitting fictional vehicle for presenting his readers with a vision of a corrupt, contemptible world, at least partially redeemed by, as Raymond Chandler put it, "a man of honour. . . [who] must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world."[12] Berger differs quite markedly from Chandler, however, by disagreeing that such a man can utlimately discover "hidden truth," for in the figure of Russell Wren, Berger comically reveals the elusiveness of truth. In the end, Wren fails to discover exactly *who* Teddy Villanova is, although we do sense that he has at least tried gallantly and failed just as gallantly in the search. In a world, like Wren's New York, one which overwhelms and threatens the individual so often and so completely, there can exist no ultimate and discoverable truths. And if there is any apprehendible truth, it is the one of the individual's own creation, the truth of the imagination.

By choosing the parodic method, Berger, like his sympathetic and crazed detective, attempts to fashion something out of the chaos of creation. The self-reflexive and self-conscious quality of the novel emphasizes the self-reflexive and self-conscious aspects of its hero, and finally his use of the parodic mode places Berger in that tradition of American literature established by Hawthorne: the romance tradition. Just as Richard Chase defines it in *The American Novel and Its Tradition,* such novels express "dark and complex truths unavailable to realism" through such means as alienation, exaggeration, coincidence, and incongruity.[13] As such, each work is an exploration, an attempt to move beyond the strictures of fictional forms and the thinking that traditionally underlies those forms. It is a fictional mode whose significance G. D. Kiremidjian explains best when remarking, "In a culture where usurpation of function and confusion of polarities are the rule, the very instability of parody becomes a means of stabilizing subjective matter which is itself unstable and fluid, and parody becomes a major mode of expression for a civilization in a state of flux."[14]

Notes

1. John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976), p. 142.
2. Thomas Berger, *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* (New York: Dell, 1977), p. 11. Further citations will come from this edition and be noted parenthetically in the text.
3. Cawelti, p. 175.
4. Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1940), p. 1.
5. Leonard Michaels, Review of *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* in the *New York Times Book Review* (March 20, 1977), p. 1.
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