

SYMBOLIC NAMING IN THE MALTESE FALCON\*

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The novels of Dashiell Hammett, especially The Maltese Falcon (1930), were early hailed as masterpieces of detective fiction, but detective fiction, alas, was not regarded as serious literature. Popular they were, and lucrative, especially in their movie versions, until Hammett ran afoul of the Congressional Committee investigating his socialist/communist connections, was blackballed in Hollywood and forced by the Internal Revenue Service to pay \$140,000 in back taxes. Between these disasters and his forty-year bout with tuberculosis, Hammett died impoverished and broken in 1961, having lived for his last years with the dramatist Lillian Hellmann. After his death, a revival of interest in his novels occurred, and they were seen as examples--the lines of influence are difficult to trace--of the tough American style evinced in the works of Hemingway, Steinbeck, Caldwell, Dos Passos, some of Faulkner, and a host of others. Hammett was finally recognized\* as a\*conscious artist whose novels merited serious study.

When subjected to such study, The Maltese Falcon becomes a parable of the ambiguities and uncertainties of human existence. Although revealed only gradually, the plot is not difficult to follow. Three fortune-hunters--Casper Gutman, Joel Cairo, and Brigid O'Shaughnessy--are attempting to locate a statuette of a falcon--jewel-encrusted gold but covered with black enamel--which has priceless intrinsic and historic value, having been given by the Knights of the Order of St. John on Malta to Charles V of Spain as a token of fealty. Although in one sense working together, each of the three thieves is ready to betray the others and possess the falcon alone. Brigid O'Shaughnessy has secured another accomplice, Floyd Thursby, but she wishes to eliminate him since he has fulfilled his usefulness, and in preparation for killing Thursby, Brigid seeks the help of Samuel Spade, private investigator, and his partner Miles Archer. Miles is detailed to shadow Thursby, as Brigid has said that Thursby is the key to finding her pretended sister, supposedly abducted by this villain, and soon thereafter both Thursby and Archer are killed. Cairo, assuming that Spade has been hired to locate the missing falcon, demands the bird from Spade, who until this point has not heard of it. Pulled into the quest by both Archer's death and Cairo's demand, Spade encounters Gutman and his gunman Wilmer, pretends to know more than he does, and, in an

attempt to learn more, simply stirs things up by hints to all three searchers. Finally, the bird is brought to Spade by the dying Captain Jacobi of the freighter "La Paloma," on which Brigid had shipped the falcon, and Spade enters into negotiations with the three searchers. His apparent aim is to get a cash reward and a fall-guy to take the blame for the by-now three murders that have been committed. When the falcon turns out to be fake, simply black-painted lead, Gutman, Cairo, and Wilmer leave to continue searching for the real falcon, whereupon Spade promptly notifies the police to pick them up. Then he tells Brigid that he knows she killed his partner, because Miles was not so dumb as to be caught in "a blind alley with his gun tucked away on his hip and his overcoat buttoned" by anyone other than a beautiful woman who was also his client. Brigid relies on Spade's apparent love for her, but he turns her over to the police anyway. Cairo, Brigid, and Wilmer are arrested, Gutman having been shot by Wilmer, and the case is closed.

Even when briefly recounted like this, the story opens up several promising avenues of investigation. First, the search for the falcon appears to be a parody of the search for the Grail, or, even more, of the Magi's quest for the infant Jesus. Second, the series of lies, concealments, and other falsehoods, culminating in the false falcon, suggests that a basic theme of the novel is ambiguity and illusion, or the questions "What is truth?" and "What

is fiction?" Finally, one can't help noticing the peculiarity of the names of certain of the characters, and these names, by their multiple and ironic meanings, seem to throw some light on Hammett's artistry. Before going any further, however, I must confess to a good deal of uncertainty regarding Hammett's intentions. He stopped his formal schooling at the age of 14, took a series of odd jobs, and eventually became a Pinkerton agent. He entered the Army during World War I, rejoined Pinkerton's after the war, until he left to take up writing full time in 1922, and thereafter until 1934 continued his writing career uninterrupted. He himself tells us, in an Introduction to The Maltese Falcon written for a 1934 republication, that

If this book had been written with the help of an outline or notes or even a clearly defined plot-idea in my head I might now be able to say how it came to be written and why it took the shape it did, but all I can remember about its invention is that somewhere I had read of the peculiar rental agreement between Charles V and the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, that in a short story called "The Whosis Kid" I had failed to make the most of a situation I liked, that in another called "The Gutting of Couffignal" I

had been equally unfortunate with an equally promising dénouement, and that I thought I might have better luck with these two failures if I combined them with the Maltese lease in a longer story.<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say that most of his characters in the novel come from actual criminals, clients, and associates he encountered during his work with Pinkerton's, but that

Spade had no original. He is a dream man in the sense that he is what most of the private detectives I worked with would like to have been and what quite a few of them in their cockier moments thought they approached...; a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent by-stander or client.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, my analysis of some of the names may go beyond what Hammett knew or intended. If the analysis helps in understanding the novel, however, who is to say it was not Hammett's intention, conscious or subconscious?

First, then, Samuel Spade, the first two words of the novel and the first character we meet, is described as having a long and bony jaw, "his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his

mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller, v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down--from high flat temples--in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan."<sup>3</sup> Since Spade is Hammett's "dream man," "it was no coincidence," as Oscar Handlin said in The Atlantic (July 1966, p. 137), "that [Hammett] gave the first name he himself discarded [Hammett was christened Samuel Dashiell Hammett] to his best-known hero." Spade was in some sense an alter-ego for his creator, but only in some sense. If we follow up other references we find Irving Malin saying that the name Samuel "suggests his biblical namesake who can identify the first Hebrew ruler."<sup>4</sup> Samuel, whose name means "name of God," was early dedicated to the service of God, possessed of prophetic vision, and the last of the judges over the Israelites (although Samson, "the sun's man," is sometimes called the last of the judges). Samuel scored a miraculous victory over the Philistines (the Lord discomfited the foe with a great storm) and was held in high esteem, but the Israelites, desiring to be like other nations, demanded a king. Samuel, led by prophetic vision, yielded to their demand and chose Saul as king, the man who stood a head taller than other Israelites, and later, seeing Saul's tyranny, secretly

consecrated David as his successor. As Malin notes, "Perhaps [Spade] is also prophetic in his uncanny ability to see through the details to the mysteries within,"<sup>5</sup> and, we may note, Spade has no difficulty in judging the guilt or innocence of others.

But Spade's last name, we are reminded by Walter Blair, is "ominous";<sup>6</sup> the ace of spades has long had the significance of a death card, and gangsters, as countless stories tell us, are notoriously superstitious. A spade, of course, is a digging tool, appropriate enough for a V-shaped detective who must dig for facts, but the hint of death reminds us that graves are dug with spades. Moreover, if we follow up the oxymoronic description of Sam Spade as a "pleasant blond satan," which Blair reminds us recurs throughout the novel, we are led to another possible significance of the first name. On the one hand, Samhiel is the name of an angel invoked, in the cabala, to cure stupidity--an appropriate association for a detective.<sup>7</sup> And another "immortal angel of God" is Samiel, grouped with Michael, Gabriel, "and other spellbinding angels."<sup>8</sup> Both of these identities complement and reinforce the biblical name of Samuel. But on the other hand is Samael (apparently identified by Voltaire and others with Samiel), who is a Satan indeed. His name means "poison angel" and in rabbinic literature he is the angel of death and prince of demons. "Samael has been regarded both as evil and good; as one of the greatest and as one of the foulest spirits operating in Heaven,

on earth, and in Hell. On the one hand he is said to be chief ruler of the 5th Heaven [or sometimes the 7th Heaven]..., one of the 7 regents of the world served by 2 million angels; on the other hand, he is 'that great serpent with 12 wings that draws after him, in his fall, the solar system.'<sup>9</sup> One source charges him with being the seductress of Eve and the father of Cain, another says he is the dark angel who wrestled with Jacob, and still another claims it is he who tempted David to number Israel. The Paraphrase of Job, 28:7, speaks of "the path of the Tree of Life which Samael, who flies like a bird, did not know, and which the eye of Eve did not perceive." Finally, James Branch Cabell, in The Devil's Own Dear Son, calls Samael the "youngest and most virile of the 72 princes of Hell, ... the first of the art critics."<sup>10</sup>

Samael is Satan, but, like Sam Spade, complex; you never know quite where you are with him. He seeks data and tests others, but he kills. He is seductive and glorious, but deadly. He flies like a bird, and so he, like Spade himself, can be compared to the Maltese falcon: pure gold under a black exterior (the darkness implied by Spade's last name should be remembered), created by the Knights of the Order of St. John as a gift for a king and yet now the prey of thieves, and ultimately not what it is thought to be, let alone what it appears to be. As Irving Malin reminds us, the bird is a symbol of illusion, change, and deception: "It can never really be grasped;

it vanishes triumphantly. ...Because the falcon is fake, it divinely judges [the characters'] own deception."<sup>11</sup> In a sense, therefore, both Sam Spade and the falcon are one, both enigmatic and slippery judges of others, both the objects of search and yet the seekers (remember that a falcon, a bird of prey, is noted for its keen vision). Both are simultaneously good and evil, noble (Samuel is judge and prophet, falcons are royal hunting birds) and deadly. Both Spade and the falcon embody the ambiguous multiplicity of human--and divine?--nature. Neither Spade nor the falcon will ever be owned or controlled; unlike the other characters, who fail because of their own limitations, Spade is the true existential hero.

He is also the true artist. Whereas the other characters tell fantastic lies, creating exotic and romantic fictions, Spade either remains silent or tells the truth, although not necessarily the whole truth. In a novel by Robert Heinlein, Time Enough for Love, a character says that the two best ways to lie are (1) to tell the truth but not all of it and (2) to tell the truth but make it sound like a lie. Spade uses both techniques, and is therefore implicitly what Cabell called Samael, an art critic, criticizing the romantic fictions and the inflated style of other, earlier writers. It is generally conceded that the greatest influence of the tough-guy detective novel on literature is stylistic, that it created the vogue for the hard, spare, laconic style that has been called

of dealing with the existential ambiguities of the world in which he lives.

Only slightly more capable of dealing with reality is the trio of thieves, Cairo, Gutman, and O'Shaughnessy. As noted, this trio in some ways resembles, by ironic inversion, the three primary searchers for the Grail (Lancelot, Galahad, and Parsifal) and, even more, the three Magi (Gaspar [or Caspar], Melchior, and Balthazar). The resemblance, I believe, is not merely fanciful, and is meant to show the difference between times when faith was rewarded and the present, when faith is only self-deluding. Gutman's first name, Casper, is very close to the name Gaspar and its alternate Caspar, and both are of German origin (meaning "jasper," the semiprecious stone mentioned in Revelations), which provides a possible further link.<sup>13</sup> Gaspar means "white," and Casper Gutman is habitually dressed in "a black cutaway coat, black vest, black satin Ascot tie holding a pinkish pearl, striped grey worsted trousers, and patent leather shoes"; furthermore, his eyes were "dark and sleek" and "dark ringlets thinly covered his broad scalp."<sup>14</sup> Such a total opposition between white and black can hardly be coincidental, although it is possible that the intention was to hint at a link between Gutman and both Spade and the black falcon. As a further ironic touch, Gutman's last name, as Blair reminds us, means "Goodman" in German,<sup>15</sup> although, since Gutman is extremely fat,

the name could also refer to his girth. Finally, Gaspar was the Magus who bore the gift of gold, and Gutman is the character who is so immensely rich that he spends more than the value of the falcon in searching for it.

Joel Cairo's name dimly echoes Melchior in sound, and both names are exotic and Eastern. Melchior means "light," as, in one sense of the word, the petite Cairo is, while his swarthy skin belies the other meaning of the word and links him to the darkness of Gutman's garb. Melchior's gift of frankincense parallels Cairo's habit of carrying a scented handkerchief; both the perfume and the name come from the land of the Magi and of fantastic fictions. But the name Joel, meaning "Jehovah is God," is more curious: not only is gold or the falcon God, as far as Joel Cairo is concerned, but he has interesting parallels with some of the fourteen Joels mentioned in the Bible. One Joel is a distant ancestor of Samuel and another is a son of Samuel and father of the sweet singer Heman.<sup>16</sup> Although we may see in this connection a hint that Samuel Spade, in his ambiguously good/evil character and his aggressive sexuality which is not fulfilled in marriage or progeny, may be more closely related to Joel Cairo than appears on the surface, perhaps the most important irony is that the homosexual Cairo seems to have no forebears and to be incapable of having progeny. In short, these biblical Joels stress the importance of family and community, whereas Joel Cairo

acts against the community at large and is frustrated in his pathetic attempts to establish a community within the group of thieves, notably in Wilmer's rejections of his advances. Other biblical Joels are chiefs and heroes, but the most prominent is the prophet, author of the Book of Joel, one of the shortest, most beautiful, and most often quoted books of the Bible. Ironically, in view of the character of Joel Cairo, the Book of Joel tells of a fearsome plague of locusts, sent by God to punish the unfaithful Israelites, of the repentance of the Israelites, and of God's restoration to them of their material blessings and His promise of spiritual blessings to come and His terrible vengeance upon their enemies. Joel Cairo, of course, is considerably more of a locust than either prophet or wise man.

The third member of the group of thieves, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, can be linked only by analogy with the third wise man, Balthazar. The names associated with her are also ironic, however. She first introduces herself to Spade as "Miss Wonderly" and later gives him her name as "Leblanc," but this calculating murderess, although pretending school-girlish shyness, is neither wonderful, wondering, nor virginally white. We finally know her by the name of Brigid O'Shaughnessy, still not sure if this is her correct name, but this name too is ironic on several levels. In the first place, it is a name that might have come out of a Victorian novel describing a naive country lass or wholesome, red-cheeked servant girl. Miss

O'Shaughnessy, though fair and attractive enough to seduce both Miles Archer and Sam Spade, is far from naive or rustic. Secondly, the name Brigid is that of more than one saint, perhaps the most appropriate one being St. Brigid of Ireland, known as the "Mary of the Gael." St. Brigid was renowned for both beauty and piety, although according to one account she felt that her beauty interfered with her righteousness and so prayed to become ugly; instantly one eye swelled and burst, rendering her partially blind.<sup>17</sup> Brigid O'Shaughnessy, on the contrary, although partially blind to Sam Spade's true character, trusts in her beauty to save herself from justice.

Further ironies surround the fact that Brigid had entrusted the Maltese Falcon to Captain Jacobi of the ship "La Poloma," who delivered the statuette to Spade. How delicious is the fact that a character whose name evokes the "Mary of the Gael" delivers a quest-object, linked as we have seen with the Christ sought by the Magi, to be carried in the hold or belly of a ship named "La Poloma" or "The Dove"! What a delightfully ironic inversion of the biblical account of the Annunciation and birth of Christ! And the falcon is delivered by a man, who dies in the act, not to the trio of searchers but to the "blond Satan," Sam Spade! The point becomes keener when we note that Captain Jacobi is the messenger; "Jacob" means "supplanter" (referring to the fact that Jacob supplanted his

brother Esau and was generally a shrewd operator) and is also British slang for the starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*--probably because the starling supplants other, more tuneful, birds). "Jacob" is also a slang word for a simpleton or fool (probably by ironic inversion, as a bald man is called "Curly") and for a thief (probably because a thief might use a Jacob's ladder--a usually nautical rope-ladder named after the one Jacob saw leading to heaven--to illicitly enter houses). *Jacobus*, Latin for James, also provides us with the Jacob's staff, used by pilgrims going to the shrine of St. James in Spain but also a slang term for both a surveying device (occasionally used for navigating ships as well as for measuring land) and a staff that conceals a knife. Probably irrelevant is the *jacoby*, another name for the purple ragwort, so called because it blooms near St. James' day, but of curious interest is the *jacobian*, the name of a mathematical term that vanishes when the variable functions to which it relates are no longer independent (named after its deviser, Professor K.G.J. Jacobi of Prussia [1804-1851]). The word "Jacobin" also has multiple meanings, referring to a friar of the order of St. Dominic, to a member of the French political society which advocated extreme democracy and absolute equality, and even to a kind of domestic pigeon whose neck feathers resemble a cowl or hood.<sup>18</sup> Drawing the multiple ironies out of these allusions would be tedious and probably unnecessary. It should be sufficient to point out that

Captain Jacobi, foolishly or criminally allowing himself to be drawn into Brigid O'Shaughnessy's scheme, captain of a dove and himself a kind of dove (or pigeon!), supplants the true Mary of the Bible in delivering his precious burden to the world and vanishes at the point when the searchers after the falcon are least independent of each other.

These three searchers, like the Magi seeking the infant Christ, come out of the East (in this case Constantinople, where the trail of the statuette begins) seeking the symbol of faith and glory (the falcon, a royal bird, modeled in gold and jewels, is a vassalage offering to Charles V from the Knights of the Order of St. John). As the glory of God is obscured in the human form of Jesus, so the precious gold is obscured by the layer of black enamel. But of course the Magi wished to worship Christ, not to possess him, and beneath the veil of flesh the glory was true; these inverted "wise guys" wish to steal the treasure and find that the gold, as though by some inversion of alchemy, has turned to lead. Not only is all that glitters not gold, but even all that doesn't glitter except in the imagination is not gold. With irony upon irony, the black bird turns out to be just that; under all the fictions, the ugly truth is exposed. The epiphany reached by these questers is quite different from that achieved by the Magi. Truth both is and is

not revealed by appearances; one cannot make binding assumptions either way. Consequently, the way to relate to a world of ambiguity and chance, a world of falling beams as Spade puts it in his parable about Charles Flitcraft (who learned that his comfortable security was just an illusion), is to be as shifty, deceptive, hard, and perceptive as Spade himself is. To be in harmony with such a world, says Hammett, is to be like it.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Dashiell Hammett, "Introduction," The Maltese Falcon (New York: Modern Library, 1934), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. viii-ix.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>Irving Malin, "Focus on The Maltese Falcon: The Metaphysical Falcon," in Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties, ed. David Madden (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. 106.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>6</sup>Walter Blair, "Dashiell Hammett: Themes and Techniques," in Essays on American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbell, ed. Clarence Gohdes (Durham: Duke University Press, 1967), p. 305.

<sup>7</sup>Gustav Davidson, A Dictionary of Angels (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 256.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>11</sup>Malin, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup>Hammett, p. 264.

<sup>13</sup>Madeleine S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, eds., The New Harper's Bible Dictionary (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 819, s.v.

"Wise men."

<sup>14</sup>Hammett, p. 126.

<sup>15</sup>Blair, p. 305.

<sup>16</sup>Miller and Miller, s.v. "Joel."

<sup>17</sup>William Smith and Henry Wace, eds., A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects, and Doctrines (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967 [repr.]), 1, 336-337.

<sup>18</sup>The Oxford English Dictionary (1933), s.v. "Jacob," "Jacobian," "Jacobin."