In this final chapter, I shall not be attempting to do justice to the American hardboiled school. To confine the book within manageable bounds I shall instead emphasise the impact of the hardboiled on various kinds of recent British writing. To justify this procedure, I would point to the debatable emphasis on ‘national’ characteristics which tends to come into play over this issue in many studies. In Dennis Porter’s The Pursuit of Crime, for instance, a somewhat complacent contrasting of English snobbery with American individualism hardly scratches the surface of the heavyweight European Marxist theory (Gramsci, Benjamin, Althusser, Foucault) adduced to demonstrate the impact of social factors on literary forms. There are indeed reasons why it was America that produced the hardboiled mode, but once produced it provided a vocabulary for the expression of a wide range of concerns in many Western societies including the British.

The loose idea of ‘pastoral’ invoked in the last chapter can perhaps be applied to the particular awareness of transatlantic relationships which the detective genre seems to call into play. In discussions with both English and American students and friends, I have found that each nationality tends to dislike the clichés of its own branch of the genre while admiring the literary qualities of the other. This seems to reflect an ongoing transatlantic relationship whereby, for instance, Poe creates the ‘classic’ form from European models such as Godwin and Vidocq, only to have it reassimilated in France by Gaboriau and in England by Doyle. Doyle, in turn, shows repeated interest in American patterns of crime and detection from his first Holmes novel to his last, The Valley of Fear, where an American private-eye story constitutes a pastoral excursion within a Golden Age country-house mystery. America remains the heartland of the Holmes cult, and also responded eagerly to dime-novel transpositions of Gaboriau, whose guilty magnates, brutal interrogations and over-involved detectives may have influenced
the hardboiled form as much as the indigenous romance tradition of Twain and Fenimore Cooper. The more recent ‘procedural’ form of Ed McBain and Hill Street Blues also owes a great deal both to Gaboriau and his successor Simenon. The purest practitioner of the English puzzle-form was the American-born John Dickson Carr; Agatha Christie’s father was half-American; Raymond Chandler was educated at an English public school and first acclaimed as a serious writer by English rather than American intellectuals. Leaving aside a further Australasian dimension which links some of Doyle’s cases with the bestselling ‘gold-boom’ thrillers of Fergus Hume and perhaps the subsequent success of Ngaio Marsh, and the important transformations of the genre effected by European writers such as Leonardo Sciascia and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, it seems reasonable to summarise that the three leading nations in the game, America, Britain and France, tend to find in each other’s detective writing satisfyingly distanced reflections of their own concerns which can well be described by Empson’s formula for pastoral: ‘putting the complex into the simple’.

But before considering some recent British uses of the hardboiled mode as just such a form of pastoral, some brief points about the mode itself do need to be made. For brevity I shall concentrate on Raymond Chandler, although Hammett’s Red Harvest (already briefly discussed) can claim to be the most radical instance of the genre which it virtually founds, at least as far as the novel is concerned. In a very different way from the English whodunnit, the American hardboiled novel can also be seen as a version of pastoral. The sense of division from other books and other lives is enforced by the specialisation of the private eye’s work: in this one perspective, from this one point of view, the complex life outside looks simpler and clearer. It is not, as in the English whodunnit, that a microcosmic society has been carefully sealed off from the larger one (although in some cases the ‘underworld’, with its colourful characters, does constitute a kind of Beggar’s Opera microcosm) but that a sprawling and threatening world is made manageable by being seen in terms of a deliberately limited range of issues.

But if the limitation of the private eye’s perspective constitutes a necessary means of keeping this world under control, it has also often provided a highly effective means of evoking a world where such control seems impossible. For writers like Hammett, Chandler