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PLOTS AND PLOTTERS

Double Agents and Villains in Spy Fictions

Edited by Carmen Concilio

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FOREWORD

The enemy is the villain. In the early twentieth century espionage narratives, above all in John Buchan's novels, the enemy is the man who deliberately pursues evil and he is a foreigner. In Ian Fleming's novels and in many other spy stories written in the Fifties and the Sixties of the last century the enemy is a foreigner and a communist. It is also true, however, that, at least after Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, the identity of the enemy is hard to pinpoint. The uncertainty arises with the figure of the double agent, who operates on two fronts and whose loyalty is never to be trusted.

In the tradition of secret-agent stories which was started by Maugham and was confirmed in the novels by Graham Greene, Eric Ambler, Len Deighton and John le Carré, double agency is a central theme. Several different motives can convince a spy to turn double agent: money or ideology, but also, in some cases, fear of being exposed. If an agent feels that he cannot keep his activities completely concealed from the enemy, he may find it convenient to become one of the enemy's own agents. Above all, if he has been, as le Carré has revealed to his readers, "out in the cold", alone, for a long period of time.

The double agent is a most tragically isolated human being because he must behave as if "every man's hand is against him". He cannot share his mind and heart with anybody; he must lie to one and all. He enters into such a state of isolation that this very isolation can only be overcome through self-revelation, flight or death. But it must be acknowledged that the condition of the double agent can be dealt with in two different ways. In *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*, the story deals with opera-

tions initiated by the protagonist's own espionage organization which betrays the protagonist himself; the British Secret Service enforces a complex cover up of a double agent planted in East Germany's espionage organization. The 'mole' is responsible for several murders, a totally negative figure, someone who deliberately pursues evil – but who is on 'our' side, 'our man'.

In *The Human Factor* some of the British Intelligence big bosses try to discover which one of their agents is a 'mole', and when they identify him in the insignificant Davis, they organize his 'accidental' murder. As it happens Davis is not the 'mole'. The double agent is Castle, who is indebted to the Russians for having smuggled his black South African wife out of the country. Davis's death compels Castle to help the enemy one more time, even if he knows that this will mean his own ruin. However, Castle's moral stature makes the reader empathize with him, that is with someone who works for the enemy.

We are brought to realize that espionage occurs in such a dark, fuzzy, confused and confusing area of human relationships that it is often difficult to tell who the enemy really is and even when we do see them as they are, we must admit that sometimes our sympathies go with the 'mole', and not with the double-agent hunters. The human factor has the upper hand.

Paolo Bertinetti

IAN MCEWAN'S INNOCENT SPIES

SILVIA ALBERTAZZI
(University of Bologna)

Writers are like spies, poking into failures and weaknesses
for good stories.

Hanif Kureishi

When Ian McEwan published a new novel, *The Innocent*, at the beginning of 1990, after three years of silence, many reviewers were rather perplexed. They expected a story of anomalous passions (like *The Comfort of Strangers*) or morbid adolescence (like *The Cement Garden*), or a plot supported by a multi-layered narrative structure (like *The Child in Time*), while *The Innocent* seemed to be a traditional, linear spy story, apparently without any postmodern winks to deeper hidden meanings. It did not reveal, either, any metafictional or auto-referential elements disguised as popular fiction tricks. It was *just* a spy story, belonging to a “minor” genre, even though it was written by a major author. This is why, while looking for all the possible interpretations suggested by the novel’s title and the subtitle – *A Special Relationship* – we must also take into account the specificity of spy fiction as a genre. Indeed, whilst all possible readings spring from the usual scenario of spy stories, the novel acquires deeper meaning thanks to the author’s explicit or implicit reference to narrative and filmic intertexts.

A Special Relationship

As stated before, at first sight *The Innocent* seems a typical spy story set in Berlin at the end of the Second World War. The plot is

rather simple: in the ruined city, full of secret agents of all nationalities, the Americans and the English dig a tunnel to intercept telephone calls in the Russian zone between reciprocal diffidence and incomprehension. This is ‘Operation Gold’, which actually took place in Berlin in 1955, and, as shown in McEwan’s novel, was betrayed by a George Blake (who appears in the book as a minor character). Deriving his information mostly from a volume on the British spy system called *Spycatcher*, which was the object of wide polemic and severe censorship in the late Eighties, McEwan describes the “special relationship” between the English and the Americans – as his subtitle suggests: a relationship mainly based on suspicion and resentment. As McEwan’s novel shows, not all the people working at the American General Quarter knew about Operation Gold. Those engaged in the warehouse thought they were involved in the import-export of technologies, while the people at the radar station could not decipher coded messages concerning Operation Gold, since only the few who had access to the tunnel knew what it was for.

Moreover, it was not easy for the Americans and the English to establish an even relationship. The latter, who were convinced they were the true heroes of the war, resented the attitude of the Americans, who considered them as losers, since they had just lost a great Empire (and, consequently, all their former power). It is not by chance that the action of *The Innocent* takes place in 1955, just one year before the Suez crisis and the definitive passage of the hegemony over the Orient from Great Britain to the United States.

It is quite easy to detect the influence of such spy story masters like Graham Greene and William Somerset Maugham on the novel, whilst the attention McEwan pays to the bureaucracy of espionage and the platitude of a spy’s everyday life has nothing to do with James Bond’s glamorous universe. On the contrary, the frozen atmosphere of winter in Berlin, together with the obsession for – and the ironical uselessness of – betrayal remind one of le Carré’s *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. Yet, more than any other spy novel, Lein Deighton’s *Funeral in Berlin* seems to haunt McEwan’s world: not by chance, since Deighton’s classi-

cal spy story is considered the archetype of all spy fiction set in Berlin in the 50s of last century.

The plot of *The Innocent* pivots around the digging of a tunnel that, just like the Berlin Wall, which was to be built a few years later, is a figure of the folly generated by an excess of rationality. The very title of McEwan's novel ironically emphasizes the folly of rationality: the protagonist, Leonard Marnham, is innocent only because his betrayal arrives too late, when George Blake has already betrayed Operation Gold. In le Carré's words, he is "an innocent at large among professional intelligence-gatherers".¹ His innocence derives from that foolish guilelessness which, according to le Carré, contributes to the creation of a true spy, in a game of chance and betrayal. The Americans, who seem to be updated versions of Mark Twain's "innocents abroad", show another kind of ironic innocence. Similar to cartoon supermen, the Old World confuses them, and they try to conquer it with their rock and roll and their baseball. It is their incomprehension of the European reality – which is not very different from that shown one century before by their compatriots during their European grand tour – that starts a new kind of colonization, which will substitute British imperialism: the seemingly "innocent" – but twice as deceitful – American colonization of the European unconscious.

An Unbildungsroman

We have already noted the perplexed attitude of the first reviewers of *The Innocent*. For instance, John Buchan, literary critic of *The Spectator*, wondered at the beginning of his review: "Do I get paid all this money just for reading a sort of high-brow *Funeral in Berlin*?"² Then, being disappointed because he did not find any hints of those "acts of fictional outrage" (37) that characterized McEwan's previous works, he ended by affirming that with this novel "our best young, or youngish, novelist has created

1 John le Carré, "The Unbearable Peace", *Granta*, 35, 1991, p. 27.

2 James Buchan, "Getting away with murder", *The Spectator*, 12 May 1990, p. 36.

a new publishing category: literary slasher fiction". The reaction of the Italian reviewers was not very different, since they, too, mainly tried to detect traces of the usual themes and modes of "Ian Macabre" behind the façade of spy fiction. In this sense, Paolo Bertinetti offered one of the most significant Italian readings of *The Innocent*. Considering that all McEwan's works are "*Bildungs* – or better, *Unbildungsroman*", Bertinetti read *The Innocent* as a sort of "un-coming of age" novel, where adulthood is reached through the discovery of sex, crime and betrayal: in a word, through the loss of innocence.³

Thus, the "special relationship" hinted at by the subtitle of McEwan's novel might not only be the relationship between the USA and Great Britain, but also the relationship between men and women, in general, and Leonard and his German lover Maria, in particular. Actually, Leonard's innocence reminds one of the undoubtable and yet unbelievable guiltlessness of certain characters of Alfred Hitchcock, such as the protagonist of *Young and Innocent* who, as suggested by this very title, shows many points in common with McEwan's Marnham.

Obviously, this kind of reading pays more attention to the love story constituting the subplot of the novel than to the spy fiction in the main plot. Yet, the meeting between the virgin Leonard and the older and more experienced Maria in a Berlin night club, as well as their consequent relationship – which appears to be almost desperately based on sex –, might all be re-workings of spy fiction clichés. In the same way, Maria's ex-husband, Otto, whose beastly presence haunts the lovers, is similar to those stereotypes of coarseness and violence you can find in anti-German propaganda. Yet, when the two lovers murder Otto, the novel leaves the territory of spy fiction to enter the tract of crime – and noir – narrative, while at the same time suggesting an interesting and unexpected parallel between the relationships between political powers in the 'Great Game of espionage' and those between men and women in the 'erotic game'.

3 Paolo Bertinetti, "Il giardino della guerra fredda. Un romanzo di spionaggio per Ian McEwan", *Linea d'ombra*, July/August 1990, p. 51.

After the killing of Otto and the dismembering of his body (which will be packed into two suitcases and dragged by Leonard through a cold Berlin in a vain attempt to get rid of it), suspicion and diffidence take hold of the lovers. Their relationship becomes a continuous interplay of lies and secrets, just like the one between the Americans and the English. Actually, even before Otto's murder, Marnham, proud of belonging to the winners' side, had already imposed his will on Maria, a loser, by possessing her against her will in a very ruthless scene. After their crime, only their common misdeed still ties the two lovers: they drift more and more apart, until they definitively break up. Sure, the brutal killing of Otto, and the even more brutal disposal of his body, which occupies a dozen pages of horrific details, remind one of other macabre situations we find in McEwan's early works. One thinks of the burial of the mother's corpse in *The Cement Garden*; the killing of a British tourist in a weird Venice in *The Comfort of Strangers*; the episodes of incest, pedophilia, and insanity in the short stories of *First Love*, *Last Rites*, and, last but not least, the kidnapping of a baby girl in *The Child in Time*. Yet in *The Innocent* the crime is so excessive that, to avoid its inevitable consequences, betrayal seems to be the only way out.

Whilst in *The Cement Garden* the cement hiding the mother's burial crumbles, revealing her corpse underneath, in *The Innocent* the suitcases containing Otto's limbs, being too bulky to be stored in the luggage storage of the railway station, and too heavy to be dragged through the city, are eventually hidden in the "Operation Gold" tunnel. Consequently, in order to avoid their discovery, a tip-off seems to be the only way out to Leonard.

As the story of the sentimental dis-education of a naïve young man caught in an absurd situation, *The Innocent* finds a narrative model in Albert Camus' *L'étranger* (*The Outsider*), whose protagonist, Merseault, may be considered an "innocent" par excellence, being absurdly compelled to carry out an utterly gratuitous crime.

McEwan himself suggests a parallel between Marnham and Merseault: "I'd always admired *L'étranger*, so I knew about the

central chapter, an innocent who becomes complicit in a crime”,⁴ he told an interviewer. To another one he explained: “I’d admired *L’étranger* for years, the way that the reader is drawn in to complicity with a crime”. Leonard, a poor civil servant lost in an absurd game of international espionage, is a true outsider in the Germany of the Fifties. He commits a crime that shall not be amended with his own death, as is the case with Merseault, but with “the end of the affair”, according to a canvas reminiscent of Greene and Maugham. He returns to everyday British life, epitomized by his father’s house in a country that nostalgically regrets its lost empire. It will take more than three decades and a final coup de theatre to see Leonard back in Berlin, willing to renew his interrupted conversation with history and love.

Two Suitcases in Berlin

In McEwan’s novel, the diffidence between the lovers following their murder is not only a cliché of noir fiction, but also a metaphor of the suspicion characterizing the relationship between the occupants of Berlin. In this sense, the ambiguous “innocence” of the title is common to the British protagonist, the Americans and even German people like Maria and Otto, who are seen as losers and victims of history. Yet, innocence becomes synonymous with guilty hypocrisy when applied to the winners, to those who own the power. As far as the occupants are concerned, innocence often coincides with national interest. However, even an individual like Leonard can behave like an Imperial power toward his weaker neighbours when he justifies his horrible deeds to convince himself he is innocent. After his monstrous crime, Marnham never doubts his own innocence: “He was an innocent, and he knew it”, the omniscient narrator comments.

This absolute – amoral or even immoral – certainty of his own innocence distinguishes Marnham from Merseault. Whilst the

4 Ian McEwan in Deborah Orr, “Sensation and Sensibility”, *City Limits*, 10–17 May 1990, p. 21.

latter does not defend himself and consequently embraces death, estranged from the world, accepting “pour la première fois [...] la tendre indifférence du monde”,⁵ Leonard proclaims his innocence even while he is carrying the suitcases containing Otto's body. In the interviews he gave at the time of the publication of his novel, McEwan explained how he turned Camus' ‘killer against his will’ into an ‘innocent spy’:

I wanted another theme but I didn't know what. Then I was reading *Spycatcher*, and I came across Operation Gold, and its tunnel. I immediately thought of Kafka's “The Burrower” [sic] and I knew that was it.⁶

Kafka's short story “The Burrow” is the last – and maybe the most important – intertext of *The Innocent*. Not by chance, it is quoted also in the epigraphy of the novel. It is the story of a creature that burrows a meandering tunnel, to defend itself from an imaginary enemy. The more the creature is haunted by its fear and anguish, the more complicated its tunnel becomes, in an unstoppable descent towards the darkest paranoia. McEwan commented: “I found apparent analogies with the Cold War climate. While the nations were outfitted with sophisticated gear to spy on their enemies, their safety decreased”.⁷ That is to say, in simpler words: “The more you dig looking for safety, the more you dig your own grave. This is the Cold War”.⁸

It is no coincidence, then, that Leonard hides the two suitcases in the tunnel: he can get rid of their bloody contents only by throwing them in the bottomless pit of Cold War. Better, in McEwan's words:

[...] it is as if those suitcases represented the bloody baggage of European history we cannot get rid of. Nor can we reopen them, because the corpse would protrude, starting to scare us again.⁹

5 Albert Camus, *L'étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 179.

6 McEwan in D. Orr, 1990, p. 21.

7 McEwan in Alberto Sette, “Elogio dello scetticismo”, *Rinascita*, 26/8/1990, p. 48 (my translation).

8 McEwan in Michele Neri, “McEwan: le mie spie tornano a Berlino”, *La Stampa*, 19/5/1990, p. 6 (my translation).

9 McEwan in Franco Marcoaldi, “Il cadavere in valigia”, *La Repubblica*, 20 May 1990, p. 9 (my translation).

Better to throw them in the tunnel, or, out of metaphor, to blame the great powers, and the Cold War, looking for an alibi, proof of innocence. Proof, which does not stand the passing of time, since, coming back to Berlin at the end of the novel, after thirty years, Leonard eventually feels guilty. He is obsessed by time: the time he has wasted separated from Maria, before the fall of the Berlin Wall (which is still standing at the end of story). Thus, the omniscient narrator comments on the upcoming reunion of the two lovers:

They would return to Berlin together, that was the only way [...] they would visit the old places and be amused by the changes, and yes, they would go out to Potsdamer Platz one day and climb the wooden platform and take a good look at the Wall together, before it was all torn down.¹⁰

Like the gorgeous Marlene Dietrich, Leonard Marnham has still “one suitcase [better, two] in Berlin”.¹¹ Yet, there is nothing worth a song in his suitcases: only the memory of old massacres and the bad conscience of the West.¹² To open these suitcases is to let loose Kurtz’s horror; touching the heart of darkness; to carry them is to confess one’s complicity, to lose one’s innocence. It is impossible not to recall Leonard Cohen’s intimation at the opening of his 1966 poetry collection *Flowers for Hitler*: “I wait / for each one of you to confess”. Now like then, as Cohen wrote, “History is a needle / for putting men asleep / anointed with the poison / of all they want to keep”.¹³

10 Ian McEwan, *The Innocent* (London: Cape, 1990), p. 229.

11 The song “Ich hab’ noch einen Koffer in Berlin”, sung by Marlene Dietrich, was the sound track of the Italian radio broadcasting for the first anniversary of German reunification in 1990.

12 See the analysis of *The Innocent* in S. Albertazzi, *Bugie sincere. Narratori e narrazioni 1970–1990* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1992), and in Id., *Nel bosco degli spiriti: senso del corpo e fantasmaticità nelle nuove letterature di lingua inglese* (Manziana: Vecchiarelli, 1998). On *The Innocent*, see also: M. Delrez, “Escape into Innocence. Ian McEwan and the Nightmare of History”, *ARIEL*, 26, 2, 1995, pp. 7–23.

13 Leonard Cohen, “What I’m doing here”, *Flowers for Hitler*, in Cohen, *Selected poems 1956–1968* (Toronto: McClellan and Stewart), p. 87, 93.

We all have our suitcases in Berlin, as another secret agent, Lemmy Caution, suggests in a 1990 TV film by Jean-Luc Godard, *Allemagne année neuf-zero*. Here, after living for three decades in East Germany, we see Caution going back, carrying his suitcase, to a West he is not able to recognize. In the first part of Godard's film, which is called "Le dernier espion" ("The Last Spy"), an aged Lemmy Caution (played, like in *Alphaville*, by Eddie Constantine) wanders through a mournful Germany, searching for a West he cannot reach, because "these are roads leading nowhere". The landscape surrounding his wanderings in 1990 is as bleak as the country that welcomes Marnham in 1955: "Germany is a country twice and a half sad",¹⁴ Godard observed introducing *Allemagne année neuf-zero* at Venice Film Festival in 1991.

Moreover, in 1990 Germany shows even more signs of "the American colonization of the unconscious" (as Wim Wenders would call it)¹⁵ than in 1955. However, what most matters is McEwan's and Godard's analogous attitude towards history: they both see it just as a collection of deeds and situations experienced, endured and suffered by common men and women. It is interesting to note that neither of them is concerned with the fall of the Berlin Wall. McEwan wrote his novel before it came down, and he always declared that he did not add the final reference to its possible fall at a later time. As for Godard, at the Venice launch of his film he wondered: "The day the Wall fell is a historical day: but how about the day before? What is this thing called history?" The words remind one of a question recurring in Julian Barnes' novel *A History of the World in Ten and a Half Chapters*: "[...] what happened after 1492? [...] What happened in 1493?" I guess that both McEwan and Godard would subscribe to Barnes's conclusion: "Let's celebrate 1493, not 1492; the return, not the

14 All quotations from Jean-Luc Godard and his *Allemagne année neuf-zéro* are from the November 1991 broadcasting of the film on *Antenne 2* as part of the television series *La vingt-cinquième heure*.

15 See Wim Wenders, *Emotion Pictures* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1986).

discovery".¹⁶ Indeed, the aged Leonard Marnham would agree with Godard's Lemmy Caution that "the periods of happiness are the blank pages of history".

As for McEwan, in 1990 he told an Italian interviewer that in his opinion, the reunion of East and West Berlin was marked by ambiguity, just as a possible reunion between Leonard and Maria would be. "In my novel, the West Berlin of today is not described as a German miracle, but as an ambiguous, sad, and not very attractive place. Yes, the food is excellent and so are the films. But the air stinks".¹⁷

"The dragons of our lives are just princesses waiting to see us beautiful and brave",¹⁸ Don Quixote tells Lemmy Caution in a surreal scene of Godard's film. Surely, after Otto's killing, Marnham has not been brave enough to satisfy Maria's expectations. Three decades later, he might redeem himself by questioning his own innocence for the first time. Back to Berlin, the elderly Marnham might affirm, just like Godard's Caution back to the West: "As soon as I passed the frontier, the ghosts ran up to me". In the French film Caution's ghosts are (among others) Puskin, Goethe's Faust (whom he recognizes as his similar) and Don Quixote. In the English novel, instead, Marnham must dismiss his alleged innocence. For him, it is time to open his eyes to a new reality, to abandon even the memory of a Great Game he never understood, and to reach Lemmy's conclusion: "Perhaps all ghastly things are helpless things waiting for our help".¹⁹

It is no longer time to play the secret agent. To sell out to the enemy does not pay. As Lemmy Caution finds out at the end of his search for the West, in German there more terms meaning "betrayal" than in any other language. The end of the Cold War does not mean the end of any war. "The last battle begins, a battle

16 Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in Ten and a Half Chapters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), p. 241.

17 McEwan in Marcoaldi, 1990.

18 "Les dragons de notre vie ne sont que des princesses qui attendent de nous voir beaux et courageux".

19 "Toutes les choses terrifiantes sont peut-être des choses sans secoue qui attendent que nous les secourions".

of money and blood”, the voice off comments at the end of *Allemagne année neuf-zéro*.

The conclusion of an interview McEwan gave when launching *The Innocent* in Italy seems to be a comment on Godard’s script: “We must not rethink communism, we must rethink capitalism, the deeply unjust organization of our society, which can no longer blame the terror of the East or the Cold War”.²⁰ After the collapse of the tunnel, our suitcases appear wide open in the light, showing their macabre contents.²¹

Epilogue. Operation Sweet Tooth

More than twenty years after *The Innocent*, McEwan published another spy story: *Sweet Tooth*. The protagonist is a woman, Serena Frome, a former low-level operative for MI5, the British internal intelligence service, who recalls at a distance of four decades the failure of her short experience as a spy.

My name is Serena Frome (rhymes with plume) and almost forty years ago I was sent on a secret mission for the British security service. I didn’t return safely. Within 18 months of joining I was sacked, having disgraced myself and ruined my lover, though he certainly had a hand in his own undoing.²²

20 McEwan in Sandra Petrigani, “Scritto sul Muro”, *Panorama*, 24 December 1989, p. 4.

21 The first three parts of this essay are an updated English version of Silvia Albertazzi, “Una spy-story d’autore: *The Innocent* di Ian McEwan”, in Paola Galli Mastrodonato, Maria Gabriella Dionisi, Maria Luisa Longo (eds.), *Geografie: percorsi di frontiera attraverso le letterature* (Manziana: Vecchiarelli, 1999), pp. 189-197. The many essays on McEwan that have appeared after the year 2000 do not seem to add much to the critical interpretation of *The Innocent*. See, for instance, Peter Childs, *The Fiction of Ian McEwan. A Reader’s Guide to Essential Criticism*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2006; Sebastian Groes (ed.), *Ian McEwan. Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009); Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP), 2007; Lynn Wells, *Ian McEwan* (London: Palgrave, 2010); Roberta Ferrari, *Ian McEwan* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2012).

22 Ian McEwan (2012), *Sweet Tooth* (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 1.

This is the beginning of her tale. It is a misleading opening, hinting at drama, intrigue, and, eventually, risk and violence. The reader who remembers *The Innocent* might find some similarities between the protagonists of the two novels. They are both young, inexperienced, and caught almost by chance in the trap of espionage. Moreover, being “innocent” – that is to say, gauche and rather naive, they are both destined to fail miserably. They both suffer the dreariness of their everyday jobs, the bleakness of office work; they both live precariously: Leonard in a claustrophobic apartment in Berlin, Serena in a damp bedsit in Camden. In a way, *Sweet Tooth* seems to be the counterpart of *The Innocent*, since the protagonist is a girl who tells the story in the first person. Yet, *Sweet Tooth* is a light counterpart, because the tone of the narration is almost cheerful, there is no violence and narrative tricks substitute suspense. The action takes place in the early Seventies, starting in 1972, when “the British mood was self-lacerating, and there was a general willingness to assume that every country in the world, Upper Volta included, was about to leave us far behind.” (93) In England, it is a time of upheavals, the miners’ strikes, energy crises, terrorist attacks. However, as a reviewer noted, this backdrop “while effective, glances off the page as a parody of the kind more meaningfully employed by Jonathan Coe in *The Rotters’ Club*”.²³ Nor is Serena more interested in what remains of the “seedy, careless insurrection”²⁴ of the late Sixties. Being the daughter of an Anglican bishop, brought up in a cathedral precinct, before stumbling upon *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* she has never bothered with politics.

I knew nothing of the arguments and disillusionment of an older generation. Nor had I heard of the ‘left opposition’. Beyond school, my education had been confined to some extra maths and plies of paperback novels. I was an *innocent* [...]. (9)

23 Catherine Taylor, “*Sweet Tooth* by Ian McEwan: review”, *Telegraph*, 28 August 2012. www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fictionreviews/9496984/Sweet-Tooth-by-Ian-McEwan-review.html .

24 McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 44.

Her ideas on what she calls “this inglorious revolution” (9) are decidedly conservative:

I knew with what trouble it had been assembled, Western civilization, imperfect as it was. We suffered from faulty governance, our freedoms were incomplete. But in this part of the world our rulers no longer had absolute power, savagery was mostly a private affair. Whatever was under my feet in the streets of Soho, we had raised above filth. [...] perhaps I simply lacked youthful courage and was cautious and prim. But this inglorious revolution was not for me. I didn't want a sex shop in every town, [...] I didn't want history put to the torch. (44–45)

“A young anti-Communist in the soft-on-Communist academia of the early '70s”,²⁵ Serena is easily groomed for an interview with MI5 by her Professor of History, a mature scholar she has an adulterine affair with. Recruited by the domestic counter-espionage service and left abruptly by her lover – she finds herself doing menial work among misogynist colleagues in a cold, characterless office in Curzon Street, until she is selected for an undercover operation, thanks to her supposed knowledge of contemporary fiction.

Actually, Serena is a voracious reader of paperbacks, even if not a very sophisticated or selective one. Yet in a world where nobody is interested in literature, she appears to be “rather well up on modern writing [...] awfully well read and quite in with the scene”.²⁶ Thus, her task will be to covertly recruit young writers showing anti-communist sympathies, whose work will be secretly funded by a front foundation. In particular, after reading the short fiction of a University lecturer named Tom Haley, she is to contact him pretending to be an emissary of the “foundation” and offer him a large stipend for three years. Predictably, Serena falls in love first with the unknown author of the short stories, then with the very same man in flesh and blood. With her – and his – falling in love, a riddle of lies, narrative tricks and fiction

25 Kurt Andersen, “*Sweet Tooth* by Ian McEwan”, *The New York Times*, 25 November 2012. www.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/books/review/sweet-tooth-by-ian-mcewan.html.

26 McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 103.

starts: up to the end, which is a metafictional coup de theatre, it is almost impossible to understand who is lying to whom, what is fictive and what is real. Tom's short stories are all too similar to the situations he is to live with Serena (or, better, they seem to be metaphorical and figurative renderings of them); yet they also remind the reader of some stories to be found in McEwan's 1978 collection, *In Between the Sheets*. As for the novel he writes taking advantage of his pension, a gloomy dystopian work decidedly not in line with the ideology of MI5, its plot is strongly reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. This is no surprise, since real authors and publishers pop up in the plot: Tom Haley gives a reading together with Martin Amis; Ian Hamilton is his editor and praises his work and even McEwan's first publisher, Tom Maschler, appears on the scene.

All these hints at the world of writers and writing confirm that, notwithstanding its setting, *Sweet Tooth* is not a work of spy fiction. On the contrary, here McEwan does what he did not do with *The Innocent*: that is to say, he uses a spy fiction plot for other purposes. While the story of Leonard Marnham was first and foremost a spy thriller, with a tinge of noir, *Sweet Tooth* is a metafictional tour de force contrived as a spy story. Not by chance, a desk officer warns Serena:

In this work the line between what people imagine and what's actually the case can get very blurred. In fact that line is a big grey space, big enough to get lost in. You imagine things – and you can make them come true. The ghosts become real. (155)

This is just what happens with writers and fiction. The post-modern strategies some reviewers missed in *The Innocent* abound in *Sweet Tooth*: for instance, here betrayal, besides prejudicing the success of the spies' operations, and dooming the erotic relationships of the spy protagonist,²⁷ also haunts "the relationship

27 Later in the novel, we discover that the mature lover who groomed Serena for MI5 was passing documents to a Russian contact. "He was a footnote in the history of nuclear spying, and I was a footnote to his treachery", Serena comments.

– built on illusion, after all – between the reader and this novel itself”.²⁸ A novel about “our own peculiar responses to fiction, to the strange, slippery magic of narrative [...] about all how any of us ever really want from fiction is [our] own world, and [ourselves] in it”,²⁹ by its final metafictional turn *Sweet Tooth* appears to be also a male tour de force into a woman’s consciousness. Paraphrasing the title of a blockbuster of some time ago, it could be renamed (or subtitled) *What Men Want*, since at the end we find out that Serena is no less than a creature of Tom’s who, pretending to tell her story from her own point of view, has re-invented her according to his own wishes.

This has not much to do with spy fiction, but it has a lot to do with sexual politics and genderized writing (and reading). An English academic, Katie Roiphe, examined McEwan’s novel as a male imaginative creation of femininity. According to Roiphe, Serena is “a little pliant, a little silly, a little bland, a little light on actual interest in her work”, just like a man would like his perfect partner to be. Moreover, she seems to lack those elements of independence and defiance needed by a spy, but dispensable in an ideal woman, according to a male point of view. A “thin character”, Serena offers McEwan the opportunity to work out the “the fantasy of female consciousness by “relentlessly examining and exposing this thinness” through the eyes and the pen of his alter ego Tom Haley. In this sense, to properly understand the novel one should re-read it, after finding out the metafictional trick at the end. In this way, Serena would appear what she really is: a woman created and “spoken” by a man, “a man’s fantasy of a woman”. As Roiphe concludes:

On realizing that the character is a male novelist’s dream girlfriend, his vision, we are confronted in a vivid, uncomfortable way with the fabrications of love, the ways we animate and concoct other people, the

28 Maureen Corrigan; “Ian McEwan’s *Sweet Tooth* Leaves a Sour Taste”, *npr books*, 12 November 2012. www.npr.org/2012/11/14/164985216/Ian-mcewans-sweet-tooth-leaves-a-sour-taste.

29 Julie Myerson, “*Sweet Tooth* by Ian McEwan – Review”, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2012. www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/02/sweet-tooth-ian-mcewan-review.

thoughts we put in their heads, the mostly hidden condescension of men towards women.³⁰

It is apparent that, despite all the references to the Cold War, the miners' strikes, the power crisis, the IRA, the soaring crime rate, insurrectional troublemakers,³¹ and even the camouflage of Stella Rimington under the name of Millie Tringham, we are a long way from spy fiction. Or maybe we are not. According to an unconfirmed quote, McEwan believes that "All novels are spy novels [...] as all writers are spies".³²

30 Katie Roiphe, "Want to Understand Sexual Politics? Read this Novel", *Slate*, 7 November 2012. www.slate.com/articles/double_x/roiphe/2012/11/ian_mcewan_s_sweet_tooth_sexual_politics_in_novel_form.html.

31 See for instance McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*, p. 220.

32 McEwan, quoted in Taylor 2012.

SMILEY AND THE DOUBLE AGENT OF
TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SPY:
IN THE BOOK BY LE CARRÉ AND IN THE
FILM BY TOMAS ALFREDSON

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There are moles and there are moles. There is the mole in le Carré's book *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, there is the mole of the TV version based on the book, the one with Alec Guinness in the role of George Smiley, and there is the mole in the film version, the film directed by Tomas Alfredson presented in Venice a few years ago which garnered good critical reviews but not a great box-office success in Italy.

It is impossible to talk about the film without bearing in mind that for many of le Carré's readers, George Smiley *is* Alec Guinness, who in a formidable test of an actor gave a face, a style, an attitude, a physical reality to the character that emerges from the pages of the book. A character to which Alec Guinness gives an almost father-figure appearance. Smiley, le Carré said in a recent interview, had this characteristic: in a way he was the father that he would have liked to have had. And in the press release about the film, in which he unreservedly praised Gary Oldman's interpretation, he said something rather curious and interesting: namely, that if he had met Smiley/Alec Guinness on the street at night his gut reaction would have been to protect him; if he had met Smiley/Gary Oldman his reaction would have been to make a run for it.

The director of the film, at the very moment when he began to work on the project, knew that he and Gary Oldman were facing this problem. A huge problem, alongside that of having to concentrate more than 420 pages of the book and what the television adaptation had done in numerous installments, into just a couple of hours. But then, in the final analysis, the problem has always been the same, what always happens when it comes to taking a

story from the page to the big screen or the small screen. That of the transfer from one language, from a linguistic code, to another. From the page to the screen. And so it is worth briefly dwelling on the ‘problem’ of the transition from book to film.

A few years ago, having to comment on the stage adaptation by the Canadian playwright George F. Walker of Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (in that case it was an adaption from the page to the stage, not from the page to the screen), I called my essay “Only those who betray can be faithful”. I wanted to get rid of all the talk about faithfulness/non-faithfulness in the adaptation, be it either film or theatre. And in this case, mine was not a paradox, because only by betraying the novel by Turgenev had George F. Walker been able to be faithful to the ultimate meaning of *Fathers and Sons*. It is also true that, sometimes, a director manages to be faithful even without betraying, or is unfaithful and betrays. But there is no need to invent some eleventh commandment about fidelity. Here, in our case, I think we can say that the film, cutting, changing places and settings here and there, adding (curiously, having to shorten) a few scenes that do not appear in the book, fully corresponds to what has to be considered a fundamental element of the novel.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy, is from ‘74. The highly successful James Bond films, in which the idea that spying meant glamour, breathtaking action, beautiful girls and luxury gadgets, sophisticated and fascinating adventures, possibly in exotic places, triumphed. Since the beginning, le Carré books offer a somewhat different picture of the reality of the world of the British Secret Service, presented in a critically respectful way, not with the irony of Graham Greene, but seen as a machine to counter the Soviet totalitarianism. An effective machine, despite its errors and limitations of ‘culture’, despite the bureaucratic logic and the meanness of its men. The decisive point is the latter. The Secret Service agents have nothing in common with James Bond if not for the fact that they risk their lives. They are great people of self-control, ability to keep secrets, sharpness of observation; but they are normal people, or rather, normal officials as far as the dynamics that govern their relationships, their ambitions and their career rivalries are concerned.

All this is done in the film perfectly. And not only because of the dialogues and the interpretation of the actors – especially commendable that of Gary Oldman in the role of Smiley – but for what is the quintessential feature of ‘cinematic’ film. And that is because of the images and the visual scenery. Grays and beiges, shades of brown (in narrow corridors, in stuffy rooms, in spaces filled with cigarette smoke) dominate and abound and create a kind of patina that envelops the characters and scenes. This melancholy, unhealthy, disheartening white collar atmosphere speaks quietly about the characters moving in it. It communicates difficulties, private miseries and bureaucratic cruelty of the institutional dimension of their work. We can say, paradoxically, that it is this atmosphere that forms the ‘character’ which communicates to the viewer what is one of the central themes of le Carré’s book, both from the narrative and the ideological point of view.

Frequently, (and this, again I underline, is curious in a film that has to eliminate thousands of words that fill the 422 pages of the book on which it is based) it is the pictures – without words – that recount the crucial moments of the story. Such as in the party scene (which is not in the book) where George Smiley discovers his wife’s betrayal; or in brief flashbacks to the closing scenes (also without words, and also a great test for the actors) that makes us realize the truth about the mole. There are scenes that we do not find in the book, like the opening scene with the random killing of a woman feeding her baby in a bar in Budapest, an innocent victim of the war between spies and of the Cold War. There are aspects of the book that the film cannot include, such as the figure of the boy from a private school whom we meet at the beginning of the novel, a secondary character of extraordinary vividness, somewhere between a Dickensian novel, an adventure book for boys and a Graham Greene story: it is inevitable that the character remains in the written page – as well, of course, in our, the reader’s, imagination.

A brief aside. The film was well received and praised for its setting reconstruction. Only those over 50 years old can speak from experience of the accuracy and veracity of this reconstruction. But there is one detail that is worth emphasizing. Not about the

phones, equipment, clothes, cars, hairstyles and furniture of a time long gone and masterfully recreated in the film. It is the image of a big office full of typists, the kind of typing pool mentioned by Wright Mills in his essay on white-collar workers, the kind of female employment and organization that no longer exists. Work conditions have possibly even got worse of course: just think of call centers. Where, however, meagre consolation, it is men, as well as women, who find themselves in this alienating situation.

It must be said that the film is more 'correct' in its attitude towards women than the novel: as *le Carré* himself said. But, apart from its 'authentic interpretation', there is no doubt that there is a subtle (but no less obvious) emphasis on the ambiguity of male sexuality in the film, and both Smiley and the macho community of his colleagues have a decidedly different position on adultery.

There is a second point that is important to reflect upon: that of the reasons which led the mole, the traitor, to go to the enemy. In the book, the mole (whose code name was Gerald, and who is one of the most important officials of the Circus, Bill Haydon, Station Commander of London, the son of a high court judge, an Oxford graduate, like Smiley) at first briefly, then with more details, explains to Smiley the reasons for his choice, why he had decided to stay with the USSR rather than with the West. In the beginning there was mostly disappointment, and distrust of Britain and the US. Then in 1956, after the Suez crisis and the military and diplomatic debacle in Britain, there was the big step, the choice of sides (obviously for Haydon the events in Hungary, the Soviet invasion and the repression that had caused thousands of communists to leave the party, meant nothing). In 1961, the mole recounts, he had been given Soviet citizenship and in ten years he had received two medals, two high honours. This brings us to 1971 or so, after the Prague Spring. But the mole was untouched even by this tragedy.

Le Carré was determined to give comprehensible explanations to understand the mole's choice of side. Even to justify it; though with reserve, and grant that he acted, as he himself says, for moral reasons, at least in part.

About ten years before the publication of the book there had been Kim Philby's sensational escape, the mole *par excellence*, Graham Greene friend's and immediate superior, who escaped just in time after being discovered. But Philby differs from le Carré's mole. The story of Philby's career officially went like this: Philby, a Cambridge graduate in the 1930's (at that time there was widespread sympathy for the Soviet Union and Marxism in British universities, 'justified' by the need to fight Nazism), covered the Spanish Civil War as a journalist and joined the British secret service in 1940.

In reality, he had become a communist at Cambridge (but he was not a card carrying member) and had been recruited as a Soviet agent in England. His work as a Soviet agent did not conflict with his work in the British service during World War II. In any case not until 1944, when he became the head of the section dealing with intelligence about the Soviet Union. After the end of the war his work of double agent probably led to the betrayal of the invasion of Albania in 1949; and he certainly helped break down Anglo-American relations. In 1951, two Foreign Office officials, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, fled to Moscow just before being revealed as Soviet agents. Philby was asked to resign because of his friendship with them (in actual fact he had tipped them off) and returned to journalism.

In 1955 Harold Macmillan, the Foreign Secretary, stated in the House of Commons that there was no evidence that Philby had betrayed the interests of Britain; and the following year Philby went as a journalist to Beirut. Not exactly as a journalist: cleared by Macmillan, he had been recruited again in the British secret service under the cover of a journalist. More importantly, at the same time he also had been reactivated as a Soviet agent. But the defection of a KGB officer in 1962 betrayed him. In January 1963 he fled to the Soviet Union. Philby had probably been tipped off by Anthony Blunt, professor of History of Art at the University of London, Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, and one of the 'Cambridge Five', the group of friends working for the Soviet Union since the Thirties (the other four were Philby, Burgess, Maclean and John Cairncross). Eventually, a few months after his

arrival in Moscow, the British government officially declared that he had been a Soviet agent.

It was a shock; probably even greater for the members of the British establishment (of which he was a member). Son of St. John Philby, an Arabist, explorer of the Saudi desert, young Philby had been sent (appropriately) to Westminster School and then to Trinity College, becoming an exemplary representative of the ruling class.

It is worth remembering what John le Carré wrote about it: “Effortlessly he played the arts which the establishment could recognize – for was he not born and trained into the establishment! Effortlessly he copied its attitudes, caught its diffident stammer, its hesitant arrogance; effortlessly he took its place in its nameless hegemony”. That is why his betrayal was such a trauma: he was “a hundred per cent one of us”¹.

The story of the betrayal of le Carré’s mole, as I mentioned before, is different, because Bill Haydon is recruited by Karla, the KGB chief, after the end of the war when the USSR was no longer an ally against Hitler and Nazi Germany but an enemy power that constituted a direct threat to Britain and the Western world. Haydon’s ‘choice of side’ is not very precisely explained: the lack of confidence in America suggested his “early efforts, confined to what he hoped would discreetly advance the Russian cause over the American”². Mistrust became total after the Suez crisis, “the sight of the Americans sabotaging the British action in Egypt was, paradoxically, an additional incentive”³. From then on, he became a full-time Soviet mole with no holds barred, convinced that the USSR would guarantee the hope of a better world. The explanation may seem unconvincing; and in theory it should be even less in the film, where of course there is no room for all the considerations with which the mole justifies his betrayal.

I believe that many of those who read the book when it came out in the Seventies interpreted the statements of the mole as the result of a sort of blind and fideistic assessment of reality (as now

1 Leonard Palmer, *The British Espionage Novel* (London: Viking 2008), p. 107.

2 John le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (London: Viking, 2011), p. 411.

3 Ibid.

we think that the choice of many Britons, Germans and Italians to join Daesh is the result of an imbecilic fundamentalist interpretation of Islam – although in reality it is not, as it is not a question of religion).

It is possible that today's reader is more willing to believe the motives of the mole, interpreting them as perhaps the exaggeration of an attitude which, on the whole, is acceptable. It appears that for us Westerners of our confused times (if we exclude the fanatics who leave for Syria) there are no more causes to believe in and fight for. The passing of time hides and confuses things, maybe even gives them a romantic aura: and therefore a modern reader, albeit, conservative, could more easily accept the idea that the mole believed in a cause worth fighting for.

Haydon was wrong, because the foreign country that he decided to serve had nothing to do with the cause that it claimed to represent. However it was possible that he, like many others, did not realize it. But now that the dramatic tensions of the Cold War and the tragic circumstances that revealed the true nature of the Soviet regime are so far away, it is possible that his explanation of betrayal could become compelling. And it is even possible that the reader of today, while not sharing his reasoning, is willing to consider the betrayal of Haydon as the result of a misplaced idealism. Especially if it is a young reader who probably has a very vague idea of what the Soviet Union and the conflict between the USSR and the Western World was like.

This is also true with Alfredson's film, which has one more advantage. Alfred Hitchcock explained that he had to remove all doubt about the innocence of the protagonist of his film *The Lodger* (while in the text on which the film was based there were doubts), because production had imposed a very popular actor and beloved by the public, Ivor Novello, who in the viewers mind could not in any way be considered a culprit/baddie. Similarly the American production of the film *The Quiet American*, which overturned the positions in Graham Greene's novel on which it was based, chose the actor Audie Murphy for the part of the quiet American (who is guilty in the book). Murphy was a bad actor, but was known as the most decorated American combat soldier

of World War II, and then was chosen because the public had to know from the beginning of the film that his character could not be guilty.

The actor who plays the part of Bill Haydon in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* is Colin Firth, an excellent and much loved actor who has almost always played likable and positive characters. The spectators, as in the cases cited above, overlap this with the character he plays ; and for this reason, even when they find out that he is a traitor, they are willing to believe in the sincerity or, at the very least, the likelihood of his motives and the good faith that has dictated the betrayal.

MATA HARI: AN ICON OF MODERNITY

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Margaretha Gertruida Zelle was born on the 7th of August 1876 in the Netherlands. At nineteen she married a captain of the Colonial Army in the Dutch East Indies and two years later they moved to Java. In 1903, she left her husband and daughter and fled to Paris. After some failed attempts at employment as an artist's model, she profited from her Javanese experience and exotic sex appeal, winning fame as Mata Hari, the oriental dancer who charmed the fashionable Parisian high society.

In 1914 she was living in Berlin, but her bright star had already begun to fade and in order to maintain her high standard of living she had to rely on her talents as a courtesan. Among her many lovers she showed a constant weakness for officers, whom she collected without paying attention to their nationality, oblivious to the suspicious atmosphere brought on by the outbreak of the war. Her Dutch nationality, which enabled her to freely cross national borders, and her connections with German officers, attracted the interest of captain Ladoux, head of the French counterespionage, who unofficially hired her.

In the autumn of 1916 she was in Madrid, where she contacted the German envoy, Major Kalle, doing "what a woman does in such circumstances when she wants to make a conquest of a gentleman", as she said afterwards.¹ Kalle told her that submarines were going to land German and Turkish officers onto the Moroccan coast, a French military zone, and she thought that this meeting had successfully established her as a double agent for the French. While in Madrid, she also met the French military attaché responsible for French espionage, colonel Denvignes, with

1 Julie Wheelwright, *The fatal Lover: Mata Hari and the Myth of Women in Espionage* (London: Collins & Brown, 1992), p. 62.

whom she was seen on several occasions. Kalle began to grow suspicious and decided to test her to see how much information would get back to the French. He gave her some stale or even false news, which Mata Hari took at face value. In the meantime, Ladoux, who suspected Mata Hari of working for the Germans, had stopped answering her messages and she impatiently resolved to go back to Paris, without understanding that her cover had been blown, both with the French and the Germans. Afterwards, to strengthen the case against her, Ladoux produced a piece of so-called crucial evidence: French intelligence had intercepted some radio messages sent from Kalle to Berlin describing the helpful activities of a German spy code-named H 21, who could be identified as Mata Hari. However, Ladoux made several contradictory statements regarding what the messages actually contained. Moreover, the messages were written in a code that had already been broken by British intelligence and some sources claimed that the Germans already knew it had been broken. Would that be a proof that German intelligence had resolved to get rid of a useless agent?² Whatever the case, Mata Hari was arrested in Paris on the 13th of February 1917. She was first taken to the Palais de Justice to be questioned by captain Bouchardon, who acted as the chief investigating officer of the military tribunal, and then to Saint Lazare prison. On the 24th of July she appeared before the Third Military Tribunal and two days later she was sentenced to death penalty “for espionage and intelligence with the enemy for the end of assisting their enterprise”.³ Notwithstanding the many appeals on her behalf, at dawn on the 15th of October Mata Hari was executed by firing squad at the Vincennes military camp.

Exotic femme fatale

Mata Hari’s iconic status stems out from a particular moment in European culture, between the 1880s and the 1930s, which spe-

2 Fred Kupferman, *Mata Hari: songes et mensonges* (Paris: Editions Complexe, 1982), p. 83.

3 Wheelwright, p. 92.

cifically identified itself with the notion of ‘modernity’. As noted by Rita Felski, “the idea of the modern saturates the discourses, images and narratives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”, an era “profoundly shaped by logics of periodization, by the attempt to situate individual lives and experiences in relation to broader historical patterns and overarching narratives of innovation and decline”.⁴ Marked by crucial metamorphoses in sexuality and sex roles, this culture of modernity found a central organizing metaphor in gender, through the use of images of femininity as the embodiment of its anxieties, fears and hopes.

When a journalist asked Mata Hari why she chose to go to Paris, she answered: “I don’t know, I thought all women who ran away from their husbands went to Paris”.⁵ By the end of the century, Paris had indeed become the epitome of urban modernity, where the traditional bourgeois ethos could be renegotiated in a “symbolic redistribution of relations between feminine and masculine”.⁶ If the symbols of the triumphant capitalist system of production were male figures, the flip side of the coin was definitely feminine: a dreamworld shaped by consumption, where the distinction between private and public spaces which traditionally relegated women to a premodern sphere appeared suddenly blurred. Department stores, exhibitions, theatres, races, balls and soirées were new kinds of public urban spaces, which male perception associated with a dangerous femininity. In Zola’s *Au bonheur des dames* (1883), the department store from which the novel takes its title is a place where consumption has “abandoned all pretense to being a rational transaction grounded in objective need, and is shown to be driven by the inchoate emotional and sensual impulses of the female customer” (70). Here, everyday feminine objects are aestheticized by the stylistic manipulation of displays, offering women a visual pleasure and “encouraging them in a euphoric loss of self through the surrender to an irrational cult of ideal feminine beauty” (70). Breathless and excited,

4 Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 9.

5 Wheelwright, p. 13.

6 Felski, p. 19.

oblivious to class differences, customers appear as an indistinct crowd of primordial, desiring femininity. This symbolic bond between consumption and desire is reasserted and further elaborated by Zola in *Nana* (1880) through the paradigmatic figure of the actress and courtesan, a *femme publique* whose “social and sexual identity is shaped by fashion, image and advertising” (75). An insatiable consumer of objects and men, Nana offers yet another representation of ferocious female desire, undermining the principles of economic rationality and tacitly challenging male authority. The threatening nature of these images of femininity lies in their ambivalence. Here, the traditional equation of women to Nature and the primordial forces of the unconscious coexists with the contradictory idea of style and elaborated artifice, that shaped feminine identity through the seductive clothing bought in department stores, the gorgeous costumes worn on stage and, ultimately, through the artifice that regulates women’s relationships with men.

Mata Hari’s career as a performer and courtesan in Parisian high-society perfectly fits in with these new images of femininity, with the significant addition of exoticism. Nourished by the seductive appeal of the colonial empires, the *fin-de-siècle* taste for exoticism went hand in hand with the cult of modernity. In the 1900 Exposition Universelle, Parisians could embark in a Tour du Monde pavilion displaying oriental architectures (among which, a Dutch East Indies pavilion) and with the same ticket admire the most spectacular achievements of western art and technology: the *Art Nouveau* of the Porte Monumentale entrance, the Pavillon Bleu and the Grand and Petit Palais; the massive Palais de l’Electricité, fitted with thousands of multi-coloured lights; escalators, panoramic paintings, films with recorded sound. In this context, Margaretha rapidly understood that she could profit from her Javanese experience. She invented a new public identity for herself as an exotic dancer and, as her fame increased, she artfully shaped her biography to match the desires of her audience: she declared herself a native of Java with European parents, the daughter of an Indian temple dancer, or even an orphan raised by Indian temple priests who had trained her as a dancer and

dedicated her soul to Shiva. By 1905, Paris was already talking about her: “Vague rumours had reached me of a woman from the Far East”, wrote Frances Keyzer, the Paris correspondent for a London society magazine,

a native of Java, wife of an officer, who had come to Europe, laden with perfumes and jewels, to introduce some of the richness of the Oriental colour and life into the satiated society of European cities; of veils encircling and discarded, of the development of passion as the fruits of the soil, of a burst of fresh, free life, of Nature in all its strength, untrammelled by civilization.⁷

In that year, Margaretha, who was still using her married name, Lady MacLeod, gave an astonishing dance performance at Madame Kierevsky’s salon. There, she met Emile Guimet, industrialist and collector who founded the Museum of Oriental Art. He organised her grand début at the Museum, transforming the library into an imaginary Hindu temple, with dimmed lights, incense floating through the air, columns adorned with white flowers, Persian rugs on the floor and a precious statue of Shiva presiding over the ceremony. After performing three dances, she tore off the veils covering her hips and stood almost naked in front of the audience’s subjugated gaze, dressed only in jewels and a breast plate. She had become Mata Hari – “eye of the day” in Malay – and stepped into fame.

“Mata Hari danced nude”, recalled many years later Louis Dumur, a novelist who had assisted to the performance, “her small breasts covered with two carved brass plates, held by chains. Glittering bracelets held her wrists, arms and ankles; all the rest was nude, fastidiously nude, from the nails of her fingers to the point of her toes” (15). The simple thrill of watching a nude woman dancing on stage, however, was enveloped in the refined setting of the Musée Guimet, the glamour of the costumes and the claimed intention of faithfully reproducing the dances of a primitive religion: “All Paris is talking of the beautiful woman known as Mata Kari [sic]”, reported *The Gentlewoman*. “On two

7 Wheelwright, p. 14.

consecutive nights the halls and staircases leading to the circular library were filled with all that Paris contains of the artistic, scientific and literary world” (15). “[She] danced like Salammbo before Tanit, like Salomé before Herod” (17), commented a review in *Le Gaulois*, obviously evoking Flaubert’s orientalist icon and, more significantly, Salome, who by the end of the century had become a sort of collective obsession – an Art Nouveau icon in Aubrey Beardsley’s drawings for Oscar Wilde’s play and a decadent *femme fatale* in Frédéric Moreau’s paintings. By 1907, Mata Hari herself had become obsessed with the idea of playing Salome, urging her agent to persuade Richard Strauss to cast her in the role of his opera ballet: “[Only] I will be able to interpret the real thoughts of Salome” (17). Though she never managed to play the role publicly, in January 1912 she performed a Salome dance at the residence of Prince San Faustino at the Barberini Palace in Rome. In a portrait reproduced on the programme, she appeared naked except for a thin veil covering her hips and a medallion lying between her breasts, smiling with St. John’s head at her feet. Comparing Frédéric Moreau’s *fin-de-siècle* Salomes with the former romantic Orientalism of Delacroix, Mario Praz noted the emergence of a very different attitude. While Delacroix seems to inhabit his lustful, sanguinary Orient, Moreau contemplates it from the outside, using it as a seductive decoration.⁸ Mata Hari’s incarnation of the exotic *femme fatale* definitely shares Moreau’s modern aesthetics, her appeal lying in the ambivalence between the expression of a “primitive”, “uncivilized” sexuality and the stylish artifice which informs it. The description of Moreau’s Salome in Huysmans’ novel, *À rebours* (1884), could indeed apply to Mata Hari’s exotic character: she was both “refined” and “savage”, bewitching and subduing male’s will with the charm of a “venereal flower”.⁹

8 Mario Praz, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1976), p. 213.

9 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), pp. 135–6.

Double agent and femme fatale

With the outbreak of World War I, the *Belle Époque*'s glamorous world was swept away, swallowed up by the enormous disaster that marked the western civilization's utter failure and, at the same time, the apocalyptic climax of modernity. Mata Hari the exotic dancer belonged to that world and disappeared with it. In 1915 she wrote to her agent asking him to find her an engagement with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, but by then her oriental style was as outdated as the Grand Palais architecture and her dancing career was finished. Mata Hari's public life could have ended there and she might have faded away, an ageing courtesan destined to become just another old picture from the *Belle Époque*. Margaretha's life, however, offered one more unexpected development. Arrested, tried and executed as a double agent, she became the archetype of the female spy, "the measure against which all other fictional women spies have been assessed for their competence, loyalty and femininity".¹⁰

Mata Hari the double agent though, exists only because Mata Hari the *femme fatale* had, by reviving her and somehow revealing her deep nature. The dancing Salome of the *Belle Époque* became "a sinister Salome, who played with the heads of our soldiers in front of the German Herod" (93). Mata Hari's uncertain nationality and exotic legend were a sign of her untrustworthiness towards the country that had offered her hospitality and success; her many erotic intrigues with officers and wealthy men, a sign of her inclination to duplicity and to playing politics behind the scenes; her seductive power, a murderous activity. "The false temple dancer, the false nautch-girl, the great cosmopolitan dancer," wrote Alfred Morain in 1930, "all these roles masked the international spy, paid by the enemy to worm out military, political and diplomatic secrets" (41–2).

In 1931, when Hollywood seized Mata Hari's story, the symbolic double bind of the spy and the exotic *femme fatale* was significantly asserted by compressing the story's time frame in

10 Wheelwright, p. 4.

wartime Paris, where Greta Garbo is a successful dancer who secretly conspires against France with the German secret services. We see her dancing in front of a statue of Shiva, adorned in the glamorous costumes inspired by the new **Art déco style** and being admired by officers and wealthy men. At the same time, she is snatching precious information from a reluctant Russian general who is desperately in love with her.

In the summer of 1917, when Mata Hari's trial began, France's demoralization was at its peak: mutinies were igniting on the battle front and Paris was overflowing with women's strikes, demanding salary increases and their men's return. Putting on trial a famous *femme fatale*, depicted as an evil enemy of the country, obviously offered a sort of public catharsis, but it also revealed those male anxieties which the war had further intensified. The women's strikes in Paris showed just how much the sex roles had changed. "As young men became increasingly alienated from their prewar selves, immured in the muck and blood of no man's land, increasingly abandoned by the civilization of which they had ostensibly been heirs", write Gilbert and Gubar,

women seemed to become [...] even more powerful. As nurses, as mistresses, as munitions workers, bus drivers, or soldiers in the "land army", even as wives and mothers, these formerly subservient creatures began to loom malevolently larger. [...] With little sense of inherited history to lose, [...] they would seem to have had, if not everything, at least something to gain during the terrible war years of 1914 to 1918: a place in public history, a chance, even, to make history.¹¹

When the newspaper *Le Gaulois* reported the death of Mata Hari, "the hired spy who yesterday paid her debt to society", it also reminded its readers that other female spies had faced firing squads all over France, sarcastically concluding that this was a true sign of women's equality.¹²

11 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale university Press, 1988-89), 2, *Sexchanges* (1989), pp. 262-3, 270.

12 Wheelwright, pp. 99-100.

Of the many women spies executed throughout Europe, however, only two names were retained by collective memory: Mata Hari and Edith Cavell, the British nurse executed in Belgium, because they embodied two utterly opposite archetypes. While Mata Hari was the evil *femme fatale* justly put to death, Edith Cavell was the innocent victim, the martyr. Mata Hari was the “shameless spy” whose murderous seduction had caused the death of thousands of innocent soldiers; Cavell was the white angel who took care of them, tending to their wounds. “In trying to defend themselves, the Germans have pushed their insolence so far as to compare Edith Cavell to Mata Hari”, wrote Louise Thuillez, who was involved with Cavell’s Belgian escape network,

Edith Cavell had worked for her country, consecrating to this noble task all her career of faith and sacrifice. Mata Hari, thinking only of her own personal charms, had sold herself to the highest bidder. While Edith Cavell, at the bedside of the wounded men she was tending, wept over the sufferings of her fellow-countrymen, Mata Hari in the luxury of palaces betrayed indiscriminately all who approached her (120).

Contrary to Mata Hari, Cavell offered the possibility of reconciling the traditional, domestic image of women with the new place they increasingly occupied in society: the household’s angel had become the soldiers’ angel. However, the compromise offered by this reassuring image of femininity needed its evil counterpart and who better than a famous *femme fatale* to play the part?

The tragic fall of the femme fatale

Most of the *femme fatale*’s icons that saturate 19th-century imagination are triumphant, powerful women, as if the male fantasy that created them could barely begin to conceive “the death of the goddess, so enthralled (it was) by her magic, and so dependent on her charms”.¹³

13 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 22.

Mata Hari's fall, on the contrary, is a crucial element of her icon. "The savage women who prepare murder in the shadow, and take advantage of their beauty contributing to the destructive endeavour of our enemies do not deserve anything but death. They are evil, grim creatures", stated prosecutor Lieutenant Mornet in his closing speech, emphatically concluding that "the evil that this woman has done is unbelievable. This is perhaps the greatest woman spy of the century".¹⁴ The reasserting of the patriarchal law is obviously one of the main symbolic elements of Mata Hari's exemplary execution: the *femme fatale's* threatening power had gone too far and it had to be destroyed. This narrative pattern had found one of its most exhaustive literary representations in Henry Rider Haggard's novel, *She* (1885), which "was not only a turn-of-the-century bestseller but also, in a number of dramatic ways, one of the century's literary turning points, a pivot on which the ideas and anxieties of the Victorians began to swivel into what has come to be called the 'modern'".¹⁵ Haggard's heroine, Ayesha, is an immortal white queen who rules a fantastic land in the darkest heart of Africa, an evil *femme fatale* named by her people *She-who-must-be-obeyed*, whose threatening power is symbolically contained within a set of ambivalences which make her a sort of Mata Hari's alter ego. Blazing into the African darkness, the absolute whiteness of Ayesha's skin situates her in an ambivalent space, where the enticing and somehow reassuring otherness of the exotic woman gets disquietingly closer to the male, dominating, western identity. Her African domain is indeed a matriarchal society, where the relationships between men and women appear unnaturally subverted: an uncanny, deadly domain located in the catacombs of a perished civilization, "a land of swamps and evil things and dead old shadows of the dead",¹⁶ where Ayesha lives shrouded like a corpse. When she strips off her funerary veils though, she reveals an extraordinary beauty that commands men's absolute erotic devotion. The crucial sign that crystallizes the ambivalences of the *femme fatale* is Ayesha's

14 Kupferman, p. 121.

15 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 21.

16 Henry Rider Haggard, *She* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), p. 143.

immortality, which reveals the artifice of her youthful beauty and allows her evil power to perpetuate forever:

I have heard of the beauty of celestial beings, now I saw it ; only, this beauty, with all its awful loveliness and purity, was *evil*. [...] It had stamped upon it a look of unutterable experience, and of deep acquaintance with grief and passion. Not even the lovely smile that crept about the dimples of her mouth could hide this shadow of sin and sorrow. It shone even in the light of the glorious eyes, it was present in the air of majesty, and it seemed to say: “Behold me, lovely as no woman was or is, undying and half-divine; memory haunts me from age to age, and passion leads me by the hand – evil have I done, and with sorrow have I made my acquaintance from age to age, and from age to age evil shall I do, and sorrow shall I know till my redemption comes” (155–56).

Ayesha’s immortality brings with it the shadow of an eternal female otherness, which stands “in and behind the forces of history like a half-concealed fatality, a secret cause that transcends and transforms the currents of events”:¹⁷

It might be possible to control her for a while, but her proud ambitious spirit would be certain to break loose and avenge itself for the long centuries of solitude [...]. [She] was now about to be used by Providence as a mean to change the order of the world [...] by the building up of a power that could no more be rebelled against or questioned than the decrees of Fate. [...] Ayesha strong and happy in her love, clothed with immortal youth, godlike beauty, and power, and the wisdom of the centuries, would have revolutionised society, and even perchance have changed the destinies of Mankind.¹⁸

To this fatality Haggard’s story opposes the inexorability of the patriarchal law, which comes to interrupt the eternal return of the *femme fatale*. Thus, Ayesha is destroyed by the very source of eternal life which had preserved her – a rolling pillar of fire symbolically functioning as a sort of avenging phallus: “Naked and ecstatic, in all the pride of Her femaleness, She must be fucked

17 Gilbert and Gubar, p. 8.

18 Haggard, p. 203.

to death by the ‘unalterable law’ of the Father,” as Gilbert and Gubar put it (21).

Taking the *femme fatale*’s life though, is not enough for a law which seems to demand the humiliating sacrifice of her beauty, symbolically depriving her of the very source of her power. Pierre Bouchardon, chief investigating officer of the military tribunal, describes the grey showing through Mata Hari’s dyed-black hair, the ageing face that no make-up could now conceal. The prison doctor stresses how her features, “without fineness and not at all feminine”, “gave no impression of beauty”, and reiterates the power of artifice: “it was certainly through hard work before her mirror and by strength of will that this woman had succeeded in cultivating beauty, by gracious expert expression and by putting her body into the most pleasing attitudes”.¹⁹ In both testimonies, Mata Hari’s deteriorated appearance is significantly equated with racist stereotypes, as if her exotic legend had become an integral part of her identity: “hideous, heavy-lipped, copper-coloured” (68), “savage”, “of an Asiatic type, with plenty of long hair, black and sleek [...], a low forehead, prominent cheek bones, a big mouth with lascivious lips, large ears, [...] a large nose with wide nostrils” (85). Following the same pattern, Ayesha’s destruction takes the form of a real degeneration:

She paused, and stretched out her arms, and stood there quite still, with a heavenly smile upon her face, as though she was the very Spirit of the Flame. [...] But suddenly [...] a kind of change came over her face [...]. I gazed at her arm. Where was its wonderful roundness and beauty? It was getting thin and angular. And her face – by Heaven! – *her face was growing old before my eyes!* [...] “*Look! – look! – look!* she’s shrivelling up! she’s turning into a monkey!” [...] Smaller she grew, and smaller yet, till she was no larger than a baboon. Now the skin was puckered into a million wrinkles, and on the shapeless face was the stamp of unutterable age.²⁰

By annihilating the threatening artifice of her seduction, Ayesha’s immortality is brought back to nature. Like Mata Hari, she

¹⁹ Wheelwright, p. 85.

²⁰ Haggard, pp. 293–94.

is precipitated into the old age that she had managed to conceal and she is swept back into that space of exotic otherness whose boundaries had been blurred.

The black legend of Mata Hari's rise and fall was told, a few years after her death, by two men who had been directly involved in her capture and conviction. Major Emile Massard, commander at the headquarters of the armies in Paris, who had attended the trial and accompanied her to Vincennes, wrote Mata Hari's story in *Les Espionnes à Paris* (1922). Ten years later, Captain Ladoux himself dedicated her a chapter in his fictionalized memoirs, *Chasseurs d'espions* (1932), entitled "How I Captured Mata Hari". In 1919, Mata Hari also inspired the fictional heroine of *The Temptress*, a novel written by William Le Queux, an amateur spy hunter hired by British Intelligence.

In 1931, the film produced by Metro Goldwyn Meyer, directed by George Fitzmaurice and starring Greta Garbo, marked a turning point in the representation of Mata Hari's fall. In order to adapt the character to Hollywood's melodrama, the evil *femme fatale* had to be redeemed, possibly through true love. To this end, the script used the figure of a young Russian aviator, captain Vladimir Masloff, with whom the ageing Margaretha had fallen in love.

She had met him in 1916, when he was on leave from the front, and afterwards went to see him in Vittel, where he was convalescing after mustard gas had burned his throat and destroyed the sight of his left eye. This visit to Masloff was a crucial event in Margaretha's life, because it brought her in contact with the French counterespionage bureau. Vittel was in the military zone: not only a spa town for wounded soldiers, but also a training centre for the allied air forces, near a military airport used to bomb southern Germany. Non-residents needed police permission to visit Vittel and Margaretha was directed to Ladoux's office: he gave her a pass, had her followed by his agents, and when she returned to Paris offered her money, unofficially employing her in the French espionage service. In his memoirs, Ladoux claimed that she had told him: "I want to be rich enough not to have to deceive Vadime (Vladimir) with

others”.²¹ According to many sources, she wanted to marry him, while he considered their relationship nothing more than a passing affair.

In Fitzmaurice’s film, Mata Hari’s affair with the young Russian aviator has been transformed into a romantic love story, that enables her to abandon the role of the dark lady. When her lover is taken back to France, blessed and blind, the cynical *femme fatale* resigns from the German secret services and starts imagining a brand new life for herself, taking care of her wounded lover whose blindness symbolically underlines the definitive surrender of her evil seductive power. Mata Hari’s dark past though, inevitably catches up with her. In order to save the young Russian, she kills her jealous former lover, thus revealing her spying activities against France. Exploiting the melodramatic resources contained in contemporary testimonies, the script transforms the *femme fatale*’s exemplary punishment into a tearful ending. In prison, Mata Hari is allowed to see her lover one last time: being blind, he believes her when she pretends they are in a hospital where she is waiting to have a dangerous operation. “Don’t be afraid”, he tells her. “I won’t be afraid, if you hold me”, answers Mata Hari, sobbing in his arms, “Goodbye my beloved”.²² The final sequences show her elegantly draped in a long, high-necked black dress, slowly descending a staircase at the bottom of which stands a military cortege waiting to take her to Vincennes. Among the officers, we also see Ladoux’s fictional alter ego, captain Dubois, who from the very beginning had been convinced of Mata Hari’s spying activities and eventually captured her. Flanked by two ranks of soldiers, a redeemed Mata Hari tragically walks away towards her death.

Other versions of Mata Hari’s fall will follow: a naive woman caught up in a big game she cannot control, an innocent victim of the French justice system. Yet, however the story is told, the tragic necessity leading the *femme fatale*’s glamorous life towards its ending remains its unalterable, symbolic core. Here lies

21 Wheelwright, p. 53.

22 *Mata Hari*, directed by George Fitzmaurice, with Greta Garbo and Ramon Novarro (Metro Goldwyn Meyer, 1931).

the fascinating power of Mata Hari, an icon who crystallizes the essential ambivalence of modernity, its high hopes as well as its tragic destiny.

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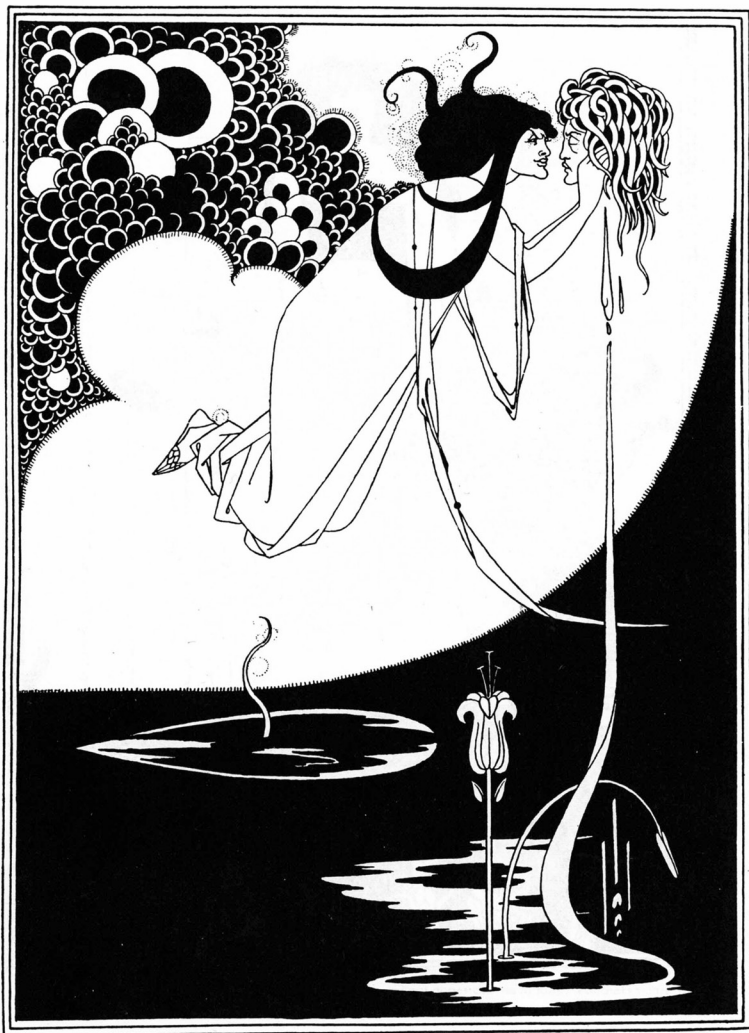
Unknown, *Mata Hari*, 1910



Unknown, *Mata Hari dancing at the Musée Guimet, 1905*



Gustave Moreau, *L'Apparition*, 1876, Musée d'Orsay



Aubrey Beardsley, *The Climax*, 1893, British Library



Mata Hari (G. Fitzmaurice, 1931)



Mata Hari (G. Fitzmaurice, 1931)



Mata Hari (original film herald), 1931

FIGURES OF DOUBLE-NESS IN *THE HUMAN FACTOR* BY GRAHAM GREENE

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Spy fictions should probably involve a certain degree of doubleness to be credible. Sophisticated spy fictions, such as Graham Greene's novel *The Human Factor* (1978),¹ which is a classic of espionage,² do promote doubleness to a structural all-encompassing figure, or, in other words, to a literary strategic construct, or narratological structure.

As a first consideration, this type of novel might be defined as cosmopolitan novels, for, geographically, they encompass almost the whole world. In *The Human Factor* in a few pages, or even a few lines, the reader is projected from Central London to South Africa, to Zanzibar, to Zaire, to Mozambique, to Cuba, to China, to Russia, to the US. On the one hand one breathes the claustrophobic atmosphere of the characters' wanderings through Central London; on the other one experiences a variety of geopolitical spaces uniquely intertwined by mysterious diplomatic or counter-diplomatic plots at the time of the cold war, a major subject in British espionage fiction. This exploitation of geography is quite eloquent. Britain is represented through its typical sports – fishing, hunting, golf – and culinary traditions – steak-and-kidney pie, or steak-and-kidney pudding, roast-beef, whiskies and sherries. In opposition, in places such as Lourenço Marques (Maputo), people are said to indulge in luxurious sun-downers, with a touch of exoticism. Nevertheless, a Manichean

1 Graham Greene, *The Human Factor* (New York: Penguin, 2008). Further references to this edition will be given in parenthesis in the text.

2 "The last and best of his espionage narratives." Robert Lance Snyder, *The Art of Indirection in British Espionage Fiction* (North Carolina: Mc Farland, 2011), p. 72.

perspective is avoided and binary oppositions are neither stable nor so well defined.

Another consistent figure of doubleness is produced by the clear-cut split between private life and work at the Agency among the ‘employees’ of the Intelligence. The protagonist of the novel, Maurice Castle, is a happily married man, therefore he often expresses his uneasiness for the schizophrenic life he has to conduct: “Sometimes he found it impossible not to show one splinter of the submerged iceberg life he led” (90). Similarly, Daintry, his superior – who also is an embodiment of Castle’s double, for he too was a married man – although he had separated from his wife, expresses similar concerns, when talking of the life of his ex-wife and daughter:

After all she had consented to marry him knowing all; she had voluntarily entered that chilling world of long silences. He envied men who were free to come home and talk the gossip of an ordinary office (82).

After dinner they said goodbye in Panton Street – he offered to take her home in a taxi, but she said she preferred to walk. He had no idea where the flat was that she shared. Her private life was as closely guarded as his own, but in his case there had never been anything much to guard (85).

Daintry seems to regret both the lack of communication with his ex-wife and with his daughter, to the point that it seems to him that his job had been exactly the cause of their separation. Daintry might be seen as the complementary-double of Castle. The latter still has a wife and a son, who depend on him and whom he depends on, while the former has a wife and a daughter, who have emancipated from him. One man is married, the other man is separated. Thus, they represent two different stages of married life. Both believe in old good manners and in the innocence of Davis, their colleague, who is suspected of being a double agent. But Davis can be considered an opposite-double of Castle, for he is the bachelor, used to night-clubbing, a little too much drinking, and who is in love with his secretary, Cynthia.

Sarah, Castle’s wife, may be the one who suffers the most for his lifestyle and this is revealed by her words: “I know you are

worried. I wish you could tell me why – but I know you can't. Perhaps one day... when you are free... [...] If you are ever free, Maurice" (110).

When Castle meets his 'control', Boris, the Soviet agent who's always been in contact with him, he experiences a sort of crisis: "there's no one in the world with whom I can talk of everything, except this man Boris [...] He couldn't talk to Davis – half his life was hidden from Davis, nor to Sarah, who didn't even know that Boris existed" (114).

Michael Denning claims that:

Graham Greene's novel begins with the separation of public and private. [...] But the separation is not natural, or real; we discover that Sarah had begun not as his wife but as his agent and that his work-life as a double agent is a consequence of his private life, of his debt to the Communists who helped Sarah escape from South Africa.³

The same naïvety is stressed by Robert Lance Snyder, who detects Castle's delusion in believing he can "cordon off his employment by the firm and his bourgeois life".⁴ Moreover, the symbol contained in his name, that builds a citadel around his family life, is doomed to crumble in spite of Sarah's reassuring words: "We have our own country. You and I and Sam. You've never betrayed that country, Maurice" (238).

Known as a man without flows, Castle is also an estimator of literature. He has his favourite book store, where he discusses literary masterpieces with the store keeper, Mr Halliday, who not only perfectly knows the plot of *War and Peace* but also can discuss politics in Vietnam and in South Africa: countries Halliday considers twins in their doomed history. Castle always buys two copies of each book he wants to read. Mr Halliday has a real double. His son owns a bookstore just across the same street. Only, the son sells porn-magazines and both father and son are ashamed of that activity. They have different audiences, while

3 Michael Denning, *Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 133.

4 Robert Lance Snyder, p. 76.

sharing similar traditional literary tastes; after all, the son is a fan of Trollope, a favourite reading also among the Intelligence employees: “My son’s very fond of Trollope”, proudly admits Mr Halliday. “Though it doesn’t really go with the kind of literature he sells, does it? (90)” he adds ironically. This last statement redoubles irony: it is not only self-referential, but it presents his son’s activity as a cover for his truer interest: the British canon, and not as one would expect vice-versa.

When, surprisingly, it seems to become clear that Halliday’s son is the link between Castle and the Soviets, it is Castle himself who alludes to the “double bluff”, of which he becomes aware at the same time as the reader:

It had always seemed strange to Castle that they had chosen so dubious an intermediary as young Halliday, whose shop might be searched at any time by the police. Perhaps, he thought, it was a kind of double bluff (180).

In Castle’s office there are two secretaries, Chyntia and her substitute, Patricia. Davis is tailed by two different agents, both of them in black cars. So, apparently, almost each character has a double, or any situation is doubled up or repeated. Thus, mirroring as the same and its opposite, repetitions with variations, complementarity and supplementarity are the dominating pattern of this well-constructed plot. Eventually, Sarah gives in to Maurice’s sceptical opinion that life might offer the same chance twice: “You said once things never happened twice the same way” (199). Life, actually, imposes that they should leave this country as they left South Africa in the past.

And the past comes to interfere again. Castle is forced to meet Mr Muller twice. The latter somehow represents the villain, spokesperson of the South African humiliating apartheid policy, a double-dealer and a hateful presence both in his office in Pretoria, where Castle first met and faced him, and now in London, at Castle’s place, although he seems to have changed to a degree: “he looked more human” (97).

Mr Muller is a member of the BOSS a new military intelligence agency established in South Africa in 1966, whose power

was larger than that of the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs. Paradoxically, Castle and Mr Muller are the two faces of the same coin: colonialism in South Africa. One is a Boer who claims to be African and to have owned Africa since the eighteenth century; he is a supporter of apartheid and a declared racist. Castle is and remains a British liberal idealist all through the novel, free of prejudices. Both forces were active in South Africa in the mid '70s, when the Soweto uprisings on 16 June 1976 showed clearly the violence and inhumanity of apartheid. Three years later, in the same year of the publication of Greene's novel a scandal involved President Vorster in South Africa and in 1979 Botha was elected.⁵

Castle is the embodiment of the saying *in medio stat virtus*. His real wish is to be "inconspicuous", that is to say, normal, average, invisible. But that is exactly the expression that betrays his being, in fact, conspicuous. His defence of his middle class status resounds like Defoe's eulogy of the middle class family in *Robinson Crusoe*. First, Castle defends his choice of living "a long way out" from Central London, something his superiors find "inconvenient". He answers, more precisely, that he lives "less than an hour by train. I need a house and a garden. I have a child, you see – and a dog. You can't keep either of them in a flat" (8). Second, he defends the fact that he has no wish "to appear different from the schoolmasters on either side [...] for the same reason he kept the rather gaudy stained glass of the Laughing Chevalier over the front door. He disliked it; he associated it with dentistry [...] but again because his neighbours bore with theirs, he preferred to leave it alone" (12). According to the same principles he keeps the Yale key, instead of a mortise lock, because the neighbours were content with Yale.

Castle is well read and he is a literary person, for, after all, he is a character out of a book. He does not read literature for entertainment, but as the most ancient encoded linguistic system. His reading and de-codification is mainly and necessarily an ethical

5 Founded by John Vorster in 1969, who was Prime Minister in the years 1966–1978 and the President of South Africa in 1978–1979. He had to resign because of a scandal linked to the misuse of government funds. See N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Abacus, Edinburgh, 1995, pp. 595–596.

one. Castle does the right thing, only in the wrong way, a way that turns against himself, depriving him of his beloved ones. It is just all too logic that once in Moscow he can only become an ordinary reader and he is offered a position as publishing chief advisor on African literature: “He says there are a great number of African novelists and they would like to choose the most valuable for translation” (253). This may be a deliberate suggestion by Greene himself to the English publishing and cultural industry.

Doubleness in speech acts

Of course speech can or cannot mean what it appears to say. The use of rhetorical figures, metaphors for instance, allows for a doubleness of meanings that sometimes are intended to create irony and laughter. This is the case with the first formal exchange between the chief responsible of security, Colonel Tomlinson, who introduces the character of Mr Daintry as “our new broom”, who “has taken over security from Meredith”. At first Mr Daintry “wincd at the description” (6) to show disapproval. Soon after that, Mr Daintry affirms it is his task to check the employees in charge of top secret information and, as if apologizing, he says ““You must forgive the new broom, I have to learn the ropes,” he added, getting confused among the metaphors” (7). Now, the final authorial comment coincides with the critical voice of Castle, the protagonist, who is able to defy his superiors by subtly dismantling their unsuccessful puns through his mental asides, which are immediately shared with the reader. The OED defines the metaphor “new broom” as a “newly appointed person eager to make changes”. The new acquisition, called in to sweep away those responsible of leaks, sees himself as a puppeteer or as a sailor who has to redirect a vessel going adrift, but Castle intends his role more literally: “He wanted to see how far below the table the new broom was liable to sweep” (8), while refusing to open his briefcase for inspection if not asked explicitly to do so. Thus, the latent and patent meanings of the metaphor are explored and unveiled so as to create a short-circuit and a certain comic effect

that ridicules the superiors and makes the reader to take side with Castle.

In a slightly different situation, the polyvalence of words creates a similar comic effect. While exiting clear from the checking, Castle orders the porter to buy three pounds of Maltesers for Colonel Daintry. The porter misinterprets his words and claims: "That would be a hundred and twenty packets or thereabouts", calculating how many packets of them one could buy for such a sum of money. Castle was referring to the weight no to the cost: "'No, no,' Castle said, 'it's not as bad as that. The weight, I think, is what he means'" (9). Here, a single word has two different meanings. The result of Castle's unveiling the pun, once again, is that he demonstrates himself more cunning than his two superiors and more canny than the two porters, who are another example of doubles.

After all, the Maltesers, the cheap chocolates Castle suggests Daintry should buy for the hostess of the shooting party are only sold at ABC: a code name for "Aerated Bread Company", an alternative firm pursuing healthier mass food products, such as yeast-free bread. The unfinished question "what on earth...?" is left to the reader to complete, and adds once again a comic effect to the scene, for Castle is suggesting very low-quality chocolate, almost like Kit Kats, for such an important occasion, something one cannot buy at the prestigious Fortnum & Mason. Again, Castle seems to laugh at the snobbish habits of the British upper class, represented by his superiors. Later on, at the shooting party Daintry clearly perceives "he had been deliberately fooled by that man Castle" (21).

Another example of this use of double meanings in speech is the reference to Castle's child, who is not his own son, but the child his wife had with a black man while they were in South Africa. His colleague and friend Davis always calls the child "the little bastard", and that becomes almost a nickname, or a coded name among them: "Castle said, 'I like my wife.' 'And of course there's the little bastard,' Davis went on. 'I couldn't afford children and port as well.' 'I happen to like the little bastard too'" (5). Later on, in the second chapter, during a private conversation

Sarah asks Castle if he really does not mind the fact that their son is not his own child:

‘It’s strange, isn’t it, your being so fond of Sam.’

‘Of course, I am [...]’

‘There’s no “of course” about it. A little bastard.’

‘That’s what Davis always calls him.’

‘Davis he doesn’t know?’ she asked with fear. ‘Surely he doesn’t know?’

‘No, don’t worry. It’s the word he uses for any child.’ (18)

Once again, the literal meaning of the word “bastard” has shifted to a figurative meaning, almost synonymous with “child”, in the coded language Davis and Castle share. The prejudice about Sam, which is to be found in all Castle’s superiors and in Mr Muller, clashes against Castle’s deep sense of affection towards his son.

A further example of Doublespeak is performed in the use of the verbs “shooting” and “fishing”, apparently two popular sports among the upper classes in England. Sir John Hargreaves, the organizer of the hunting party, specifies that while in Africa he used to go shooting but only with his camera. When his guest Doctor Percival complains that he prefers going fishing, he answers: “Well, you might say we’ve got a bit of fishing on hand now.” The expression “you might say” shows his insistence in using a metaphor. The reason why he invited both Daintry and Percival is that there is a leak in the African section of the Department and he wants to discuss the case with them.

When this case becomes more serious and they have to decide on the innocence or on the culpability of poor Davis, they go on saying: “‘we seem to have a fish on the line.’ – ‘[...] it may be only an old boot.’ ‘I don’t think it is. One gets to know the tug of an old boot’” (120).

When Davis dies, sooner than expected, doubts start to flash in the conscience of cynical Doctor Percival and Sir Hargreaves, who consistently sticks to the fishing metaphor, both as a coded language between them and as a way to remove responsibility as if talking of something else: “It was a pity one couldn’t throw a

man back into the river of life as one could throw a fish” (160) privately thinks Percival while attending the sermon at the funeral. “I can only pray you got the right fish” (163) sadly and impotently concludes Sir Hargreaves.

A moment of comedy is then reached at the wedding of Daintry’s daughter, where Daintry and Castle arrive late and are unable to grasp the groom’s name. By mere guess, Castle goes around saying that his name is Clutters, causing general astonishment for such a strange name, synonymous with ‘stutter’. His real name is in fact Clough. Here, the double meaning is only a matter of misunderstanding, yet it seems that Castle enjoys indulging in his mistake.

This moment of comedy, when Daintry keeps on crashing clumsily all the ceramic owls his ex-wife displays at the wedding party, is interrupted by tragedy: a telephone call announces Davis’ death. It doesn’t take much to Castle to understand that his colleague has been murdered because he was considered a double agent responsible for a leak.

This episode has a follow up, when Daintry, while going back home from the funeral, meets Buffy, a guy he had met at the shooting party, who invites him for a drink. In the bar two more men join them. This interlude has something of Shakespeare’s plots, where lower class characters take the stage to mock and mimic more serious behaviours. Daintry at first does not remember the man’s name, is it Boffin, or Buffer? The inept conversation among them has notes of absurdity: references to maltesers and smarties, weddings and funerals, to the need for confession and to Ian Fleming’s novels are made. All this is meant to postpone the moment when Daintry goes home to his kitchenette and to his tinned sardines, to a lonely man’s lunch, the lunch of a man who is going to resign from office with the only prospect to “exchange one loneliness for another” (169). Thus, as an even sadder ending, when he calls his daughter looking for Mrs Clutter, he gets dismissed with a simple “You’ve got the wrong number” (170).

England vs South Africa

In these contrasted geographies, England is the exact opposite of South Africa. When in the second chapter the narrator takes the reader by the hand from his office to his home, and he introduces his black wife, Sarah, he immediately adds: “Yet no one here minded her African blood. There was no law here to menace their life together. They were secure – or as secure as they would ever be” (14).

In the second part of the novel, then, when Muller arrives in London to visit Castle and Sarah at their place, Castle remembers his words during their first unpleasant meeting: “You are like most Englishmen who come to the Republic, you feel a certain automatic sympathy for black Africans” (95). On that occasion Castle had been accused of breaking the law of apartheid, or to be more precise, the Race Relation Act that prohibited any relationship between whites and blacks. Apartheid banished miscegenation. Years later, Mr Muller still maintains his old racist prejudices claiming that he took Castle:

for one of those high-minded anti-apartheid sentimentalists. [...] I was convinced it was a real love affair. I’ve known so many Englishmen who have started with the idea of attacking apartheid and ended trapped by us in a Bantu girl’s bed. It’s the romantic idea of breaking what they think is an unjust law that attracts them as much as a black bottom. [...] Castle, I’m really glad we are working together and you are not what we in BOSS thought – one of those idealistic types who want to change the nature of human beings (98).

Mr Muller, at this point in his conversation, does not know that by now Castle has been married with Sarah for seven years. Thus, it is a surprise for him to meet her and their son, Sam. Yet, he manages to keep his cold blood and easily adapts to the situation. Muller, who considers himself an African by right, descends from an ostrich farm owner: “My grandfather was what they call now one of the ostrich millionaires – put out of business by the 1914 war” (101). This piece of information provides Muller with a sort of pedigree as a true Afrikaner. Classical South African literature

is rich in examples of narratives set in ostrich farms. Castle once refers to Muller's Reformed Church, alluding to the Dutch Reformed Church, which was openly supportive of apartheid, and to Muller's behaviour as "conformist".

Another juxtaposition between England and South Africa occurs when Castle brings his wife and child to visit his mother in East Sussex. Here, Sarah feels: "like a black guest at an anti-apartheid garden party too fussed over to be at ease" (105). But, about her grandson, Castle's mother is ready to stress that "Sam is English by birth whatever anyone may say. [...] I hope I'm as liberal as your father was, but I would hate to see Sam dragged back to South Africa" (107-108). On her part, Sarah is grateful to Castle's mother, for "she accepts so easily the fact that Sam's your child. Does it ever occur to her that he's very black to have a white father?" and Castle answers: "She doesn't seem to notice shades" (109). These passages show how England is a liberal country, where people live a life free of racial prejudices and are fully devoted to the respect of justice.

Among all the characters, however, Castle is the one who is totally committed to the cause of the blacks, to the point of admitting: "I became a naturalized black when I fell in love with Sarah" (116).

Castle – and, through him, Graham Greene – manages to provide different points of view on South Africa and shows that he knows the history of the country well. Not only the reader learns of Muller's sense of belonging, which is typical of some Boers, but he is also introduced to the figure of Rougemont, a descendant of the Huguenots who fled to South Africa from France and who was not a supporter of apartheid. Nevertheless, he was certainly ready to defend the acres of land (here Greene uses the Afrikaans word "*morgen* of land") he was cultivating by fighting the desert and draught just following the same sense of belonging and ownership. Even among Greene's white South Africans there are various shades of ideologies.

It is Muller's presence in London, however, which takes the situation to its crisis. It needs an American lady to say "I don't like those apartheid buggers" (192) while greeting Muller, but

this sounds ineffective and hypocritical as she is the wife of Mr Hargreaves, now landed from a plane from Washington and deeply involved in the Uncle Remus affair. When she turns to discuss her ignorance in Afrikaner art and literature it emerges that South Africa may have become such an inhumane country because of renouncing its humanism, its literature; Muller, too, dismisses literature as unreliable, for, he says, it mixes up with politics: "There's a poet in prison now for helping terrorists" (192). The year before the publication of this novel Steven Beko a black student activist had died in prison. In 1975 the poet Bryten Brytenbach had been arrested in South Africa and imprisoned; although found innocent in 1977, he was released only in 1982. Greene's novel may probably refer to him.

In *The Human Factor*, chapter one of part four of the novel is dedicated entirely to an exchange between Castle and Muller on the South African situation. Here, roles become clearer and a duel between good and evil looms in the air. Castle is offered news about the Uncle Remus project: the use of atomic weapons against the blacks in case of riots or rebellions. This conspiracy involves the US, England and the South African white government, while Germany has to provide the "latest mining machines" (157) in order to reduce the labour force and to raise the wages of few technically skilled workers, so to create a black middle class. The unemployed, whom Castle is worried about, are to go back to their homelands. And as for apartheid, Muller predicts: "There'll always be a certain apartheid as there is here – between the rich and the poor" (157). This last statement has been proven true after the South African free elections in 1994.

Although much of it is of course fictional, the novel is certainly not the product of mere fantasy, for now and then in South Africa scandals were brought up of agreement on atomic weapons between its white government and foreign powers. From now on, Castle is even more determined than before to work as a double agent for Russia, to do his best to stop this "Final Solution".

The "human factor" of the title, the flaw in the system, is not simply love, the love for a woman and a child. It is also hate, the hate of racism. Castle could pass for a Kaffir-lover, one who

loves the blacks, as it was commonly said in denigration, in the worst years of apartheid. Indeed he does love the blacks, he loves Africa, he loves his wife Sarah and their son Sam. However, it is true that in the text there are not so many straight references to South African historical facts, with the exception of the Soweto massacre (1976). Castle acts more out of his hatred towards Muller. Snyder rightly observes: “Tragedy in *The Human Factor*, then, arises from Castle’s vulnerability to sentiment unsupported by credence or faith in any coherent system of belief.”⁶

In the end, Maurice Castle can be defined as a heroic anti-hero. Or, as Snyder puts it, as a tragic hero. Consistent with his principles and his life, he accomplishes his moral duty all alone and becomes a traitor to his country, to his mother, to his firm. He confesses to his wife to have become a double agent to pay back his debt towards Carson, a communist, who helped her out of South Africa. He finally ends up in Moscow, in the only narrative sequence which can stand up comparison with James Bond’s action films.⁷ In the non-place of a Hotel and airport Castle’s disguised identity makes of him the perfect double: “Everybody in the world, so they say, has a double,” he claims (228).

So far, Castle’s life has been uneventful and certainly not up to his little son’s fantasies about the James Bond type of spy. Castle, not differently from his London colleagues, remains a lonely, isolated figure. Being part of a big “game” he realises in the end to have been played with, as a puppet, by the Soviets, who pursue their own goals. Moreover, it has been noticed that having spent a life in “boxes” he ends up trapped.⁸

6 Snyder, p. 79.

7 On the novel and its film adaption see Paolo Bertinetti, “Philby e il fattore umano”, in *Agenti segreti. I maestri della ‘spy story’ inglese*, (Roma: Edizioni dell’Asino, 2015), pp. 149–162.

8 “One of two metaphors Greene uses to capture this regulatory principle is the trope of the boxes. [...] As Christoph Schöneich has noted, the homologue tropes of box and game interweave throughout *The Human Factor* to suggest the amorality of ‘Spionagetätigkeit’ (286; see also Newman 255–57), a term that denotes not simply espionage as an occupation but all those activities sanctioned under its aegis.” Snyder, p. 78.

In his Russian exile, he conducts a sad life with scarcely any chance to reunite with his family. Firm and self-confident in his plans, he is a stable character all through the novel, ready to acknowledge what good there is in Catholicism and in Communism, without ever embracing neither their ideologies nor their ideologues. Castle is immune from dogmatism but he is victim to the human factor, best explained by the epigraph chosen from Conrad's *Victory* (1915): "I only know that he who forms a tie is lost".

“OUR CAMBRIDGE VILLAINS”: ALAN BENNETT’S DOUBLE AGENTS

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The trouble with treachery nowadays is that if one does want to betray one’s country there is no one satisfactory to betray it to. If there were, more people would be doing it.

(Alan Bennett)

Alan Bennett’s theatrical genius is rooted in his working-class, North-of-England cultural milieu. A first-class degree at Oxford University in the mid-1950s earned him the chance to nurture his early interest in medieval history, a passion he soon left behind to pursue his career as a dramatist. Together with his fellow Oxonian Dudley Moore (b. 1935), Cambridge men Jonathan Miller (b. 1934) and Peter Cook (1937-95), he contributed to revitalizing British stage comedy with the revue called *Beyond the Fringe* (BTF). Their shows comprised “skits, parodies, songs and monologues on subjects including nuclear holocaust, the cold war and capital punishment”.¹ The foursome were extremely active in the newly born Edinburgh Fringe Festival, but they later split up, like the members of the Auden Group in the 1930s and England’s Angry Young Men two decades later. Although Bennett was “the least famous of the four”² and “certainly the quietest and most cryptic of the quartet”,³ he achieved success with his innate talent, combined with hard work and genuine passion. Critic Peter

1 Peter Wolfe, *Understanding Alan Bennett* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1999), p. 2.

2 Jack Kroll, “The Toast of London Town”, *Newsweek*, 21 January 1991, p. 60.

3 Ben Brantley, “Swimming in Irony”, *New York Times Book Review*, 1 October 1995, p. 13.

Wolfe compares him to his predecessors Noël Coward and John Osborne, since like them he has made the theatre “his turf”.⁴

As stage director Richard Eyre has rightly noticed, Bennett is “fascinated by the idea of spying: the idea of being outside a society and at the same time within it”.⁵ This is particularly evident in three of his plays, which form the ‘traitor trilogy’: *The Old Country* (1977), *An Englishman Abroad* and *A Question of Attribution* (1988). All of them were inspired by the figures of the so called ‘Cambridge five’ or the ‘Apostles’, namely Guy Burgess, Donald MacLean, Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross, who betrayed the English to the Soviets in the 1940s and 1950s. They belonged to the British upper class and were recruited during their years at Trinity College, Cambridge, in the 1930s. At that time the conservative governments, first guided by Baldwin and later by Chamberlain, led a policy of appeasement which seemed to ignore (or at least to underestimate) the threat posed by the rise of national socialism. These young Cambridge intellectuals looked at Russia as the only foreign power who could stop Hitler.⁶ They were totally unaware of the pact between Molotov and Ribbentrop, as well as of the 1939 territorial agreements stipulated between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, which remained a state secret for a long time.⁷

This essay will focus on Bennett’s 1988 double bill *Single Spies*, which comprises *An Englishman Abroad* and *A Question*

4 Wolfe, p. 3.

5 Richard Eyre, “Alan Bennett: He makes it easy for you”, *Independent*, 14 November 1999, p. 6.

6 Cesare De Seta, “La spia che venne dall’arte”, *Corriere della Sera*, 24 April 1993, p. 29. In the memoirs Blunt wrote after his real identity was revealed, he speaks about a climate of great excitement and of anti-Nazi conspiracy: “The atmosphere in Cambridge was so intense, the enthusiasm for any anti-fascist activity so great, that I made the biggest mistake of my life”. Twenty-five years after Blunt’s death, in 2009, his memoirs have been made available to the public in the Reading Room of the British Library. See Mariacristina Cavecchi, “Quando il teatro va al museo. Una storia di oggi”, *Altre modernità*, 5 (2011), 26–44 (p. 29). For further insight into the historical background of the period, see Paolo Bertinetti, *Agenti segreti. I maestri della spy story inglese* (Roma: Edizioni dell’asino, 2015), 149–52.

7 Cavecchi, “Quando il teatro va al museo”, p. 28.

of *Attribution* and was earlier adapted for the small screen by the BBC in 1983. The rationale for the choice of these two one-acters is their coherence. In fact, unlike *The Old Country*, whose protagonist Hilary is fictional,⁸ *An Englishman Abroad* is based on the true story of Guy Burgess, while *A Question of Attribution* sheds light on the life of Anthony Blunt. Both these Cambridge spies were homosexual, and both of them were double agents. Moreover, Blunt helped the 1951 London to Moscow flight of Burgess with MacLean. Following Peter Wolfe's 1999 and Joseph O'Mealey's 2001 critical guides, which together with Daphne Turner's 1997 *Alan Bennett: In a Manner of Speaking*, are, as far as I know, the only existing monographs entirely devoted to Bennett's *oeuvre*, I will show that the playwright's sympathy lies more with his traitors than with their hunters. The reason is given by Bennett himself: "they still had illusions. They had somewhere to turn" (xi).

'For he remains an Englishman'

An Englishman Abroad is based on the true story of a chance meeting between the Australian actress Coral Browne and the treasonous English ex-diplomat Guy Burgess. When it was first performed at the Royal National Theatre, London, in 1988, Prunella Scales acted as Coral Browne, while Simon Callow played Guy Burgess's role and Alan Bennett figured as the tailor. The action takes place in Moscow in 1958, seven years after Burgess has fled to the city following the MI6's detection of his treason. It is the period of the 'Thaw' following Stalin's death (1953), and the play begins with a "witty juxtaposition of dour portraits of Marx, Lenin and Stalin with the voice of Jack Buchanan – the English equivalent of Fred Astaire – singing 'Who

8 In his introduction to *Single Spies*, Bennett explains that though Hilary has often been identified with Philby, it was not his intention, "the character having much more in common with a different sort of exile, W. H. Auden", Alan Bennett, *Plays II* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. ix. Further references to this edition will be given in parenthesis in the text.

stole my heart away?”⁹ In this opening scene Bennett satirizes the romanticized view of Communism through the words uttered by Coral Browne, who had “never been a fan of the old boy”. As she ironically puts it, “It wasn’t so much the cult of personality that put me off [...] it was the moustache” (277).

When the play begins, Burgess’s unmasking is a dead issue, and he has ceased to be a news item in either London or Moscow. The notoriety of this man in his early fifties has faded with his handsomeness, and he is now “running to seed” (278). He is shabby, smelly and drinks heavily. While in the period that followed his arrival in Moscow he was under the strict surveillance of the Kremlin’s top intelligence, now he is only watched by a young apprentice. His identity is often linked to Maclean, the other double agent with whom he flew to Moscow, but he does not like this connection and consequently tries to avoid him, although he is desperate to speak English with a compatriot. His Russian exile is drab and desolate, since “there’s no one in Moscow at all. It’s like staying up in Cambridge for the Long Vac” (279). For this reason he particularly welcomes the company of Coral Browne, who is in Russia with the Stratford Memorial Theatre Group for a performance of *Hamlet*. Their first meeting is very awkward, as after drinking heavily, Burgess is caught vomiting in Michael Redgrave’s dressing room. He nevertheless invites Coral to lunch in his flat the following day.

Burgess’s untidy retreat is very basic, and it is crammed with (English) books and papers. When he welcomes Coral, his unceremonious manners immediately set her at ease. However, she surprisedly notices that her grungy new acquaintance has stolen soap, cigarettes, whiskey and face powder from her changing room. Burgess’s politeness when he asks for her forgiveness contrasts with his larceny, betraying his natural gentlemanliness beyond the facade: “One wasn’t well [...] One should have asked [...] One is such a coward” (281). He defines himself a “gentleman of leisure”, is a former student

9 Joseph O’Mealey, “Spies and Writers: Burgess, Blunt, Kafka and Proust”, in J. O’Mealey, *Alan Bennett: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 55–84 (p. 39).

of Eton and Cambridge and enjoys reading classics such as Sterne, Browning, Austen and Trollope. What this charming exile, who comically survives on garlic and tomato, misses most about home, is not so much his Jermyn Street commodious apartment in London, but mainly gossip. He asks Coral if she has ventured to see people from his entourage that she has never heard of, such as Labour politician Harold Nicolson, literary critic Cyril Connolly or art historian Pope Hennessy. In his fond memories of London, "one somehow remembers everyone knowing everyone else" (283).

This traitor is also sentimental and nostalgic. He tells the Russian equivalent of *Où sont les neiges d'antan?* ("Where are the snows of yesteryear?", 286), referring to the fading of time and to his lost chances.¹⁰ He then tells Coral, "I can say I love London. I can say I love England. But I can't say I love my country. I don't know what that means" (291-92). As Wolfe explains, "it probably refers to his discontent with postcolonial Britain's dependence on the United States in the decade after World War II, with Britain's huge, spongy espionage industry, and with the country's dullness – neither the discovery of North Sea oil nor the Beatles-induced Carnaby Street fashion revolution having yet occurred".¹¹ Despite his political beliefs (he has always been a Marxist), he is rather disillusioned with the USSR, calling the 'pigsty' where he lives and complaining about the poor quality of Russian clothing, dentistry and conversation. When asked for the reason of his betrayal, he simply answers: "It seemed the right thing to do at the time. And solitude [...] If you have a secret you're alone" (293).

Coral Browne is fascinated by Burgess and speaks about his "Bags of charm". As an Australian actress and an outsider to the English system of upper-class male privilege, she is the ideal intermediary between Burgess and the audience, and she plays the same role of the go-between with the London haberdasher Burgess asks her to contact for a tailor-made suit. He is willing to

10 In his conversation with Coral Browne he even muses "What would have happened had one gone into the theatre?" (284).

11 Wolfe, p. 143.

recover some of his bygone English elegance, asserting that he does not “want to look like everybody else” (286). Bennett has written for Coral a long speech that emphasizes both her role as an outsider and her strong personality:

Listen, darling. I'm only an actress. Not a bright lady, by your standards. I've never taken much interest in politics. If this is communism, I don't like it because it's dull. And the poor dears look tired. But then Australia is dull and that's not communism. And look at Leeds. Only it occurs to me we have sat here all afternoon pretending that spying, which is what you did, darling, was just a minor social misdemeanour, no worse – and I'm sure in some people's minds much better – than being caught in a public lavatory the way gentlemen in my profession constantly are, and that it's just something one shouldn't mention. Out of politeness. So that we won't be embarrassed. That's very English. We will pretend it hasn't happened, because we are both civilized people. Well, I'm not English. And I'm not civilised. I'm Australian. I can't muster much morality and outside Shakespeare the word treason to me means nothing. Only, you pissed in our soup and we drank it. Very good. Doesn't affect me, darling. And I will order your suit ... And keep it under mine. Mum. Not a word. But for one reason and one reason only: because I'm sorry for you ... But you're not conning me, darling. Pipe isn't fooling pussy. *I know* (292).

The quintessential English need to appear civilized and conceal emotions, such as moral disapproval or shock, does not belong to Coral's frame of mind. The tailor she goes to in London lets her understand that he will not give way to indiscretions about his customer, to whom he refers benignly as “One of our more colourful customers [...] Always getting into such scrapes, Mr. Guy” (296). However, when Coral goes shopping at Burgess' request for “four pyjamas”, she encounters a clothier who is not as discreet as the tailor. Initially the shop Manager simply says: “I'm afraid this gentleman no longer has an account with us, madam.” When Coral tries to persuade him to open it again, he does not change position and explains that “the gentleman is a traitor”. At this point Coral's reaction is of outrage at the hypocrisy shown by her interlocutor, who did not look down on Burgess when he was only a notorious drunkard and homo-

sexual.¹² Her indignation turns into embarrassed surprise when after her climactic line "Thank Christ I'm not English", she is told that the firm is not English but Hungarian. This should call to mind the ruthless Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, two years before the play unfolds, when Russian tanks and troops occupied Budapest killing 60,000 people in order to repress an anti-Communist upheaval. The salesclerk's revelation appeases Coral's rage. The implications of Burgess's siding with a brutal regime, even if he himself did none of the actual killing, cannot be ignored,¹³ and Coral does not excuse his misconduct, even though she shows some understanding.

A minor character who deserves a brief commentary is Burgess's Russian boyfriend Tolya. He plays a very marginal role in a scene where he is introduced to Coral and utters a few words in English. He is fascinated by a packet of English cigarettes and by Coral's lighter, which he flicks on and off as he had never seen one. He then asks Burgess to play Coral a tune, so the couple embarks on the duet "Take a pair of sparkling eyes" from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondolier*, a popular satire on class division in British society. Tolya is a tender lover, no matter that he is a policeman watching Burgess. The English spy corrects Coral's comparison of him to Oscar Wilde – both homosexuals, "both exiled for crimes against the society that once pampered them."¹⁴ He insists that it is too easy an identification, too sentimental: "Though he was a performer. And I was a performer. Both vain. But I never pretended. If I wore a mask it was to be exactly what I seemed" (291). Wilde denied his sexual behaviour in all three of his court trials, whereas Burgess never concealed his anti-establishment views. His saving grace was that he was a gentleman,

12 "And perhaps if you'd be gracious enough to lower your trousers, Mr Burgess, we could be privileged enough to thrust our tongue between the cheeks of your arse. But not any more. Oh no. Because the gentleman in question has shown himself to have some principles" (298).

13 O'Mealey explains that in the National Theatre production, Bennett made sure the connection with the Hungarian uprising was clear by having Coral add, "Oh, I said, and thinking of the tanks going into Budapest a year or two before, wished I hadn't made such a fuss" (298–99).

14 O'Mealey, p. 41.

“a real agent”/ “gent”, and he cleverly followed the rule that “If you don’t wish to conform in one thing, you should conform in all the others” (288).

Burgess is last seen looking “the picture of an upper-class gentleman”, now in his smart new suit, overcoat and “Homburg hat” (299). To further emphasize his elegance, he is accompanied on the pianola as he sings Gilbert and Sullivan’s “For he is an Englishman” from *HMS Pinafore*. But this is not the play’s end. Bennett masterly projects the action forward, when Coral refers to the 1983 television production of the play, recounting that a Foreign Office minister told her that Burgess could probably have returned to the UK to visit his elderly mother in her sickbed without being charged with treason. This is because “In England, you see, age wipes the slate clean” (299). Bennett closes his “Brechtian drama of alienation”¹⁵ with a sympathetic gaze towards Burgess. As he explains in his introduction to the play, in fact, while the Communist mole Philby with his divulences to the Kremlin sent British troops to “torture and death”, Burgess only made “fools of people in high places” with his “silly” indiscretions (x). At least, Bennett seems to conclude, this traitor was risking his own skin, not someone else’s.

The Enigma of Espionage

A Question of Attribution is based on the real figure of Anthony Blunt, one of Britain’s greatest art historians, Director of the Courtauld Institute, Surveyor of the King’s (later Queen’s) Pictures and a famous expert on Poussin. Under this prestigious cover, he helped the 1951 London to Moscow flight of Burgess and Maclean. As a double agent he served both MI5 and KGB, but although his treachery was discovered in 1964, he was granted immunity on the condition that he would collaborate in the identification of other spies of the same circle. However, in 1979 journalist Andrew Boyle published a book on the ‘fourth man’

15 Wolfe, p. 141.

of the Cambridge five, *The Climate of Treason*.¹⁶ Even though he used the pseudonym 'Maurice', his publication led Margaret Thatcher to denounce Blunt's treachery, causing a great international scandal.¹⁷ The traitor's unmasking offered prolific inspiration to many writers, including Miranda Carter with her biography *Anthony Blunt: His Lives* (2002) and John Banville with his successful fiction *The Untouchable* (1997). Moreover, the publication of *The Crown Jewels: the British Secrets at the Heart of the KGB Archives* (1999) contributed to shedding further light on the case.

In his enlightening article "The Cleric of Treason", George Steiner questions himself and his readers about the reasons which might have compelled Blunt to his treachery, advancing the hypothesis that he betrayed his country in order not to betray his ideals as an art historian. The English scholar, in fact, believed that great works of art could not survive the fragmentary, anarchic administration of private institutions. He advocated the need for an authoritarian yet 'enlightened' state, which could promote art as a way of improving life conditions for the whole of society. As a consequence, he looked sympathetically at the Leninist art commission, because it allowed Soviet citizens to enjoy artistic masterpieces in public galleries. As Steiner had it, "No scholars, no men and women wanting to mend their souls before a Raphael or a Matisse need wait, cap in hand, at the mansion door".¹⁸

Set in England in the 1960s, *A Question of Attribution* stages the last hours before Anthony Blunt's arrest, when he has already confessed his spying for the KGB, and collaborating with the fictional investigator Chubb, he is preparing to leave the scene in great style. This intriguing "enquiry in which the circumstances are imaginary but the pictures are real", is concerned with two emblematic paintings or puzzle pictures, Titian's *Allegory of Pru-*

16 The American edition was titled *The Fourth Man*.

17 Barrie Penrose, and Simon Freeman, *Conspiracy of Silence. The Secret Life of Anthony Blunt* (London: Grafton, 1986), pp. 540–42.

18 Steiner, George, "The Cleric of Treason", *New Yorker*, 8 December 1980, p. 158.

dence¹⁹ (Figure 1) in the National Gallery and the *Triple Portrait*²⁰ (Figure 2), also attributed to Titian, which is included in the Queen's collection.²¹

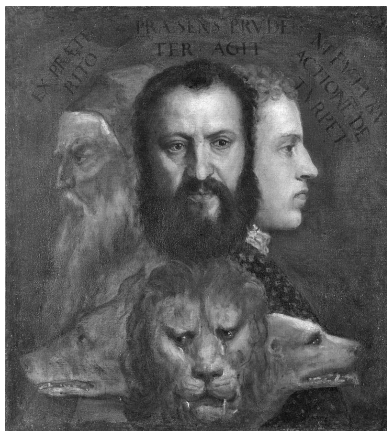


Fig. 1 Titian, *Allegory of Prudence*, 1565–1570, The National Gallery of London.

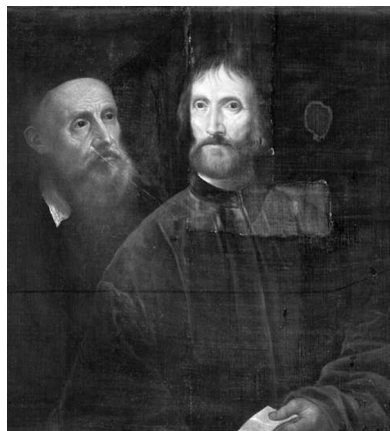


Fig. 2 The *Triple Portrait* before cleaning: *Titian and a Venetian Senator*, cca. 1562, Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art.

The title of Bennett's comedy and the issue of connoisseurship play on the spy's double life, laying emphasis on the ambiguity of both art and of human behaviour. Blunt's identification as

19 Titian, *Allegory of Prudence* (oil on canvas, painted between 1560 and 1570); National Gallery of London.

20 Titian, *Triple Portrait* (1562); Hampton Court Palace. See figures 1 and 2.

21 Bennett says he is indebted to two articles in which these paintings are discussed, "Titian's *Allegory of Prudence*" by Erwin Panofsky (1955) and "Five Portraits" by St John Gore (1958). In a note on the paintings he adds: "Should anyone be interested enough to compare the actual paintings they would be in some difficulty as at the moment the *Triple Portrait* (which has recently been re-titled *Titian and Friends*) cannot be seen. It used to hang at Hampton Court but since the 1986 fire it has not been on public view. Indeed, I have not seen it myself, knowing it only from the photographs which illustrate Mr St John Gore's article. There is a certain appropriateness about this, though, as one of the criticisms made of Anthony Blunt as an art historian was that he preferred to work from photographs rather than the real thing" (p. 303).

the 'fourth man' of the Cambridge group runs parallel with his surprising discovery of the 'third man' in the *Triple Portrait*, followed by a fourth and a fifth figure, that surfaced on the canvas after an accurate cleaning combined with X-rays (Figure 3).



Fig. 3 The *Triple Portrait* after cleaning: Titian and Friends, Royal Collection Enterprises.

Bennett's subtle irony is particularly evident in the conversations between the snobbish aesthete Blunt and his parodic alter ego Chubb, a British intelligence officer. Both of them are after "fakes and forgery" (345), belonging not only to art history but to human History in a wider sense.²² Chubb's weekly meetings with Blunt at the Courtauld Institute have made him so keen on questions of iconology that he wanders alone in the British Museum or spends time admiring the paintings of the 'Old Masters' at the National Gallery. His genuine passion compels the art historian to comment: "One hopes the security of the nation is not being neglected in favour of your studies in iconography" (325). Chubb is used to questioning suspects for his investigations, yet he learns from Blunt that even paintings in art galleries can hide secrets of difficult interpretation, because art is often deceitful and "there isn't a hang of it" (325). Perhaps the most intriguing issue they

22 Cavecchi, "Quando il teatro va al museo". p. 26.

tackle is the meaning of the *Allegory of Prudence*. The central figure, who has been identified as Titian's son Orazio Vercelli, closely resembles the 'third man' discovered standing to the side in the *Triple Portrait* (Figure 4).



Fig. 4 Details from the *Allegory of Prudence* and *Triple Portrait*.

This figure represents maturity, while the other two stand for youth and old age. Erwin Panofsky respectively calls these allegories “memory, intelligence and foresight, and the latter’s subordination to the concept of prudence.”²³ The painting’s ‘motto’ according to Panofsky, says Wolfe, is this: “From the [experience of the] past, the present acts prudently, lest it spoil future action”.²⁴ This easily applies to Blunt, whose imminent arrest in his ripe age has deprived him of time and opportunities.

23 Erwin Panofsky, “Titian’s Allegory of Prudence”, *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Papers in and on Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955) 147–68, p. 149.

24 Wolfe, p. 151.

As has been said, the conversations between Blunt and Chubb centre on a double investigation, one pertaining to the enigma of Titian's 'third man' and the other about the art historian's double life as a traitor. A similarly sagacious exchange also occurs between Blunt and the Queen,²⁵ who is eager to know whether in her collection there are fakes and forgeries or misattributed paintings. Bennett's Queen is not an expert in art history, but her acumen and shrewdness make the comedy hilariously entertaining. She subtly alludes to the art historian's false identity, compelling him to comment after their meeting at Buckingham Palace: "I was talking about art. I'm not sure that she was" (346). Holding the belief that fakes should not be worthy of scholarly attention, HMQ refers to one of the most famous forgers of all times, the Dutch painter Van Meegeren,²⁶ whose fakes were mistakenly attributed to Vermeer, emphasizing that he was guilty of forgery. Blunt disagrees with her, as he believes it more appropriate to speak about an "enigma" rather than a "fake" (344). In a lesson he previously taught at the Courtauld Institute, he explained that paintings are documents which should be considered in their cultural and historical context. He maintains that works of art often deceive us because they are not what they seem to be. As he says. "The question doesn't pose itself in the form, 'Is it a fake?' so much as 'Who painted this picture and why?' Is it a Titian, or a pupil of Titian? Is it someone who paints like Titian because he admires him and can't help painting in the same way?" (342). Bennett's protagonist adds that "paintings make no claims" (342), whereas art historians, following cues like detectives, attach a certain meaning to artworks and sometimes are even responsible for creating an artist's identity. *À propos* of this, Blunt refers to one of the leading connoisseurs of Renaissance art, Bernard Berenson, who, falsely attributing paintings, contributed to creating the myth of "Amico di Sandro", supposedly a friend and imitator of Sandro Botticelli's. This false attribution

25 In the 1998 performance at the National Theatre, Prunella Scales's performance as the Queen made the play memorable.

26 The painter confessed his activity as a forger in a 1947 public trial.

was a devastating discovery for the American collector who had made huge investments on a non-existing artist.

HMQ is perfectly aware of Blunt's double identity. She does not want to expose him, but he was promised immunity, not anonymity. When Blunt confesses he has never had his portrait painted, she ironically replies: "So we don't know whether you have a *secret self*" (340, emphasis added), suggesting that portraits should bring to light one's inner soul.²⁷ She similarly disguises her considerations about Blunt's identity behind the following disquisition:

HMQ: I suppose too the context of the painting matters. Its history and provenance (is that the word) confer on it a certain respectability. This can't be a forgery, it's in such and such a collection, its background and pedigree are impeccable – besides, it has been vetted by the experts. Isn't that how the argument goes? So if one comes across a painting with the right background and pedigree, Sir Anthony, then it must be hard, I imagine – even unconceivable – to think that it is not what it claims to be. And even supposing someone in such circumstances did have the suspicions, they would be chary about voicing them. Easier to leave things as they are in every department. Stick to the official attribution rather than let the cat out of the bag and say, 'Here we have a fake' (344).

Blunt asserts that the word "enigma" is more appropriate than "fake", and he believes that "A great painting will still elude us, as art will always elude exposition" (348). It is not an accident that the comedy closes leaving unsolved both the mystery regarding Titian's paintings and Blunt's life. When Chubb presents him with pictures of other spies to identify, Blunt leaves the audience with an open question: "Who are they all? I don't know that it matters. Behind them lurk other presences, other hands. A whole gallery of possibilities. The real Titian an Allegory of Prudence. The false an Allegory of Supposition. It is never-ending" (348). In this way, Bennett masterly closes a play which makes "most

27 HMQ: "Portraits are supposed to be frightfully self-revealing, aren't they, good ones? Show what one's really like. The secret self" (339).

other spy dramas look clumsy and mean spirited."²⁸ Although Blunt does not offer any explicit reason for his espionage rather than "the right thing to do at the time" (133), Bennett's decision to play the protagonist's role in the 1998 stage version confirms his sympathetic attitude towards him and his colleague Burgess. The playwright's considerations in his preface to the double bill leave his readers and the audience with food for thought:

It suits governments to make treachery the crime of crimes, but the world is smaller than it was and to conceal information can be as culpable as to betray it. As I write evidence is emerging of a nuclear accident at Windscale in 1957, the full extent of which was hidden from the public. Were the politicians and civil servants responsible for this less culpable than our Cambridge villains? (x)

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CRIMINAL MINDS: REPRESENTING VILLAINS IN WILLIAM SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S *ASHENDEN*

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Espionage is very old business. It is probably the world's oldest profession after the notorious one which does not need to be mentioned, as Bertinetti ironically claims in the incipit of his history of British spy literature.¹ However, it became the subject of fiction only at the end of the nineteenth century. Before that time it was impossible to think of spies as positive protagonists of literary works, since espionage involved a morally questionable behaviour and despicable practices, such as lying, betraying, disguising. Spies were transformed into heroes in English literature only when intelligence work became indispensable in modern warfare and the agents sided patriotically with the right faction, Britain. Their official employment rose out of the necessity for the British government to face the changing balance of power in the European political arena (for example the creation of new states such as Italy and Germany, respectively in 1861 and 1871) and control the technological and military advances of other powers racing for new territories overseas. The need to acquire confidential information was overtly declared in 1873 by Secretary of State for War Edward Cardwell in a parliamentary speech. Ten years later the Intelligence Department of the army was established and in 1891 the Official Secrets Act was passed, the first bill to regulate espionage. Among the main rivals of British colonial expansion were France and Russia. It is no accident that they both appear in the first fictional work centred on espionage, William Le Queux's *The Great War in England in 1897* (1894),

1 Paolo Bertinetti, *I maestri della spy story inglese* (Roma: Edizioni dell'asino, 2015), p. 9.

in which the author narrates the imminent invasion of Great Britain by France supported by Russia.² The essential ingredients of spy fiction include: a major threat to the survival of Britain as an independent state; ‘spies’ from enemy countries, namely villains; and ‘secret agents’, that is, British refined gentlemen, not belonging to military or security bodies, lending themselves to espionage for patriotic reasons. As Rosie White synthesises: “The spy embodies fears that national identity is under threat and that in order to maintain the status quo, clandestine activities normally considered illegal or invasive must be endorsed”.³

The idea of espionage suggested by the first works of the genre is romantic and adventurous: a fantastic version of reality. This is why in his history of spy fiction John Atkins chooses Erskine Childers’ *The Riddle of the Sands: A Record of Secret Service* (1903) as “the first of the spy novels not because it was the first chronologically to take espionage as its subject but because it was the first to do so seriously and plausibly.”⁴ Here the enemy is Germany, seen as Britain’s trade rival of the present and naval rival of the future. The book was inspired by a real cruise Childers took in German waters and is full of technical details and concrete references. The protagonist Davies, an expert yachtsman, sails to the islands off the German North Sea coast with his friend Carruthers. He will later reveal that he planned the cruise in order to explore all the channels between and around the islands in search of possible bases of the German navy and feasible starting points for a German invasion of Great Britain. The idea came to Davies because of the activities of a British Captain Dollmann, whom Davies supposes to be a spy of the Germans and traitor, a fact which eventually turns out to be untrue. Childers’ work greatly influenced the public opinion on the necessity for Britain to create naval bases in the North Sea and a North Sea fleet. An interesting point made by Atkins on the book is the question of the point of view. In fact, in the end, “who was the spy,

2 Bertinetti, pp. 12–3.

3 Rosie White, *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 1.

4 John Atkins, *The British Spy Novel* (London: John Calder, 1984), p. 25.

Dollmann or Davies?”, wonders Atkins:⁵ in other words, “Who was the villain?”. When the novel was written, the overwhelming conviction was still that spying was “dirty work and was only indulged in by scoundrels”.⁶ Davies and Carruthers were however absolved since their investigations represented “patriotic spying not professional”.⁷

In the first two decades of the twentieth century British spies in fiction were basically amateur agents and patriots, and despite their involvement in questionable affairs, they were always pictured as gentlemen. The narrative focus was on adventure and action. Somerset Maugham changed all that. In his *Ashenden, or the British Agent* (1928) espionage is depicted for the first time as an ordinary job, marked by routine, lack of glamour, even boredom. The volume also brings in the moral dilemmas encountered in this profession. It is “a realistically based spy story” and can be considered as “a critique of melodramatic espionage fiction”.⁸ *Ashenden* is a collection of sixteen short stories (some of which interconnected) centred around the same professional agent and could also be seen as an episodic novel. The eponymous protagonist is actually Maugham’s *alter ego* and his stories are based on the author’s real experience in the British Intelligence Department during the First World War. Maugham’s headquarters were in Geneva, Switzerland, where he lived in a hotel ostensibly writing plays. His first assignment was to investigate an Englishman living in Lucerne with his German wife, an incident he uses in “The Traitor”. In 1917 he was sent to Petrograd to report on the situation in the early days of the Revolution. He had to send back his coded dispatches through the Embassy, using a cypher that was not known by the embassy officials. This period inspires the last six stories of the collection, dealing with the personal lives and foibles

5 Atkins, p. 24.

6 Ibid.

7 Atkins, p. 25.

8 Jeanne F. Bedell, “Somerset Maugham’s *Ashenden* and the Modernization of Espionage Fiction”, *Studies in Popular Culture*, 7 (1984), 40–46 (p. 40, both quotations).

of the American and British ambassadors in Russia (“Behind the Scenes” and “His Excellency”); the moral dilemma posed by a useful but violent scheme, which implies the death of innocent civilians (“The Flip of a Coin”); Ashenden’s love affair with the daughter of a Russian revolutionary (“Love and Russian Literature”); and the tragi-comic story of an American idealistic tradesman in Russia (“A Chance Acquaintance” and “Mr Harrington’s Washing”). Atkins points out the high degree of authenticity of Ashenden’s stories suggesting that Maugham anticipated the works of Ambler, Greene and le Carré, “in other words, the three writers who surpass all others for their fidelity to the world of espionage”.⁹ He also reports le Carré’s comment that Maugham was the first person “to write about espionage in a mood of disenchantment and almost prosaic reality”. Curtis underlines that fourteen further stories relating to this period were never published and Maugham had to burn the manuscript containing them for fear of infringing the Official Secrets Act.¹⁰ The life of Ashenden is that of a senior clerk: he recruits agents, organises and controls their work, collects information from them, and pays them wages. He has regular meetings with his boss, a colonel known in the Intelligence Department as “R.”, to receive orders and transmit the collected information. He sometimes goes on missions himself. He is sent to Russia, as explained before. In “The Hairless Mexican”, “The Dark Woman”, and “The Greek” he is in Naples, to supervise the work of General Manuel Carmona, also known as the “Hairless Mexican”, a recruited agent whose task is to subtract some important documents to a Greek man, Constantine Andreadi, working for the Germans and travelling through Italy. Since the documents must be taken at all costs, Carmona is necessarily turned into a killer.

An important detail in the volume, which also reflects the author’s biography, is Ashenden’s official job. He is a writer, a profession particularly suitable to the spying business because

9 Atkins, p. 164.

10 Anthony Curtis, *Somerset Maugham* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 95.

it provides “excellent cover; on the pretext that he was writing a book he could without attracting attention visit any neutral country.”¹¹ Beside signalling Ashenden’s role as Maugham’s mask or *alter ego*, this particular appears as a reminder of the affinity between espionage and fiction writing. Rosie White has pointed out that “the operations of secret agents and secret agencies are, by definition, clandestine, uncharted and unseen and, therefore, unverifiable. Spying in this way lends itself to fiction in its creation of cover stories, false identities and conspiracy theories.”¹² Atkins, using the distinction between “hard” and “soft” sources of intelligence given by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (the former including “aerial and space reconnaissance”, and electronic “eavesdropping”; the latter referring to the “spy trade” of the secret agent), maintains that the latter only is a suitable subject for fiction because it is speculative, difficult to prove and provides the drama needed.¹³ While underscoring the suitability of espionage as a subject for fiction, White and Atkins also seem to suggest that intelligence work and fiction writing share many common points, in that they imply a set of similar attitudes which we find repeatedly applied in the Ashenden narratives. Both agent and writer must collect information and data, make sense of them, and arrange them in a feasible ‘plot’ (in the double sense of conspiracy and story). Systematic observation is the basis in both activities. Fabrication is essential in espionage and writing: agent and writer need to put on a mask and be under cover. Moreover, they need to identify with another person or character in order to understand their personality and act consequently. Waiting is also a necessary modality in both professions: waiting for the development of a certain case or an enemy’s false move as well as waiting for inspiration to come or an idea to grow. As Bedell points out, *Ashenden* is “an implicit commentary on the relationship

11 W. Somerset Maugham, *Ashenden or the British Agent* (London: Mandarin, 1991 [1928]), p. 2. Further page numbers from the novel are given in parenthesis in the text.

12 White, p. 1.

13 Atkins, p. 9.

between the spy and the novelist which sees both as the creators of fictions.”¹⁴ Numerous examples are offered in the narrative.

In “Gustav” Ashenden finds out that the reports from Germany of one of his best agents are, in fact, works of fiction. Gustav is a Swiss man living in Basle and representing a Swiss firm with branches at Frankfurt, Mannheim and Cologne. By virtue of his business he is able to go in and out of Germany without risk. His reports are so perfect that they are taken as models for all agents. However, something in Gustav’s letters arouses colonel R.’s suspicion and he sends Ashenden to check personally. He finds out that Gustav’s latest report (as well as many previous ones) has been comfortably written from his flat in Basle. Gustav’s firm stopped sending him to Germany at the beginning of the war, but he did not want to lose the extra salary of the secret agency, so he invented his reports, drawing from German papers and keeping his ears open in public places. In “The Dark Woman” Manuel Carmona, better known as the “hairless Mexican”, shows his gift as a story-teller:

He began telling Ashenden of the vast territories, the *haciendas* and the mines in Mexico of which he had been dispossessed. He told him of the feudal state in which he lived. It did not matter whether what he said was true or not, for those sonorous phrases of his were fruity with the rich-distilled perfumes of romance. (77)

Carmona’s main story is a passionate love affair with a woman who cajoles him into revealing all the details of a plot against the government. Once he is sure she is a spy, he cuts her throat after making love to her. In this situation, Carmona proves to be an efficient cold-hearted agent. Things go differently when he is working for Ashenden, but his inclination to create fictions remains. He not only assumes a new identity and disguise to carry on his mission (he pretends he is a Spanish businessman dealing in war material and wears a black, close-cropped wig). He also ends up turning his victim into a fictional character. Since there was only one Greek passenger on the ship from Piraeus to Brindisi, a Mr

14 Bedell, p. 40.

Lombardos, Carmona has no doubts he must be Constantine Andreadi under false name. General Carmona arbitrarily attributes him a series of intentions, thoughts, and meanings that are just the fruit of his own imagination. In reality, Mr Lombardos is a Greek tradesman travelling across Italy on his way to Paris for a deserved holiday, but all his actions are interpreted by Carmona as if he was agent Andreadi. When Lombardos goes to the barber's soon after landing in Brindisi, Carmona sees it as a strategy to change his appearance (90). Lombardos' explanation of his trip to Paris is defined as a well-constructed memorised story (91). While Carmona is speaking about his (invented) business in war material, he notices Lombardos's interest and takes it as a further sign of his role of under-cover agent. Observing the Greek man's gestures, Carmona assumes that he must keep the confidential papers in his belt or in the lining of his vest. But Lombardos has only taken the precaution of hiding some money. The Mexican constructs his supposed agent so well that he ends up killing the wrong man. Only at the very end, a coded telegram unveils to Ashenden that Andreadi never went on board: he had been detained by illness at Piraeus. Another overlapping of spying and fiction writing is evident in "The Traitor". Ashenden has been sent to Lucerne to investigate Grantley Caypor, an Englishman in the service of the Germans. On this mission he pretends to be Mr Somerville (183), a clerk in the British Censorship Department, who has recently recovered from an attack of typhoid and has come to Lucerne to get back his strength and brush up his rusty German (172). His job will draw Caypor's attention and lead him like a mouse into a trap. The description that Ashenden provides of himself under cover is that of a character in a piece of fiction, in this case the product of colonel R.'s imagination:

He was travelling with a brand-new passport in his pocket, under a borrowed name, and this gave him an agreeable sense of owning a new personality. He was often slightly tired of himself and it diverted him for a while to be merely a creature of R.'s facile invention. (171)

In "Giulia Lazzari", the British intelligence is pursuing a dangerous Indian terrorist, Chandra Lal. Ashenden's assignment is to

draw him across the border from neutral Switzerland into French territory, where the police will be able to arrest him. When R. explains the case to Ashenden, he applies to his imagination as a novelist rather than his ability as an agent. Quite cynically, R., with Ashenden's connivance, will force Lal's lover Giulia Lazzari to barter her freedom for Lal's. The colonel's first action is to show Ashenden Lal's love letters to the woman: "Look, here are his love-letters. You're a novelist, it might amuse you to read them. In fact you should read them, it will help you to deal with the situation. Take them with you" (120). Writing does enter, and not only metaphorically, into the mission. Ashenden will supervise the composition of Lazzari's answers to Lal, achieving the "construction of a fictional situation accompanied by suitably emotional expression", in Bedell's words.¹⁵ By playing on Lal's feelings, Ashenden succeeds in luring the Indian into the trap. Lal will commit suicide soon after being arrested.

Espionage is not only a suitable subject for fiction but allows real people to assume multiple identities and become fictional characters for a while. However, as underlined in the first story "R.", fiction surpasses reality, insofar as it can anticipate events and produce a range of infinite possibilities. On their very first encounter, in order to convince Ashenden to work for him, colonel R. defines espionage as a good source of raw material for writing and tells him of a real incident occurred to a French minister, seduced by a charming lady who drugged him and stole his dispatch-case containing documents of great political importance. Ashenden is disappointed:

'Dramatic, isn't it?' he asked.

'Do you mean to say that happened the other day?'

'The week before last.'

'Impossible,' cried Ashenden. 'Why, we've been putting that incident on the stage for sixty years, we've written it in a thousand novels. Do you mean to say that life has only just caught up with us?'

R. was a trifle disconcerted.

15 Bedell, p. 43.

‘Well, if necessary, I could give you names and dates, and believe me, the Allies have been put to no end of trouble by the loss of the documents that the dispatch-case contained.’

‘Well, sir, if you can’t do better than that in the secret service,’ sighed Ashenden, ‘I’m afraid that as a source of inspiration to the writer of fiction it’s a washout. We really *can’t* write that story much longer.’ (3-4)

The overlapping of spying and fiction writing also influences Ashenden’s approach to villains. His attitude towards them is never judgemental or moralistic but rather a mix of human curiosity, intellectual interest and professional duty. Ashenden places himself at the right distance that allows him to analyse their reasons, achieve understanding rather than sympathy and, sometimes, also fall into a state of secret fascination. In “Giulia Lazzari”, he definitely feels admiration for the Indian terrorist Chandra Lal and ends up despising his lover, the eponymous character who betrays him. Lal, a lawyer by profession, was a dangerous agitator, bitterly hostile to the British rule in India. He had been responsible for numerous violent riots, arrested and already imprisoned. At the beginning of the First World War he fomented active rebellion subsidised by the Germans, with the aim of keeping the British army busy in India and preventing reinforcement to the seat of war. But the invincible Lal becomes vulnerable after falling in love with the Italian third-rate dancer and prostitute Giulia. Ashenden seems to be reluctant to accept his assignment, because he can see reality from the point of view of the villain. This includes even an anticolonial attitude, which depicts Lal as a patriot fighting for his country, as appears in this exchange between Ashenden and R. (the initials A. and R. have been added):

A.: ‘That Indian fellow must be a rather remarkable chap,’ he said.

R.: ‘He’s got brains, of course.’

A.: ‘One can’t help being impressed by a man who had the courage to take on almost single-handed the whole British power in India.’

R.: ‘I wouldn’t get sentimental about him if I were you. He’s nothing but a dangerous criminal.’

A.: ‘I don’t suppose he’d use bombs if he could command a few batteries and half a dozen battalions. He uses what weapons he can.’

You can hardly blame him for that. After all, he's aiming at nothing for himself, is he? He's aiming at freedom for his country. On the face of it it looks as though he were justified in his actions.'

But R. had no notion of what Ashenden was talking. (129)

Ashenden's 'heroic construction' of Lal is carried out despite the dry aseptic style of the intelligence report about his crimes: "All this was narrated dryly, without comment or explanation, but from the very frigidity of the narrative you got a sense of mystery and adventure, of hairbreadth escapes and dangers dangerously encountered" (119). Giulia Lazzari's tragic dilemma, on the other hand, is gradually demolished throughout the story. At first Ashenden recognises the genuineness of her love for Chandra. However, the stress on her mercenary past – her job as performer of Spanish dances is described as a "means to enhance her value as a prostitute" (121) –, her inclination to sell herself in exchange of favours, and the melodramatic representation of her grief, full of emphatic gestures and verbal reactions, erode the credibility of the character in a crescendo that reaches its apex with her mean request concluding the story: on learning about her lover's suicide, she coldly asks to have back the twelve-pound wristwatch she gave Lal at Christmas (160).

Even Grantley Caypor in "The Traitor" – the most villainous villain in the collection because he betrays his own country, Britain – does not appear as a dangerous criminal but is largely depicted in his 'normality'. He is an extroverted man, with a "frank, jovial red face" (176) and an exuberant vitality (175). His love for his German wife is sincere and deep. His attachment to their bull-terrier Fritz, their "only child" (183), is tender and even childish. The scene of the dog's bath in the hotel's bathroom – Caypor soaping the "wretched hound" (197) and telling silly things to keep the pet distracted; Mrs Caypor, in a large white apron and sleeves turned up, holding the poor thing still – is exhilarating. Yet, when Caypor discovered that a Spaniard called Gomez was a British agent, he had no scruples in signalling him to the German authorities. As soon as Gomez set foot in Germany, he was arrested, tried and executed. Ashenden's approach to Caypor

throughout the story is that of a novelist who is working on the development of a character. His detached curiosity makes him appreciate the villain's positive aspects and helps his psychological analysis. As underlined by the narrator,

Ashenden admired goodness, but was not outraged by wickedness. People sometimes thought him heartless because he was more often interested in others than attached to them, and even in the few to whom he was attached his eyes saw with equal clearness the merits and the defects. [...] He was able to pursue his study of the Caypors without prejudice and without passion. (193)

Most of the short story is devoted to this study. Ashenden underscores the extent of Mrs Caypor's patriotism, her hatred of everything British, her belief in the superiority of Germany to any other country in science, art and culture. Caypor's wife maintains that English people can't talk of music since they "have not produced a composer since Purcell!" (192) and she wonders why they could be so good at writing poetry. Although she is described as a "fanatic" (191), Ashenden is not annoyed by her obsession with the primacy of Germany in every field: "There was in the conception a magnificent impudence that appealed to Ashenden's sense of humour" (191). Mrs Caypor's patriotism certainly influenced her husband. However, the more Ashenden becomes familiar with the couple, the less he can find one clear reason behind Caypor's treachery, such as money, vanity or mere dishonesty. Ashenden's conclusion is inconclusive. It cannot be otherwise because Caypor is not a black and white villain but a complex character. His moral judgement is therefore suspended:

How much easier life would be if people were all black or all white and how much simpler it would be to act in regard to them! Was Caypor a good man who loved evil or a bad man who loved good? And how could such unreconcilable elements exist side by side in harmony within the same heart? For one thing was clear, Caypor was disturbed by no gnawing of conscience; he did his mean and despicable work with gusto. He was a traitor who enjoyed his treachery. Though Ashenden had been studying human nature more or less consciously all his life,

it seemed to him that he knew as little about it now in middle age as he had done when he was a child. (202–3)

In consequence, Ashenden decides that no arrangement can be made with Caypor, to bring him back to the ‘right’ side or reconfigure him as double agent. The traitor can only be pushed into a trap, as Caypor had previously done with Gomez.

Ashenden’s treatment of Caypor, seems to exemplify what Brophy calls Maughan’s “clinical attitude”.¹⁶ By “clinicalism”, he means the detached study of human emotions and psychology through description, as in the discipline of human anatomy. This “aloofness from emotion and judgement”¹⁷ seems indeed to be a by-product of Maughan’s medical training (he was a medical student at St Thomas’s hospital in London from 1892 to 1897 and qualified, but never actually practised, as doctor)¹⁸ and includes a cool, detached report of each case under examination. For Maughan (and his *alter ego* Ashenden) “conscience is a phenomenon to be described”¹⁹ in the same way as man’s belief in God or the soul. A corollary of this attitude is the relativity of evil, which is not an absolute concept but often depends on the point of view: “diversity of experience brings values into question”.²⁰ What is good in one country or one situation may be bad in another. Patriotism is an ultimate result of this view. If Caypor had played double, for example, he would not have deserved a death sentence. In “The Flip of a Coin” a plot involving the death of many civilians in Austria is decided by tossing a coin. Ashenden is confronted with the moral dilemma of whether to support or not a scheme of conspirators to blow up some ammunition factories, as a reply to many similar acts performed by the Germans in the Allied countries. Ironically, the responsibility cannot be moved onto his chiefs as “they desired the end, but

16 John Brophy, *Somerset Maugham* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1958 [1952]), p. 7.

17 Brophy, p. 10.

18 Curtis, p. 44.

19 Brophy, p. 10.

20 *Ibid.*

hesitated at the means. They were willing to take advantage of an accomplished fact, but wanted to shift on to someone else the responsibility of bringing it about” (265). The reader will never know the response of the coin, but the modality is clear and quite cynical. If the scheme is accomplished, it will be justified as “a legitimate act of war” (263).

Two more characters can be defined as villains, at least partially, in *Ashenden*. One is General Carmona, the so-called Hairless Mexican, whose ‘deeds’ have been already explored. The other is a potential villainess, Miss King. Manuel Carmona is a controversial figure. A spy, a professional killer, a womanizer and a dandy, he is defined “exotic” and “baroquely fascinating” by Malcom.²¹ Apparently, he is a dispossessed revolutionary, whose estates were confiscated by the Mexican government and who is working for the British in order to earn money, finance a coup at home and free his country from the tyrants. Ashenden is irritated by Carmona’s self-pleased behaviour and vanity, his eccentric attire and luxury, and his ridiculous disguises, including a set of different wigs. At the same time he is fascinated by his chameleon-like personality, his coolness in carrying out his job, and his “sublime self-assurance” (103), so much so that he affirms: “He was repulsive and ridiculous, but you could not take your eyes from him. There was a sinister fascination in his strangeness” (60). While watching Carmona dancing thoughtlessly in a sordid tavern in Naples, after having accomplished his murderous task, the adjectives used to describe him create a series of oppositions producing the effect of oxymora: “monstrous” and “terrible” but also moving with “a matchless grace”; “sinister and grotesque” but also having a “feline elegance” and even “something of beauty” (103). He reminds Ashenden of “one of those sculptures of the pre-Aztec hewers of stone, in which there is barbarism and vitality, something terrible and cruel, and yet withal a brooding and significant loveliness.” (103). Malcom suggests that Carmona is “a figure literally and metaphorically from another world. [...] He

21 David Malcom, “W. Somerset Maugham’s *Ashenden* Stories”, *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, ed. by Cheryl Alexander Malcom and David Malcom (Malden, US and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 227–35 (p. 228).

seems to have stepped from the pages of a Le Queux novel rather than the drab world of most of the Ashenden stories [...] adding more than a touch of color to the gray shades of Ashenden's espionage work."²² Whether Carmona is "Maugham's acknowledgement of his predecessors in the espionage genre"²³ or anticipates the grotesque villains of successive spy fiction, he is an atypical character in the volume and a hybrid villain: an assassin that acts in cold blood but also a picturesque hero because he works for the British. The mix of opposite attributes embodied by Carmona enflames the imagination of Ashenden-writer as well as colouring the world of Ashenden-agent.

Another controversial figure is the eponymous character of "Miss King", an old eccentric Englishwoman who is the chaperon of Prince Ali's two daughters. Her gay clothes, extravagant hats, heavy makeup and wig are a sort of disguise which produces a grotesque effect. Miss King left England at a young age and has been working for Prince Ali all her life as the governess first of his mother and then of his spoilt daughters, who mistreat and even smack her in public. Miss King seems to have totally embraced the anti-English sentiments of her employer Ali: a powerful Egyptian personality related to the Khedive,²⁴ a political agitator in his country and "a bitter enemy of the English" (30). Not only does the woman disdain any formal contact with her fellow citizen Ashenden, but she even refuses to use her own mother tongue and always addresses him in French. However, to Ashenden's surprise, one night he is called by the woman to her deathbed. Without her wig and bizarre clothes, Miss King looks like an actress deprived of her scene costumes: as small as a child and "immensely old" (41). She struggles to speak, but to no avail.

22 Malcom, p. 230.

23 Ibid.

24 *Khedive* is a title equivalent to 'viceroy'. It was given to the governor of Egypt and Sudan, when the countries were under the Ottoman sovereignty. At the outbreak of the First World War, the Ottoman Empire sided with the Central Powers. In 1914 the last *khedive*, Abbas Hilmi Pasha, was deposed by the British, who declared Egypt a British protectorate and appointed his more pro-British uncle, Hussein Kam, Sultan of Egypt. This brought an end to the use of the title of *khedive*.

The story ends in an inconclusive and enigmatic fashion: the only word that the woman can utter is “England” (50). The reader will never know if she had a patriotic impulse and wanted to share dark secrets with Ashenden, if she aimed to take revenge on the Prince and his disrespectful daughters, if she needed the presence of a fellow countryman before passing away or just wished to speak English for the last time. Miss King is an undeveloped character and a potential villainess (or double agent) in so far as her will is never explicated. As was the case for General Carmona, the woman’s melodramatic appearance and lifestyle contrast with Ashenden’s dull bureaucratic work of intelligence.

The beginning of the twentieth century in the West saw the rise of a new model of economic expansion and technological progress grounded in standardized mass production and mass consumption. The production efficiency methodology devised by Frederick Taylor provided the basis of a new productive system, Fordism,²⁵ and a new idea of worker: the anonymous and unskilled “mass worker”, who can easily learn his/her work because s/he is in charge of a very small segment of the labour process. The world’s first global conflict also inaugurated the idea of a technological “mass war” – an inflection of the industrial civilization – and the figure of the obedient and unreflective “mass soldier”. Like the “mass worker”, the “mass soldier” functions as a standardised element of a mechanism. He is trained to imi-

25 Taylorism is a production efficiency methodology that breaks every action, job, or task into small and simple segments which can be easily analysed and taught. It was introduced in the early twentieth century and named after the US industrial engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915). In his 1911 book *Principles of Scientific Management* he laid down the fundamental principles of large-scale manufacturing through assembly-line factories. Henry Ford, owner of the Ford Motor Company, was highly influenced by Taylor and was the first to use scientific management techniques in his factories. Fordism is a term widely used to describe the system of standardized mass production and mass consumption that was pioneered in the early twentieth century by the Ford Motor Company. Fordism implies a high division of labour through assembly lines that allow unskilled workers to manage with a small segment of the labour process. Workers are paid higher “living” wages, so they can afford to purchase the products they make. See <www.businessdictionary.com> and <www.britannica.com>.

tate and obey, to carry out standardised segments of a process or action, to believe in what he is told without questions, to be passive and docile to the requirements of the system. The ideas of valour and individual heroism, celebrated in the nineteenth-century wars, have no longer currency. The best quality of the Great-War soldier is the absence of qualities and personality: he must be a “soldier without qualities”.²⁶ According to Zamperini, the construction of the “mass-soldier” of the First World War laid the foundation for the later collective violence perpetrated by Nazism and the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. This “bureaucratization of the mind” created a mass of silent executors, relieved of any sense of responsibility, who obediently carried out their duties, however hideous or violent these may be.²⁷

In its fidelity to the real world, Maugham’s *Ashenden* reflects these changes also in the field of espionage. Ashenden’s work is largely uneventful because he is a small gear in a larger mechanism, in which the agent has become a bureaucrat. In “A Trip to Paris” he explicitly talks about this:

It might be, he mused, that the great chiefs of the secret service in their London offices, their hands on the throttle of this great machine, led a life full of excitement; they moved their pieces here and there, they saw the pattern woven by the multitudinous threads (Ashenden was lavish with his metaphors), they made a picture out of the various pieces of the jigsaw puzzle; but it must be confessed that for the small fry like himself to be a member of the secret serviced was not as adventurous an affair as the public thought. Ashenden’s official existence was as orderly and monotonous as a city clerk’s. (109)

Ashenden reflects new modalities in the world of espionage, where the agent can be associated to the “mass-worker” and “mass-soldier”: a bureaucrat that accomplishes his tasks.

26 Antonio Gibelli, *L’Officina della Guerra* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri [1991] 2007), pp. 91-2. Gibelli uses the terms: *operaio-massa*, *soldato-massa* and *soldato senza qualità*.

27 Adriano Zamperini, “Obbedienza distruttiva e crisi dell’azione”, in Stanley Milgram, *Obbedienza all’autorità* (Torino: Einaudi, 2003 [1974]), xxxii–xxxiii.

Ashenden's zeal and his commitment to the British cause relieve him of any responsibility and sense of guilt. As in "The Flip of a Coin", whatever the decision, he will be absolved. It is however in his role as a writer that he prompts a reflection on the events and the consequences of one's actions. He can be bored as an agent but he is never bored as a writer. In "A Trip to Paris", just a couple of pages before describing the monotony of his job in espionage, he conversely celebrates the creative power of imagination:

Ashenden was in the habit of asserting that he was never bored. It was one of his notions that only such persons were as had no resources in themselves and it was but the stupid that depended on the outside world for their amusement. (107)

His observation of reality as a writer, his "clinicalism" and detailed description, his absence of moral judgement which allows the public to catch the complexity behind every human action: all this conveys a subtle criticism of the workings of power. This ultimately seems to be Ashenden's and Maugham's aim.

In "The political Function of the Intellectual" Foucault underlines the interrelationship between truth and power. Truth is never outside power or deprived of power. The production of truth is a function of power and "we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth".²⁸ This means that good and evil, legality and illegality are not absolute but relative values and determined within a certain discourse. Maugham's prosaic reality is not a celebration of such reality, rather it offers an efficacious viewpoint to analyse the discourse of power by merely exposing its modalities. The impossibility of depicting villains as absolute creatures of evil falls into this adherence to authenticity.

This attitude may also give rise to misunderstandings, as shown by D.H. Lawrence's caustic review of the book. Lawrence seems to take Maugham's clinicalism and Ashenden's suspension of

28 Michel Foucault, "The Political Function of the Intellectual", *Radical Philosophy*, 17, 1977, 12-14. Quoted from Bill Ashcroft and others, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1989]), p. 165.

judgement literally, as a disengaged behaviour lacking responsibility, even a celebration of a reversed code of values. “Spying is a dirty business, and Secret Service altogether is a world of underdogs, a world in which the meanest passions are given play”, says Lawrence. He continues by affirming that “Ashenden’s sense of responsibility oddly enough is inverted” because:

He is almost passionately concerned with proving that all men and women are either dirty dogs or imbeciles. If they are clever men or women, they are crooks, spies, police-agents, and tricksters [...]. If, on the other hand, you get a decent, straight individual, especially an individual capable of feeling love for another, then you are made to see that such a person is a despicable fool, encompassing his own destruction.²⁹

He ends up by calling Maugham’s ironic detachment a “rancid sense of humour”. The editors of the volume including the review, however, comment that Lawrence’s dismissal of Maugham’s *Ashenden* was not dispassionate but founded on personal reasons.

Whether this is true or not, critics are unanimous in declaring *Ashenden* the novel responsible for the breakthrough in spy fiction: the first ‘serious thriller’, whose three basic components, in Denning’s words, are “‘realism,’ moral and literary seriousness and popular front politics”.³⁰ This genre was able to offer a privileged perspective on the contemporary political world and the workings of power, which in *Ashenden* is further reinforced by the overlapping of the modalities of espionage and fiction writing, and by the ambiguous representation of villains.

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DARK CORNERS AND DOUBLE BODIES:
ESPIONAGE AS TRANSGRESSION IN
MEASURE FOR MEASURE

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By my troth, Isabel, I loved thy brother; if the old fantastical Duke of dark corners had been at home, he had lived.
(*Measure for Measure*, IV.iii.155–57)¹

The title of “fantastic” which the dramatis personae of *Measure for Measure* attributes to Lucio identifies him as an erratic, unpredictable character — one whose central trait is his systematic distancing himself from the institutions and codes of the society he lives in.² Remarkably, he ascribes the selfsame deviance to his ruler, the figure that should be, by definition, the very embodiment and safeguard of those institutions and codes. In the eyes of this reluctant subject of Vincentio’s, the latter wields an utterly arbitrary authority whose lethal potential is fortunately neutralized by a natural penchant for benevolence and *laissez-faire*. Its exercise being so subjective, power as seen by Lucio loses any moral legitimation, turning into a mere ob-

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- 1 References are to William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. by J. W. Lever (London: Methuen, 1971; hereafter *MfM*).
 - 2 Even though according to the *OED* (B2) the noun “fantastic” may simply, in reference to people, designate extravagant appearance and manners, indicating “One given to fine or showy dress; a fop” (or “An Improvident young Gallant” in Overbury’s 1613 *Characters*), in application to Lucio the principal meaning seems to be that of “One who has fanciful ideas or indulges in wild notions” (B1) — one who thus establishes a significant ideological discrepancy between himself and the rest of the world he belongs in. The adjective “fantastical”, as allotted by Lucio to the Duke, may essentially be taken to convey an analogous set of implications (see *OED*, “fantastical”, 4 a–b). Brian Gibbons stresses that “the epithet ‘fantastic’ for Lucio may be the scribe’s” (*Measure for Measure*, ed. by B. Gibbons, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991, 77).

stacle to the free expansion of personalities and the unbounded satisfaction of desires.

Yet, however evidently biased and overly drastic, Lucio's perspective is not completely unrealistic. Vincentio's past administration was weakened by a fundamental flaw — the tolerance he manifested, by and large, vis-à-vis unlawful conducts. His easy-going attitude, which Lucio and others seem to impute merely to an idiosyncratic disregard for established legal procedures, found its theoretical justification in a metaphysical idea of the body politic — precisely what the Duke offers to Angelo in the opening scene as the rationale on which to establish his temporary rule. On divesting himself of the centrality and visibility intrinsic in his political role, he demands that his substitute become a perfect copy of himself, renouncing his own identity for a time in order to be 'possessed' or 'transmuted' through the 'sacrament' of the conveyance of power:

I do bend my speech
 To one that can my part in him advertise:
 Hold therefore, Angelo.
 In our remove be thou at full ourself.
 Mortality and mercy in Vienna
 Live in thy tongue, and heart.
 [...]
 Your scope is as mine own,
 So to enforce or qualify the laws
 As to your soul seems good. (I.i.40–45, 64–66)

Angelo is here asked to *be* the Duke — not just to 'represent' him as the delegate he actually is or 'play' him as an actor plays a part. Indeed, the request appears perfectly consistent with the mystical side of the theory of the king's two bodies, as formulated by Elizabethan jurists, which assumes that whenever a sovereign dies or abandons the crown for any reason, "the Body politic", seen as a permanent metaphysical principle, "is transferred and conveyed over from the Body natural now dead, or now removed from the Dignity royal, to another Body natural" — that of the new monarch, or regent. Such a political transubstantiation takes

place in disregard of any physical, mental or moral blemish attributable to the latter, for the king's

Body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a Body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age, and to the like Defects that happen to the natural Bodies of other People. But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People, and the Management of the public weal, and this Body is utterly void of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to, and for this Cause, what the King does in his Body politic, cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his natural Body.³

This is what enables late-medieval and early modern monarchs to deflect from literal applications of pre-existent laws and to “qualify” or adjust them at will. The ensuing haziness and unpredictability of the judicial system's reaction to a misdemeanour, however, must needs result in destabilizing Justice itself, depriving it, in the eyes of the subjects, of the certainty and steadiness which make it one of the founding structures of social existence.

In all likelihood, Vincentio does not believe wholeheartedly what he says to Angelo; more than the expression of a sincere conviction, his presentation of the transmission of power as a sacred ritual of transfiguration seems part of his deceptive strategy.⁴ It simply provides him with a valid justification for delegating his public function even to a man whom he already knows, as becomes clear subsequently, to be a downright hypocrite — to

3 Edmund Plowden, *Commentaries and Reports* (1571), cit. in Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1957), 13 and 7.

4 He concludes his dialogue with Friar Thomas by expressing his primary intention in leaving the dukedom to Angelo as follows: “Hence shall we see / If power change purpose, what our *seemers* be” (I.iii.53–54; italics added). He thus reintroduces, in the person of the Deputy as the detainer of supreme authority, the distance between appearance and reality which the theory of the king's two bodies strives to annul.

say the least — and far less honourable and even-minded than he strives to appear.⁵

That power in its entirety, within the framework of body-politic metaphysics, migrates from old ruler to new does not automatically result in its making itself entirely visible. Like a divine entity, rather than the fullness of its being, what it usually manifests of itself is just one of its two opposite faces — the implacable or the lenient, that of Old-Testament wrath or that of New-Testament forgiveness. “What figure of us, think you, he will bear?”, the Duke asks Escalus about Angelo, adding:

For you must know, we have with special soul
Elected him our absence to supply;
Lent him our terror, drest him with our love,
And given his deputation all the organs
Of our own power. (I.i.16–21)

His is no more than a rhetorical question. He knows very well which of the two “figures” his prospective substitute is going to “bear” — Terror, not Love — and this is precisely why he has selected him instead of Escalus.⁶ Shortly thereafter, when Isabella

5 Though he declares to Friar Thomas that Angelo is a “man of stricture and firm abstinence” (I.iii.12), he evidently already knows about his past behaviour to Mariana, as appears in III.i.208–30, which makes his letting such a questionable character wield unchecked sway in the state all the more deceitful.

6 To Friar Thomas he admits the excessive tolerance that has characterized his rule, and his desire to go back to a stricter enforcement of the law. He does not want, however, to incur the general hatred caused by his personally inaugurating an era of repression: “Sith ’twas my fault to give the people scope, / ’Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them / For what I bid them do: for we bid this be done, / When evil deeds have their permissive pass, / And not the punishment. Therefore indeed, my father, / I have on Angelo impos’d the office; / Who may in th’ambush of my name strike home, / And yet my nature never in the fight / To do in slander” (I.iii.35–43). Apart from the final punishment, his strategy has a striking affinity with that adopted in 1502, according to Machiavelli, in the conquered territory of Romagna by Cesare Borgia (*The Prince*, VII.8). Wishing to impose a strict rule on his new subjects while simultaneously eschewing their hate, the prince designated as his representative in the region Ramiro de Lorqua, a notoriously cruel and reckless man whom he invested with absolute power. After through this delegate the sternness and

entreats Angelo to “show some pity”, the Deputy attempts to reconcile the two extremes of rigour and clemency by presenting the latter as immanent in the former:

I show it most of all when I show justice;
 For then I pity those I do not know,
 Which a dismiss'd offence would after gall,
 And do him right that, answering one foul wrong,
 Lives not to act another. (II.ii.101–05)

The “justice” of the scaffold thus would paradoxically contain “pity”, but the implication of Angelo’s words is that the reverse would not hold, and that in no case might “pity” be seen as a manifestation of “justice”. This proposition, in its asymmetrical setup, is obviously untenable. Not only is it at odds with the neat antithesis between two declaredly incompatible ruling conducts which structures most of the play, but it is belied by its final scene, where Vincentio’s verdicts suggest that forgiveness and symbolic penalties may very appropriately substitute for capital punishments.

The notion of justice to which Angelo recurrently appeals is as metaphysical in nature as the body-politic theory, and in direct conflict with it. Whereas the latter makes the ruler the ultimate arbiter of the law — the unchallengeable dispenser of acquittals and punishments meted out “as to [his] soul seems good” — the Deputy by invoking the former represents himself as the mere executor of an impersonal, transcendent decree that no human will may alter. To Escalus, who suggests that putting Claudio to death is acceptable only on condition Angelo is absolutely sure

violence of the law had manifested themselves enough to terrify the populace, Borgia staged a ferocious public spectacle. He had Ramiro’s body, cut in two, exhibited in the piazza at Cesena, so as to distance himself drastically in the community’s eyes from that way of administering justice. The analogy was first pointed out by Norman Holland (“*Measure for Measure*: The Duke and the Prince”, *Comparative Literature* 11 (1959), 16–20). Vincentio’s Machiavellianism is discussed in detail in Zdravko Planinc, “Shakespeare’s Critique of Machiavellian Force, Fraud, and Spectacle in *Measure for Measure*”, *Humanitas* 23 nos. 1–2 (2010), 144–68.

he would not have committed the same crime had circumstances prompted him to it, he objects:

I not deny
 The jury passing on the prisoner's life
 May in the sworn twelve have a thief or two,
 Guiltier than him they try. What's open made to justice,
 That justice seizes. What know the laws
 That thieves do pass on thieves? 'Tis very pregnant,
 The jewel that we find, we stoop and take't,
 Because we see it; but what we do not see,
 We tread upon, and never think of it. (II.i.18–26)

Of course a consistent application of the metaphysical principle would require the judge-thief to begin by sentencing himself: for how could he possibly assert he does not see his own crime? But Angelo is apparently unaware of the incongruity. To Isabella he declares: “It is the law, not I, condemn your brother” (II.ii.80). When she had asked him to condemn the sin rather than the sinner, he had replied thus:

Condemn the fault, and not the actor of it?
 Why, every fault's condemn'd ere it be done:
 Mine were the very cipher of a function
 To fine the faults, whose fine stands in record,
 And let go by the actor. (II.ii.37–41)

Theoretically, he might have consented, or at least admitted that such meekness was a plausible alternative to inflexibility. It would not, that is, have clashed with his customized view of the impersonality/metaphysics of the Law; if a guilty judge does not punish himself for secretly committing the selfsame crime he censors when visibly perpetrated by another, he is already de-individualizing justice and acquitting a culprit without — formally — absolving his offence. Angelo is thus falling prey to a hopeless contradiction which is gradually amplified by his desire for Isabella, generating an increasing distance between his “tongue” and his “heart” (II.iv.1–7), to the point where he is forced to acknowledge — even though only to himself — that there is something

wrong with a felon sending another felon to death: “Thieves for their robbery have authority, / When judges steal themselves” (II. ii.176–77).

Vienna is in a condition of disorder due to the lack at the head of the state of an authority capable of being at the same time strong and fair. With Angelo’s tenure misrule brought about by excessive slackness gives way to its reversed mirror image — not good rule but misrule generated by unmitigated and largely unmotivated intransigence. Vincentio uses the swing from one extreme to the other to distance his final public image from the previous one, remodelling himself in the concluding scene into the incarnation of equity as reconciliation of compassion and firmness. Most of what happens in *Measure for Measure* — with the exception of unpredictable events such as the Barnardine—Ragozine trade-off — corresponds to his initial scheme or at least to his desires;⁷ like Prospero’s in *The Tempest* and, to a lesser extent, Oberon’s in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, his role is that of the actor who doubles as playwright or stage-manager, controlling his fellow-characters and determining their moves. In discarding his ducal garb to don the monastic habit he simply exchanges a manifest authority for a different kind of power — invisible and operating directly on a restricted segment of society, but nonetheless substantial. This he achieves by turning into a spy, or better, a secret agent. Prospero and Oberon also observe others surreptitiously to discover their real natures or ascertain their hidden intentions; when aiming at changing the course of things, however, they do not need to intervene personally but employ their magic to summon spirits ready to serve them. Contrariwise, Vincentio, who of course possesses no superhuman faculties, gets directly involved

7 Planinc regards him as responsible for the entirety of the plot: “From what follows, it is not difficult to determine that the Duke orders Angelo to enforce the laws against lechery, and in a most effective manner. [...] A single execution should snap the rest of them [the bourgeoisie, as opposed to the lower classes] to attention; and it should also serve well as a spectacle to distract the poor. The Duke likely specifies that the man should be Claudio” (150–51).

in the action and contrives plots and shifts designed to direct it, from his point of view, towards a satisfactory solution.

The disguised-ruler scenario has a long tradition in folktales, historiography and literature and is recurrent in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. In most if not all cases the public figure's reason for taking a feigned identity is fairly straightforward and in effect commendable, modelled as it is on that ascribed to the Roman emperor Severus — observing the people and the officers of the law in order to acquire the information necessary to improve the government or reform the administration.⁸ This is for instance how Prince Hal justifies himself for impersonating a young profligate in the *Henry IV* plays.⁹ A similar outcome may be envisaged by Vincentio's plan but certainly does not account for it entirely. The Duke's motivations, as has already been suggested, are more complicated and self-referential; his main goal appears to be that of transforming his return to Vienna into the triumphal inauguration of a new era of order and peace, wiping out, as far as possible, all traces of his past failures. What justifies his being regarded as a kind of villain is his Machiavellian tendency to use others in general — not only Angelo — as mere instruments, to the point where he seems prepared to expose them to potentially lethal dangers, as he does with Claudio, if that may contribute in enabling him to attain his objectives. One would be tempted to suppose that even the happy ending, with its transformation of expected bodily punishments into moral lectures and imposed marriages, rather than the consequence of his good-heartedness, is the result of a political calculation and is devised to intensify the glory of his re-entry into visibility and power.

Leaving his intent aside, on one level Vincentio acts as a scientist, for his plan is also an experiment in permutation. Like a superior being — or a god — bent on studying the reactions of a lesser world to unforeseen alterations, he repeatedly switches the pawns on his game board and waits to observe the effect of

8 Cf. Lever, Introduction to *MfM*, xlv–xlv; Gibbons, Introduction to *Meas.*, 15 ff.

9 See in particular *1Henry IV*, I.ii.187–209 (ed. Harold Child, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1958).

his interference: “Hence shall we see / If power change purpose, what our seemers be”. After trading positions with Angelo he repeats the test by ordering that Barnardine’s head be substituted for Claudio’s, and that Mariana replace Isabella in the Deputy’s bed. All this is preceded by an even more significant exchange, obtained through a reversal of the ordinary syntax of the gaze, in which the plenitude of the monarch’s power is ensured precisely by his/her being constantly under his/her people’s eyes.¹⁰ From an object of collective sight, Vincentio instead reshapes himself into a — or the (quintessential) — subject of vision, which leads him to invent an alternative way of gaining and accruing control over others.

10 “O place and greatness! Millions of false eyes / Are stuck upon thee”, Vincentio complains in IV.i.60–61, after expressing his personal dislike of this exposure by declaring: “I love the people, / But do not like to stage me to their eyes” (I.i.67–68) — which of course does not prevent him from triumphantly ‘staging’ himself in the final act. In the cultural systems of Renaissance and early modern Europe, according to Michel Foucault, a particularly strong link was postulated to exist between power and visibility — actual or symbolic, as inscribed in particular in the spectacle of the scaffold (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], trans. by Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage, 1979, 24–69). Claudio’s words to the Provost, “why dost thou show me thus to th’ world? / Bear me to prison, where I am committed”, and the latter’s reply, “I do it not in evil disposition, / But from Lord Angelo by special charge” (I. ii.108–11), suggest that the Deputy believes in the importance of exhibiting an apprehended culprit publicly as a means of instilling in the populace a sense of the absoluteness and inalterability of their ruler’s decrees. Like most of her contemporary monarchs, Queen Elizabeth made her staging herself to her subjects’ eyes, iconically or directly in pageants and progresses, an essential component of her authority. Conversely, James I’s uneasiness about being under incessant observation is well known. A passage in the *Basilikon Doron* expresses this feeling through the same theatrical metaphor employed by Vincentio, comparing the king to “one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly do behold” (in *The Political Works of James I*, ed. by Charles McIlwain, New York: Russell and Russell, 1965, 43). Once, in March 1604, James had actually attempted to reposition himself as source, rather than target, of the gaze by visiting the Royal Exchange in disguise to watch the merchants and the citizens, but he had been spotted almost instantly and forced to have the stair door closed against the crowd which had assembled — as Angelo would have commented — “in obsequious fondness” to manifest an “untaught love” appearing as “offence” (*MfM*, II.iv.28–30; for the Exchange episode, recounted in Gilbert Dugdale’s 1604 *The Time Triumphant*, see Lever, Introduction to *MfM*, xxxiv; Gibbons, Introduction to *Meas.*, 23).

This is not a panoptical situation. What Vincentio, as Friar Lodowick, does in Vienna has far more to do with the category of espionage than with that of surveillance as delineated by Michel Foucault.¹¹ Actually, surveillance, before being gradually adopted by 18th-century penal systems in the prisons of many parts of Europe as a plausible substitute for capital punishment, was already functioning, along with espionage, as a practice of intrusion into secrets and forms of dissent — whether political, religious, or merely social — implemented by Renaissance authorities to thwart any potential disturbance to the orderly progression of collective existence. Queen Elizabeth, under whose reign the first modern intelligence service was developed,¹² also encouraged the notion that her subjects were under her constant scrutiny, and that nothing of what they might do or say could be imagined to elude her notice. Significantly, this point is made most explicit in one of her portraits, where she is represented wearing a cloak or robe covered with eyes and ears, thus sanctioning the circularity, and simultaneous asymmetry, of the gaze — the monarch empowered by her official icon, inscribed with the manifold signs and symbols of her sovereignty,¹³ being displayed before the eyes

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- 11 *Discipline and Punish*, 135–228. Many scholars, notably J. Dollimore in his fundamental “Transgression and Surveillance in *Measure for Measure*” (in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeare*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1985, 72–87), establish no specific distinction between the two categories. See also Sébastien Lefait, “‘Millions of False Eyes / Are Stuck upon Thee’: The Scope of Surveillance in *Measure for Measure*”, *Sillages critiques*, 15/2013, <http://sillagescritiques.revues.org/2594> (acc. Aug. 25, 2015).
 - 12 By her secretary of state, Sir Francis Walsingham. See Conyers Read, *Mr Secretary Walsingham and the Policy of Queen Elizabeth [1925–27]*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967); Stephen Budiansky, *Her Majesty’s Spymaster: Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Walsingham and the Birth of Modern Espionage* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005); John M. Archer, *Sovereignty and Intelligence: Spying and Court Culture in the English Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1993).
 - 13 Rather than her Body Natural, what her portraits typically exhibit — in the luxurious, heavily semanticized geometries of apparel and ornament by which her physical being is reduced to a face and two hands — is, as it were, an avatar of the Body Politic as transfused in a female head of state. See Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977, 52–54); Roy Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (London: Thames

of observers whose subjection is doubled through their seeing themselves, in turn, observed and judged by it.¹⁴ The goddess watching humans from on high is far from being *abscondita* but graciously manifests herself to her people. An illusion of visibility is paired with a fiction of omniscience.

Contrariwise, if surveillance ‘proper’ does have a role in *Measure for Measure*, it is as a projection onto the future. The final epiphany of Duke Vincentio, with the literal revelation of the spy’s real face to the public assembled at the city gate, turns the returning supremo into a potential universal supervisor. Knowing that their private lives and actions have been under the close searching look of their ruler, people in Vienna now know this may happen again henceforth, and such an awareness is precisely one of the basic principles on which the practice of surveillance rests. For even though, as is often the case, the origin of this form of gaze may be hidden, it is imperative that its objects be enabled to recognize the existence and operation of the gaze itself, so as to internalize the principle of control it presupposes, turning it into a super-ego of sorts: ‘I am being watched by an entity that has some authority over me, therefore I am not free to behave as I like, but I must watch myself’. Surveillance generates collaboration between its agents and its recipients in the repression of

and Hudson, 1987, 156–61). See also Louis Montrose, “Idols of the Queen: Policy, Gender, and the Picturing of Elizabeth”, *Representations* 68 (1999), 108–61; Louis Montrose, “Elizabeth through the Looking-glass: Picturing the Queen’s Two Bodies”, in *The Body of the Queen: Gender and Rule in the Courtly World, 1500–2000*, ed. by Regina Schulte (New York—Oxford: Berghahn, 2006), 61–87.

14 I am grateful to Mariangela Mosca for reminding me of the plausibility of interpreting the eye-and-ear-robe in the Rainbow Portrait in terms of surveillance. This is how many scholars, including Herbert Norris (*Tudor Costume and Fashion*, Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997, 608), see it: “the eyes and ears on the orange drapery or lining of the fawn outer robe imply that Her Majesty saw and heard everything”. Frances Yates proposes a far more sophisticated reading, based primarily on Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*, where the symbolism of the portrait associates it with the allegories of Fame and Intelligence or Wisdom, while at the same time suggesting a further rendering of the Ovidian figure of Astraea (“Allegorical Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I at Hatfield House” [1952], rpt. as Appendix to *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the 16th Century* [1975], London: Routledge, 1999, 215–19).



The *Rainbow Portrait*, c. 1600–1603, attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger or Isaac Oliver (Hatfield House, Hertfordshire)

what a given cultural context identifies as transgressive conducts. It is precisely through this kind of mechanism that a subject becomes fully such — submitted to a higher power (*suddito*) and simultaneously invested with the freedom to choose and to act (*soggetto*). Once again, as in the Renaissance body-politic theory, religious analogies are evident. God may be invisible, but the good Christian never forgets the presence of this scrutinizing eye — this “Judicious sharp spectator [...] / That sits and markes still who doth act amisse”¹⁵ — and behaves consequently. Obviously, on the other hand, espionage has a primary interest in being as concealed and imperceptible as possible.

Taken to an extreme, surveillance may be a simple narrative of surveillance, recounting the legend of an apparatus of supervision which has not actually been implemented but is generally believed to be at work. In the *panopticon* it is not indispensable for someone to be sitting in the central tower, but it is indispensable to have the inmates convinced that someone is actually there. Surveillance does not need to exist but it needs to be *thought* to exist. Conversely, espionage (in the perspective of the spies and their controlling powers) should erase the traces of its operation, and even of its possibility, as completely as it can, making its objects utterly unaware of itself. It needs to exist, but it also needs to be thought *not* to exist — not to be active there and then.

Furthermore, surveillance comes from within a community, developing its net from above. It trickles down from the top of the political and social pyramid — from the detainers of authority and command through their representatives and delegates onto their subordinates and subjects/*sudditi*. By virtue of the collaborative dynamics it calls into existence, its action, seen optimistically, should result in strengthening the bonds among individuals

15 Sir Walter Raleigh, “On the Life of Man”, 5–6, in *The Anchor Anthology of Sixteenth-Century Verse*, ed. by Richard S. Sylvester (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1974), 341. In *Measure for Measure* the exact point of transition between the notion of espionage and that of surveillance — with the awareness the latter implies — may perhaps be located in Angelo’s final address to a divinized Duke: “O my dread lord, / I should be guiltier that my guiltiness / To think I can be undiscernible, / When I perceive your Grace, like power divine, / Hath looked upon my passes” (V.i.364–68).

and subgroups inside the community itself, turning the latter into a single body by annihilating those centrifugal drives and disintegrating forces which impede its cohesion. Instead of a principle of unity, on the other hand, by its intrinsic secrecy espionage — no matter whether foreign, domestic or conducted at the expense of a more restricted collective entity, such as a commercial enterprise, an industrial concern, and so forth — inevitably introduces a pattern of division, generating an irreparable fracture between two groups in conflict, each of which is compelled to do all it can to protect itself from being discovered or laid bare before the eyes of the other.

Last but not least, ethical implications need to be considered. From the vantage point of a given legal context, surveillance, when contained within definite boundaries so as not to turn into nightmarish oppression,¹⁶ may to a certain extent be regarded as legitimate, aimed as it proclaims to be at reaching a general goal of collective well-being and peace¹⁷ by pre-empting criminal assaults on the order of things or by hindering deviant behaviours from throwing society into chaos. Espionage is more problematic. Each of the two groups it creates tends to invest itself with a positive moral connotation and to ‘demonize’ the other, positing its proceedings as unjustifiable, if for no other reason at least because they are surreptitious and tempt their executors into turning any findings to their own advantage. If the traditional disguised ruler’s scheme finds its justification in the pursuit of the common good, it is only insofar as it, too, remains limited to the acquisition of essential information without trespassing more than is strictly necessary onto the private spheres of individual existences.

16 Queen Elizabeth is reported as declaring, “I would not open windows into men’s souls”, to stress that surveillance, no matter how legitimate, has definite limits and should never amount to encroaching on the private beliefs of citizens. See “Elizabeth I”, no. 17, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations*, ed. by Antony Jay (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012).

17 If the eye-and-ear robe in the Rainbow Portrait alludes to the monarch being in a position to know all about her subjects, then the rainbow she is holding under the inscription *NON SINE SOLE IRIS* may be there to suggest that internal peace depends upon surveillance.

Now trespass is, etymologically, one and the same thing with transgression, and in fact Duke Vincentio counters his citizens' disregard for the rules and laws designed by him or his predecessors to govern sexuality in Vienna¹⁸ with a comparable contempt for some of the principles that a head of state, no matter how absolute, should abide by — integrity and truthfulness, among others, but first and foremost the tacit, all-important pact established between sovereign and subjects by the very fact of the former being invested with the representation of the Body Politic. If he is to retain the trust and the 'love' of his subordinates, the prince must be understood to agree in restricting the potentially unlimited leeway he enjoys in the use of his power by a unilateral renunciation of a portion of his 'divine' prerogative. Opening windows into souls, making oneself indiscernible in order to gain access to the invisible fields of human minds and feelings — as opposed to seizing only "what's open made to justice" — is utterly inexcusable, all the more so if it is done through usurping the persona of one who belongs in the only category authorized to enter such fields, that is, a friar and a confessor.¹⁹

Seen from the spy's point of view, this is the best imaginable disguise, of course, enabling its bearer to avail himself of the privileges enjoyed by church members in regard to the accumulation of confidential information, but also, more practically, allowing him to be admitted almost anywhere without being suspected

18 Both lower- and upper-class forms of deviance are here emblemized by sexual misbehaviour, which thus becomes a general figure of disobedience to authority, incorporating political insubordination, religious dissent and social discontent. See Dollimore, 73–80; David Sundelson, "Misogyny and Rule in *Measure for Measure*", *Women's Studies* 9 no. 1 (1981), 83–91; Leonard Tennenhouse, "Representing Power: *Measure for Measure* in Its Time", in *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (Norman: Pilgrim, 1982), 139–56.

19 The verb "confess" and its derivatives ("confessor", "confession") are remarkably frequent in the play (16 occurrences), and used in most cases to refer to religious, rather than judicial, avowals. At the very end of the last scene (where the repetition of these terms becomes almost obsessive, with as many as nine occurrences) Vincentio, as Duke, still superposes his two identities by describing Mariana in these terms to Angelo: "I have confess'd her, and I know her virtue" (V.i.524).

or examined closely and endowing his opinions and desires with the authoritativeness of commands.²⁰ It is thanks to his habit that the *soi-disant* Friar Lodowick enters the prison whenever he chooses and treats the Provost as an inferior at his beck and call. Moreover, the frock has a hood which, besides conveniently hiding his face throughout the action and thus providing the closest viable approximation to invisibility, has evidently been devised from the outset to make the final *coup de théâtre* possible before the eyes of an astounded Viennese audience:

Lucio. Come, sir! Come, sir! Come, sir! Foh, sir! Why, you bald-pated, lying rascal! — You must be hooded, must you? Show your knave's visage, with a pox to you! Show your sheep-biting face, and be hanged an hour! Will't not off?

[Pulls off the friar's hood and discovers the Duke]

Vincenzio. Thou art the first knave that e'er mad'st a duke. (V.i.349–54)

Finally, the befittingness of this sham identity is confirmed by its symbolic significance. Just as sexuality has incorporated all forms of transgression, the deficiencies of the state's political and administrative institutions have made it possible for religion — or a figment thereof — to appropriate the principle of authority and to control the repressive apparatus in their place. Vincenzio's political use of the sacred is another manifestation of his Machiavellian nature, for it is in perfect keeping with the behaviour *The Prince* recommends to a head of state.²¹ It is paralleled not only

20 In the last decades of the 16th century as well as in the early Jacobean context England swarmed with actual (Roman Catholic) priests and affiliates to religious orders who acted as secret agents, generally for the papacy and its allies. Most of the plots against the English monarchy uncovered during that historical phase were ascribed, wholly or in part, to their machinations. Someone who presented himself as a Catholic priest, however, presumably worked as a spy for Walsingham from within the French embassy in London from 1583 to 1585; see Lucia Folena, “*Gardez mon secret: Giordano Bruno and the Historian's Spy Story*”, in *Spy Fiction: un genere per grandi autori*, ed. by Paolo Bertinetti (Torino: Trauben, 2014), 147–61.

21 Taking the appearances of virtue — mercifulness, trustworthiness, benevolence, integrity and religiosity — but being ready to act contrariwise when necessary (XVIII.4). The most indispensable of these five components is a con-

by Angelo's hypocritical Puritanism but by Isabella's comparably questionable monastic calling.²² All three characters thus play roles that establish a greater-than-usual distance between their private persons and their public façades; all three are 'double bodies', fallible selves clothed in robes of sanctity, thus reminiscent, though in a more down-to-earth manner, of the monarch's twofold constitution in the body-politic theory. Others also occasionally perform as actors under the Duke's direction, in particular Mariana when she is made to impersonate Isabella in the bed trick. Vincentio, Angelo and Isabella, however, are the only ones who, for their own separate reasons, keep their masks throughout the action, until the final *mise en scène* strips them bare of their mendacious coverings and reveals their 'real' beings, exposing the Deputy's wrongdoings along with the fictitious quality of the would-be nun's vocation, which seems to melt away instantly like belated snow in the sun of her ruler's marriage proposal.²³ From this perspective, the play-within-the-play coincides in extension with the play itself and ends in the further doubling offered by the theatrical production put on by the Duke in Act V – a third-level performance. Such a staged conclusion, besides reuniting the two audiences – the informed spectators of *Measure for Measure* and the unaware ones of the second-level show – through lighting dark corners and disclosing secrets, calls upon internal actors to relinquish their costumes and get into 'truer' identities once and for all.

Supposing, one is tempted to add, that such a *reductio ad unum* is at all viable in a context where human existence in most of its ramifications is by definition double, as the enormous recurrence of the *theatrum mundi* image in the late 16th and early 17th centu-

stant outward show of religiosity (XVIII.5). Those in power should regard the beliefs shared by their subjects as a fundamental *instrumentum regni* (*Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, I.11–15).

22 Planinc puts it thus: "Isabella is as much a novice as the Duke is a friar" (154).

23 "Give me your hand and say you will be mine" (V.i.490; cf. 531–34). Her remaining silent is in all likelihood a manifestation of her consent, which suddenly 'normalizes' her, annulling the otherness she pursued in seeking the cloister as a space where to separate herself from both the male world and the common lot of women, as wives and mothers.

ries suggests.²⁴ In fact, by setting and codifying specific standards of demeanour to which gentlemen and gentle ladies are asked to conform constantly, treatises like Castiglione's *Cortegiano*, the secular bible of the Elizabethan upper class,²⁵ prescribe 'acting' and dissimulation in all aspects of life. Courtiers seem to be offered no alternative to a clear-cut division of their selves into two – the public face worn for social interaction and the private one, or 'true I', which must remain invariably hidden to others.²⁶ The phenomenon must have been so evident to contemporaries that it led George Puttenham, writing his handbook on poetry in 1589, to associate high rank with the most contrived of tropes – allegory:

The Courtly figure *Allegoria* [...] is when we speake of one thing and thinke another, and that our wordes and our meanings meete not. The use of this figure is so large, and his virtue of so great efficacie [...] that] not onely every common Courtier, but also the gravest Counsellour; yea, and the most noble and wisest Prince of them all are many times enforced to use it, by example (say they) of the great Emperour who had it usually in his mouth to say, *Qui nescit dissimulare nescit regnare*. [...] [T]his figure [...] for his duplicitie we call the figure of *false semblant or dissimulation* [...].

[T]he figure *Allegoria* [...] not impertinently we call the Courtier or figure of faire semblant [...].²⁷

If courtiers are permanent actors, so are spies, even when they, unlike Vincentio, dissimulate their machinations under the cloaks

24 One finds many obvious examples of this kind of representation in the dramatic works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, but the same metaphor is also a favourite one in poetry. See for instance Raleigh's "On the Life of Man" (above and n. 15), or Edmund Spenser's Sonnet 54 in *Amoretti* ("Of this world's theatre in which we stay").

25 Especially in Sir Thomas Hoby's 1561 translation, *The Book of the Courtier*.

26 This is a central theme in Stephen Greenblatt's indispensable *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

27 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, facs. of the 1906 rpt., intro. by Baxter Hathaway (Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 1970), 196–97 and 305; italics in the text.

of their original identities. A comparable split characterizes the conducts of the two categories; a far more drastic distance than is presupposed to exist in the rest of humankind separates their public and private sides – their masks and their visages. What distinguishes the spy's acting from the histrionics of the aristocrat intent on staging a show of *sprezzatura*, Platonic love and social superiority is once again a matter of vision and visibility. In order to see what is concealed spies must conceal themselves; they need to make themselves absolutely indiscernible (as spies). Courtiers, like actual actors, are *known* by those who surround them to be clothed in borrowed robes, impersonating characters that do not necessarily have anything in common with their 'true' selves. By their simple *Dasein*, and identifiability as role-players, they signal their not being what they represent, in the same way in which a painting or a statue 'signifies' its not being that which it 'stands for'. Spies, instead, anxious to delete all marks of their doings, attempt to simplify their 'double bodies' by coinciding as entirely as possible with the 'costumes' they wear. Their intrusions into others' *secreta* – interior spaces fenced off precisely to discourage potential trespassers – depend on their making their own *secreta* not only inaccessible, but, insofar as possible, utterly non-existent. They turn appearance into sub-stance and transfigure sign into body, as in a reversal of the general revelation at the end of *Measure for Measure*, or as in a parody of body-politic transfiguration and its theological undertones.

But after all what really counts in society is what is outside – performance, not 'truth'. As Angelo acknowledges, stage finery and "false semblants" are enough to impress the most judicious:

O place, O form,
How often dost thou with thy case, thy habit,
Wrench awe from fools, and tie the wiser souls
To thy false seeming! (II.iv.12–15)

THE CHINESE SPY.
DUPLICITY AND DISSIMULATION
IN GOLDSMITH'S *CHINESE LETTERS*

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Introduction: Eighteenth-century spies

'Spy' is a very frequent word in the literary production of the eighteenth century. A bibliographical query on the English Short Title Catalogue of the British Library in the time interval between 1700 and 1799 clearly reveals its extensive use. In 1704 John Dunton, the hack writer who J.P. Hunter extensively discussed in *Before Novels*,¹ wrote *The Athenian Spy*, purporting in its frontispiece to unveil "the secret letters which were sent to the Athenian Society by the Most Ingenious Ladies of the Three Kingdoms, Relating to the Management of their Affections. Being a Curious System of Love Cases, Platonic and Natural" (all of which is interspersed with some poems). The very same John Dunton published *The Hanover-Spy* (1718), whose long subtitle anticipates the "secret history of St James" and some "State Secrets as this Spy was privy to". A very conspicuous title in the list is Charles Gildon's *The Golden Spy* (1709), one of the first it-narratives in the English literature. Here, the spy is no less than gold itself cast in coins of different countries and ages, each able to tell secret stories of adultery, violence, and power displays in rich courts and aristocratic mansions. As Barbara M. Benedict suggests, the choice of the narrator in *The Golden Spy* was revelatory of new modes of knowledge: objects "were becoming the subjects of literature and culture", while subjectivity was collapsing "into objectivity under the pressure of handling, collecting, owning,

1 Paul J. Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990).

seeing, stepping around, and feeling things”.² The eighteenth-century concepts of spy and espionage might represent a meeting point between secrecy, observation, and agency. Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* records five entries for the verb “To Espy”:

1. To see a thing at a distance;
2. To discover a thing intended to be hid;
3. To see unexpectedly;
4. To discover as a spy;
5. To watch; to look about.

The meaning registered by Johnson was thus more general than what we now conceive of and indeed quite related to observation as a practice, though one that involves secrecy and disguise to a certain extent.

The results of the ESTC search for the word ‘spy’ in eighteenth-century literary works tend to mirror Johnson’s duplicity. A Dubliner publisher printed in 1767 *The city Spy-Glass; Or, Candidates mirror. Wherein the merits and pretensions of the several candidates are freely considered, and impartially examined* by a “Son of Candor” who associates the telescope with political enquiry; while in 1781 an anonymous “gentleman of fortune” had his *The complete modern London spy* published with the self-explaining subtitle “or, a real new, and universal disclosure, of the secret, nocturnal, and diurnal transactions, in and about the cities of London and Westminster”. Scrolling on, we find titles of striking diversity. There is an anonymous *The Foreign and Domestic Spy* (1701), a *Hertfordshire Spy* (1707), a *Dublin Spy* (1710), a *Country Spy* (1730?), a *German Spy* (1738), a *Court Spy* (1744), a *Midnight Spy* (1766), a *Sentimental Spy: a Novel in two volumes* (1773), an *Irish Spy* written by an “ex-Jesuit” (1779), *Facts, the Female Spy* by Mary Tonkin (1783), and several other publications from North America which we will not here take into account.

2 Barbara M. Benedict, “Encounters with the Object: Advertisements, Time, and Literary Discourse in the Early Eighteenth-Century Thing-Poem”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Winter, 2007), 193–207 (p.194).

The list, though in no way exhaustive, nonetheless shows a marked conflation of ‘spies’ with periodicals and letter writing. Let us simply name, in passing, two short-lived periodicals: the weekly *British Spy*, which starts to be published in 1727; and *The Scots Spy, or Critical Observer*, published in Edinburgh in 1776. Poetry was also part of the picture, as one can see in Edward Ward’s 1714 poem *The Field-Spy; Or, the Walking Observer*. Incidentally, Ward also penned the famous *London Spy* (1709) and *Female Policy Detected; Or, The Arts of a Designing Woman Laid Open* (1702).

Two major, canonical writers also make the list. In 1724, Eliza Haywood wrote *A Spy Upon the Conjurer*. In an interesting contribution, Kathryn R. King stresses the narrator’s “natural propensity for curiosity” which, King claims, is part of a “much larger cultural ambivalence about new forms of knowledge and new ways of knowing”. King also makes mention of Charles Gildon, whose prose fictions could be interpreted as harbingers of “the generic propensity of the novel to regard itself a trespasser in private places”.³ Curiosity is also an important feature of Daniel Defoe’s main characters, not limitedly to novels only. With his usual literary (and business) acumen, in 1718 Defoe (himself a spy) issued a continuation of Marana’s vastly successful eight volumes of *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* – Marana’s original volume was translated into English in 1694. It is finally worth recalling that in the frontispiece of *The Political History of the Devil* (1726) the pretend author is an “Invisible Spy”.

Overall, it is safe to say that ‘spy’ was a qualified synonym for an observer trading in information otherwise not immediately available, i.e. private information. This trade involved artifice and distance, and secrets were often meant as hard-to-obtain pieces of information of potentially instructive value. In order to better elicit them, observation could be enhanced by dissimulation and disguise. After having obtained precious knowledge, a spy was

3 Kathryn R King, “Spying Upon the Conjurer: Haywood, Curiosity, and ‘The Novel’ in the 1720s”, *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Making Genre: Studies in the Novel or Something like it, 1684-1762 (Summer 1998), 178–193 (p. 179).

also to process and spread information – that is, turning it into intelligence so as to instruct its readers. This final stage often took place in writing.

London seems to be the privileged setting for the eighteenth-century spy. For foreigners and Englishmen alike, London was a huge, often self-contradictory information repository, rich in opportunities and yet mysterious – if not dangerous altogether. For its more enterprising inhabitants like hack writers, curiosity and agency were *sine qua non* skills for business flourishing. Accordingly, dissimulation and duplicity were highly-needed stock for a writer aiming to make a living off the London writing market. As William H. McBurney puts it in a 1957 article about Marana's *Turkish Spy*,

Fictional works were attributed to the author of *The Turkish Spy* and the “spy” authenticating device rapidly came to share title-page claims with those of the “*Secret History*” and “*Authentic Memoirs*”. The word itself was deliberately used by authors, often in combination with other appeals to popular reading tastes.⁴

Goldsmith's Chinese Letters

Oliver Goldsmith's *Chinese Letters*, usually known as *The Citizen of the World*, is a very fine instance of these eighteenth-century threads. The genesis of this work, as related in Dobson's biography, in the introduction to the collected works edited by Arthur Friedman, and in Ronald S. Crane and Hamilton Jewett Smith's and William H. McBurney's contributions, is directly linked to the noun ‘spy’. Following his 1738-1742 *Lettres Juives*, the Marquis d'Argens published the *Lettres Chinoises* in 1739-1742. Both these works were immediately translated into English. Crane and Smith, in their classic 1926 study, remind us that “Like d'Argens' other works, [*Lettres Chinoises*] had readers in England almost from the start. A translation, under the title of

4 William H. McBurney, “The Authorship of the *Turkish Spy*”, *PMLA*, Vol. 72, No. 5 (Dec., 1957), 915–935 (p. 915).

Chinese Letters, appeared in 1741, and was reprinted, with the title changed to *The Chinese Spy*, in 1751”.⁵ Nine years later, Goldsmith, “without any indication that a series was intended”,⁶ started its contribution of one hundred and nineteen Chinese Letters to the *Public Ledger*. McBurney classifies it as perhaps the final instance of a legacy that, beginning with the *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy*, included works purporting “to offer similar blends of Oriental color, subjective character revelation, and European political secrets”.⁷

Why is the philosopher Chinese? James Prior, Goldsmith’s first biographer, gives us a clue about “the inception of the Chinese letters”:

It may gratify curiosity to know that his first design according to accounts of his friends was to make his hero a native of Morocco or Fez; but, reflecting on the rude nature of the people of Barbary, this idea was dropped. A Chinese was then chosen as offering more novelty of character than a Turk or Persian; and being equally advanced in the scale of civilization, could pass an opinion on all he saw better than the native of a more barbarous country.⁸

In the introduction to the *Citizen of the World* – the name given to the Chinese letters when some years later they were collected and revised with the addition of some periodical essays like *A City Night-Piece* –, Friedman also specifies how important it was for Goldsmith that the needed knowledge was “readily available in Louis Le Comte’s *Nouveaux mémoires sur l’état present de la Chine*, which he consulted in the third edition, published at Paris in 1697, and in J.B. Du Halde’s large collection, which he used in the English translation entitled *A Description of the Empire*

5 Ronald S. Crane and Hamilton Jewett Smith, “A French Influence on Goldsmith’s ‘Citizen of the World’”, *Modern Philology*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Aug., 1921), 83–92 (p. 83).

6 Arthur Friedman ed., *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), Introduction to *The Citizen of the World*, p. ix.

7 McBurney, p. 915, quoting Robert Adams Day, “The Epistolary Technique in English Prose Fiction, 1660–1740” (unpub. diss., Harvard, 1952), *passim*.

8 James Prior, *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* (London: John Murray, 1837), quoted in *Citizen of the World*, Introduction, pp. ix–x (italics mine).

of China, published [...] in 1738 and 1741". Reading Marquis d'Argens's *Lettres Chinoises* was the final push, "and from this work, whenever inspiration failed him, he was able to draw a sentence, a paragraph, or even an entire letter".⁹

Lien Chi Altangi as a spy

Now I would like to concentrate on the characters of the *Chinese Letters*, and especially on the Chinese philosopher Lien Chi Altangi. In this and the following section I will try to investigate how Altangi, a keen observer, behaves somewhat ambiguously and duplicitously. Coming from China and thus portraying London and English customs by comparison with (supposedly true) Chinese habits, we can behold Altangi in the process of integrating himself in the London community while retaining contact with the Chinese culture. This process involves duplicity and dissimulation, but the prize is very palatable for a spy: becoming able to spread very valuable information from and to both sides.

Altangi's letters do not necessarily constitute a coherent textual whole. In his influential 1976 article on "*The Citizen of the World* and Critical Method", Wayne Booth successfully shows that "much of Goldsmith's art is obscured by any predetermined quest for 'intrinsic' harmonies' [...] there is a genuine "art of the miscellaneous" to be analysed, and this is what we can do with Goldsmith's *Chinese Letters*, if we are only "not determined to find any particular known artistic form or established kind of unity, but simply looking for signs of skill".¹⁰ Booth's analysis begins with a beautiful sentence in letter CIX which contains the verb 'spy.' "The ignorant critic and dull remarker can readily spy blemishes in eloquence or morals, whose sentiments are not sufficiently elevated to observe a beauty; but such are judges neither of books nor of life [...]". It is from the standpoint of observation

9 Ibid.

10 Wayne C. Booth, "'The Self-Portraiture of Genius': 'The Citizen of the World' and Critical Method", *Modern Philology*, Vol. 73, No. 4, Part 2: A Supplement to Honor Arthur Friedman (May, 1976), S85–S96 (p. S86).

that we need to see how the “Chinese Spy” behaves, and what his duplicity consists of. Similarly to *Tristram Shandy* (appeared but one year before and made fun of in letter LIII), *Chinese Letters* is digressive and progressive at the same time. So while the book is composed of a series of observations, many of which could be expunged without danger for the reader, there is anyway a central plot along with a couple of sub-plots as well.

Even if the work cannot be strictly read as a coherent whole, there is also a progress in Altangi’s duplicity and dissimulation practices. As he starts discerning the difference between appearances and reality in his first days in the city, his attitude grows in complexity and he aims at integrating in the eighteenth-century London lifestyle. In the first letter, a merchant from Amsterdam introduces the Chinese Philosopher to a merchant in London, and we learn that Altangi “by frequently conversing with the English there [which we take it to be in China], [...] has learned the language, though entirely a stranger to their manners and customs” (16). In Letter II we understand that before coming to London Altangi has visited many Asian and European countries and that he finally makes his passage from Rotterdam to London (18). Altangi’s early fascination is at once dispelled as he acknowledges his “disappointment on entering London, to see no signs of that opulence so much talk’d abroad; [...] I am induced to conclude that the Nation is actually poor” (19-20). In letter IV Altangi mentions how he started off with a different idea of the English people, which undergoes change by experience: “You smile at hearing me praise the English for their politeness: you who have heard very different accounts from the missionaries at Pekin, who have seen such a different behaviour in their merchants and seamen at home” (30). The sentence sounds slightly ambiguous in its final deixis (*who* and *home*), an ambiguity that would go unnoticed but for Letter VI, where for the first time Fum Hoam, “first president of the ceremonial academy at Pekin”, replies to Altangi. Asking first how long his “enthusiasm for knowledge” will continue to obstruct his happiness and divide him from his connections in China, Fum Hoam, “with an heart full of sorrow”, informs Altangi that

Our great emperor's displeasure at your leaving China, contrary to the rules of our government, and the immemorial custom of the empire, has produced the most terrible effects. Your wife, daughter, and the rest of your family have been seized by his order, and appropriated to his use; all except your son are now the peculiar property of him who possesses all [...] (38).

Given Altangi's former long journeys, it comes as a surprise that the emperor's displeasure has struck only now. So it is not unsafe to suppose that Altangi made wrong political moves that have turned him into a *persona non grata*, a kind of villain in his own place. Is he perhaps suspected of too strong a sympathy toward Europeans and Englishmen in particular? Whatever the case, in the next letter Altangi reacts by submitting "to the stroke of heaven" (39) (and, the Editor reveals to us, with "little more than a rhapsody of sentences borrowed from Confucius"). Interestingly though, Fum Hoam continues his epistolary conversation with his friend in England, a risky choice that must be carried on in secrecy.

Altangi is now an exile. Days after his arrival in London, his identity has lost reference points, suddenly becoming fluid and under construction. From this point onwards, it is possible to see how the *discontented philosopher* duplicitously hovers between an Oriental and an English outlook. In this frame of mind, Altangi states his goal for his English stay:

Let European travellers cross seas and deserts merely to measure the height of a mountain, to describe the cataract of a river, or tell the commodities which every country may produce; merchants or geographers, perhaps, may find profit by such discoveries, but what advantage can accrue to a philosopher from such accounts, who is desirous of understanding the human heart, who seeks to know the *men* of every country, who desires to discover those differences which result from climate, religion, education, prejudice, and partiality. (40)

Altangi aims at becoming embedded in English culture to better understand human nature and cultural differences. He is now a stateless person but he nevertheless has a Chinese background that is not perfectly suited to avoid deception by English prostitutes

(he notices it quickly though, as the succeeding letter starts off with “I have been deceived”). On letter X he broods over the consideration that “Custom and necessity teach even barbarians the same art of dissimulation that ambition and intrigue inspire in the breasts of the polite” (48). Interestingly, Altangi often refers to the Englishmen as polite and throughout the text he complains that they are not what they seem to be (Letter XI). Dissimulation in England is pervasive, as Altangi implies while discussing fear of death – “But observe his behaviour in circumstances of approaching sickness, and you will find his actions give his assertions the lie” (53) – and during a disappointing tour of Westminster Abbey.

Altangi spies and is in turn spied. His reaction to being observed usually involves dissimulation and duplicity, which he seems to develop out of his observations. When he is invited by a lady of distinction, Altangi comes dressed “after the fashion of Europe”, in a sense successfully recalling the eighteenth-century masquerades discussed by Terry Castle,¹¹ being mistaken for an Englishman. However, as soon as his true origins are revealed, the lady’s eyes “sparkled with unusual vivacity. [...] What an unusual share of *somethingness* in his whole appearance.” The lady goes on with a list of Orientalist *topoi* which Altangi uselessly tries to contrast by qualified replies. He soon finds himself acting the Chinese (“I now found it vain to contradict the lady [...]: so was resolved rather to act the disciple than the instructor”), an act of dissimulation that is useful though fatiguing; so that, “tired of acting with dissimulation”, he takes leave (64–65). Understanding the mechanisms of ‘Falshood’ as perpetrated by the English (and Europeans at large) is crucial to Altangi’s development: letter XVI interestingly begins with a reference to the missionaries and his hybrid formation: “I know not whether I am more obliged to the Chinese missionaries for the instruction I have received from them, or prejudiced by the falshoods they have made me believe”. In letter XXXIII, where another invitation is issued because of his China origins, he laments the “presumptions of these

11 Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986).

islanders” that in turn accuse him of being “some Englishman in disguise; his very visage has nothing of the true exotic barbarity” (142); and during the dinner with the London sinophiles he refuses “a plate of bear’s claws” and “a slice of bird’s nests,” being “dishes with which I was utterly unacquainted” (143). In another occasion, however, he states that “being a perfect Epicure in reading, plain beef or solid mutton will never do. I’m for a Chinese dish of bear’s claws and bird’s nests” (387), reinforcing his ambiguity by means of irony.

William Hazlitt once noted that *The Citizen of the World* “contrives to give an abstracted and perplexing view of things [...] I confess the process it too ambiguous and full of intricacy to be very amusing to my plain understanding”.¹² Fuzzy irony is one of Goldsmith’s methods to have his speaker Lien Chi Altangi enhance the complexity of his duplicitous English-Chinese status. While we certainly share Ferguson’s call to circumstantiate Goldsmith’s irony,¹³ some letters adopt a blatantly ironic approach. This is clear from an example in Letter XXIV, where Altangi amusingly mocks English doctors by claiming that

there must be something strangely obstinate in an English patient, who refuses so much health upon such easy terms; [...] there are many here who now and then think proper to be sick; only sick did I say? There are some who even think proper to die! [...] I’m amazed, my dear Fum Hoam, that these doctors who know what an obstinate set of people they have to deal with, have never thought of attempting to revive the dead (102–103).

This detectable irony is immediately followed by another consideration about dissimulation, as Altangi observes that “[t]he more ignorant the practitioner, the less capable is he thought of deceiving” (103). A somewhat more subtle irony is also at work in the letters dedicated to “sight and monsters” (XLV) and the glass

12 Charles A. Knight, “Ironic Loneliness: The Case of Goldsmith’s Chinaman”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Jul., 1983), 347–364 (p. 349).

13 Oliver W. Ferguson, “Goldsmith as Ironist”, *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (Spring, 1984), 212–228.

of Lao, which reveals the true nature of the beholders stripped off of all false appearances (XLVI).

For all his love for philosophy and truth, Altangi is surrounded by connections with what he terms “inconsistent conduct”. Letter XXVI describes the character of the man in black, whom Altangi is contracting an intimacy with. “He takes as much pains to hide his feelings as an hypocrite would to conceal his indifference; but on every unguarded moment the mask drops off, and reveals himself to the most superficial observer” (109). Notably, the man in black is also associated with the word ‘dissimulation.’ As he meets a wretch “who, in the deepest distress still aimed at good humour”, he cannot but follow his instincts, so that Altangi notes that “his dissimulation had forsaken him” (112). The man in black himself (his real name is to the reader entirely concealed) confirms this tendency to have feelings and behaviours at odds with each other, by claiming that “[i]f a wretch solicits my pity, I observe that the world is filled with impostors, and take a certain method of not being deceived by never relieving” (120), a statement in stark contrast with Altangi’s observations. However, as readers we should also take care of not relying too much on Altangi’s statements, especially since he takes great pains to cast doubt on the sincerity and educational values of artworks and books, as we can see in his report from the club of authors (XXX) and the meeting with the bookseller that invites Liam Chi Altangi to put his name to a history of China (LI). The philosopher also starkly condemns “the falsehoods with which the books of the Europeans are filled” (69), in particular referring to his education by the European missionaries. Wrong expectations are at the root of his belonging and not belonging to the English community, and though he is ready to specify that “having been born in China” he has “sagacity enough to detect imposture”, this does not always prove true.

Fum Hoam’s replies and the conclusion

Fum Hoam’s replies are particularly interesting to determine Altangi’s profile. There are but five letters written by him, all of

which draw some criticism towards Altangi's considerations and his pro-European ideas. In Letter VI, Fum Hoam is very sceptical about his choice, and points out very clearly that because of his imprudence, his conditions has shifted "from opulence, a tender family, surrounding friends, and your master's esteem [...] to want, persecution; and still worse, to our mighty monarch's displeasure". Letter XLII continues along the same lines, and Fum Hoam sketches a stark contrast between China and Europe in terms of history and politics, where China has the lion share of "great actions", as the subtitle of the letter suggests. Notably, what is relevant to Fum Hoam (as a representative of China) is political intelligence from Europe. Letter LVI is related to Russia, German Empire, Sweden, France, and Netherlands insofar as they provide a term of comparison with China. As the famous prediction about the independence of France implies, Altangi is instrumental in providing China with political intelligence; however, he is suspected of being unreliable as an agent. Particularly in Fum Hoam's fourth letter (LXXXVII), Altangi is heavily criticized not simply out of a divergence in sympathies ("You tell me the people of Europe are wise; but where lies their wisdom?", 353) but especially for the political consequences of an excessive reliance on Russia, the middle ground between East and West. Between the lines of sentences like

I cannot avoid beholding the Russian empire as the natural enemy of the more western parts of Europe, as an enemy possessed of great strength, and, from the nature of the government, every day threatening to become more powerful. (353)

we can perceive irritation towards Altangi excessive inclination toward Europeans, who are in turn amply condemned – "Believe me, my friend, I can't sufficiently condemn the politics of Europe" (354). Letter CXVIII, finally, has Fum Hoam on an embassy to Japan, where he condemns the Dutch for their meanness (which marks another not-so-covert attack on Altangi, who resided in the Netherlands and still writes to the Dutch merchant in charge of his money).

All in all, from Fum Hoam's missives we may infer that Altangi is a double-agent of sorts. Autonomously leaving China to explore the world, he provides valuable information about near and far-away countries. However, for the Chinese government he soon becomes politically ambiguous, so that Fum Hoam has to keep him in check. Altangi perceives this situation clearly, and he acknowledges his dubious status with what seems to be a sardonic introduction to Letter XVIII:

In every letter I expect accounts of some new revolutions in China, some strange occurrence in the state, or disaster among my private acquaintance. I open every packet with tremulous expectation, and am agreeably disappointed when I find my friends and my country continuing in felicity. (261)

As becomes clear in other textual portions, here Altangi is willingly and methodically unclear. In the letter about "the fear of mad dogs ridiculed," entirely devoted to the way information gets twisted on purpose, Altangi draws himself as a "neutral being", for whom it is "pleasant enough [...] to mark the stages of this national disease" (287). He often mentions his process of cultural integration, as in "I have interested myself so long in the concerns of this people, that I am almost become an Englishman" (Letter LXXXV); or, for instance, in his memorizing by heart the names of famous Englishmen (CIX). Yet, given that his proposals of cultural syncretism are resolved into an irony of difficult detectability (as in letter CX, where he proposes to introduce trifling profession in the courts of England), it is clear that Altangi is often deceiving. A possible explanation for this is provided in letter CIII to the merchant of Amsterdam. The Chinese philosopher first considers quitting England and, expressing the intention of dying in his native country, claims that a city like London

is the soil for great virtues and great vices; the villain can soon improve here in the deepest mysteries of deceiving; and the practical philosopher can every day meet new incitements to mend his honest intentions. (404)

The conclusion (CXXIII) leaves us with a final touch of Altangi's ambiguity that perhaps is truly derived from his staying in London. Although he had previously stated his intention to live with his son Hingpo, Altangi finally pushes for the marriage of Hingpo with Zelis — the daughter of the Man in Black. Along with the latter, as ambiguous a companion as himself, Altangi makes his status and purpose explicit. Casting aside both his English and Chinese identity, he concludes stating that

As for myself the world being but one city to me, I don't much care in which of the streets, I happen to reside, I shall therefore spend the remained of life in examining the manners of different countries. [...] *They must often change says Confucius, who would be constant in happiness or wisdom.* (476)

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DOUBLE AGENTS, MULTIPLE MOTIVES: JOSEPH CONRAD'S SPIES

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While identifying the differences between detective fiction and espionage novels, Alan Hepburn observes that “spies deal with betrayal and double crosses the way detectives deal with motives and crimes”,¹ thus pointing out at the same time the essential prerequisite of espionage, which presupposes allegiance to a country or to an ideology, and the difficulty of maintaining that loyalty, since

spies, like most people, temper ideology with private motives. Intrigue occurs where psychological and ideological commitments overlap and mask each other. The spy embodies ambiguous allegiances, some declared, some concealed. The spy therefore stands as a cipher for conflicts waged among national, international, familial, human, humanitarian, ethical, and romantic identities.²

The emergence of these conflicts is even more explicit in the role of the double agent, though, from what has been stated above, duplicity is clearly part of espionage itself as it is generated by the multiplicity of allegiances and the potential crisis of belonging. John Atkins points out the presence of conflicting motives in his definition of the double agent as “a man who works for both sides and whose priorities of loyalty are unknown, often even to himself”.³ It is no wonder, then, that a writer like Joseph Conrad could turn his attention to the world of espionage, considering he

1 Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 25.

2 Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue*, p. xiv.

3 John Atkins, *The British Spy Novel: Styles in Treachery* (London; New York: John Calder; Riverrun, 1984), p. 204.

had always been attracted by the theme of the double and, furthermore, felt duplicity as part of his own identity, so as to write in a letter to a Polish friend that “*homo duplex* has in my case more than one meaning”.⁴ This analysis focuses thus on the portraits of double agents, with specific attention to the motives that lie behind the spies’ behaviour, as they represent for the writer an interesting way of exploring the complexity of human action, and the difficulties of commitment for the characters involved as well as for the narrator.

Apart from a brief sketch in the short story “The Informer”, the double agent is portrayed more thoroughly by Conrad in two of his novels, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, neither of which can be considered spy novels, as the spy intrigues are introduced in far more complex plots; nevertheless, in both works the topic of espionage is dealt with in a political as well as psychological perspective and the two protagonists, Verloc and Razumov, “are the first double agents to be painted as serious characters in fiction”.⁵ As we will see, ideological allegiance, when present, does not represent the driving motive for either character, while psychological reasons and traits of the personality determine the characters’ ambiguous choices. Even the term ‘choice’ is not necessarily appropriate as it implies a determination that, if applicable to a certain extent to Verloc, does not seem to characterize Razumov’s actions, often the result of necessity and coercion rather than free will.

Despite the focus on psychological aspects, the analysis of the contemporary political context is by no means secondary. *The Secret Agent* is certainly concerned with the theme of anarchism, “the enemy within” often supported by foreign powers in order to create disruption against the established order of society. The author undertook accurate research regarding the actual incident of the Greenwich Bomb Outrage of 1894 organized by anarchist

4 Zdzislaw Najder, *Conrad’s Polish Background: Letters to and from Polish Friends* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 240.

5 John Gardner, “The Espionage Novel” in *Whodunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense and Spy Fiction* ed. by H.R.F. Keating (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1982), pp. 70–80, p. 73.

Martial Bourdin, from which he took inspiration, and the memories of the Assistant Commissioner in charge of the investigation, Sir Robert Anderson; furthermore, he acquired information on anarchist activities from his friend Ford Madox Ford and his cousin, both anarchist sympathizers in their youth, as well as from the anarchist literature of the time.⁶

However, unlike other novels of the same period, which depicted anarchism as a seriously threatening force and whose aim was that of awakening the readers to the need of fighting against it, Conrad does not represent it as a really disruptive force, as the anarchists described – with the exception of the Professor – appear weak and more or less overtly linked to people or institutions representative of the Establishment, while their behaviour shows their substantial conformism. As Jacques Berthoud points out, “the central issue in the novel is not how anarchism should be judged, but what anarchism reveals about the England of the time”;⁷ an England in which the institutions in charge of protecting society reveal their inner conflicts and in which members of high society⁸ sympathize with anarchist ideals underestimating its potential dangers.

In the same way, *Under Western Eyes* is centred on the opposing forces characterizing the Russian spirit, autocracy and revolution. Here Conrad, whose views were notoriously conservative but who also considered Russia as an enemy of his Poland, does

6 Conrad's sources for the novel are reported in detail by Norman Sherry in *Conrad's Western World* and by Eloise Knapp in *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: a Critical Study*. With reference to Sir Anderson's memories, titled *Side Lights on the Home Rule Movement*, Knapp points out that the book was published only in May 1906, when Conrad had already started the novel, which partly accounts for the late introduction of the characters of the police department.

7 Jacques Berthoud, “The Secret Agent” in Stape, J.H. *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 100–21, p. 106.

8 Ian Watt observes that Conrad, before starting the novel, ‘had already had close personal experience of the interpenetration of order and anarchy in the political and social order’ (p. 248); among his friends, in fact, were people like Edward Garnett, Robert Cunninghame Graham and Ford Madox Ford, who were attracted by the rebellious feature of anarchism but whose families were connected with the establishment.

not describe revolution in totally negative terms. It is true that the narrator, the Professor of languages, refuses the revolution on the ground that

the best characters do not come to the front. A violent revolution falls into the hands of narrow-minded fanatics and of tyrannical hypocrites at first. Afterwards comes the turn of all pretentious intellectual failures of the time. Such are the chiefs and the leaders [...]. The scrupulous and the just, the noble, humane, and devoted natures; the unselfish and the intelligent may begin a movement- but it passes away from them.⁹

Yet, the novel is peopled with noble figures among the revolutionaries, like Natalia and the *dame de compagnie*, and Haldin's ideals are conveyed with absolute respect. His rebellion against autocracy is in fact a rebellion to a fatalistic attitude generated by an oppressive system, since in Conrad's opinion, expressed in his essay "Autocracy and War",

from the very first ghastly dawn of her existence as a state, she [Russia] had to breathe the atmosphere of despotism, she found nothing but the arbitrary will of an obscure Autocrat at the beginning and end of her organization [...]. Autocracy and nothing else in the world has moulded her institutions, and with the poison of slavery drugged the national temperament into the apathy of a hopeless fatalism.¹⁰

Interestingly, in both works the double agent becomes the embodiment of conflicting forces in the social system; Verloc represents a combination of anarchism with a *bourgeois* way of thinking, revealed in the novel through the representation of the institutions in charge of the protection of citizens, the role of the press, and the total faith in science and progress of the whole society. Likewise, Razumov at first chooses to be loyal to autocracy but ends up revealing a rebellious side which brings him closer to the revolutionary Haldin. The presence of this inner conflict de-

9 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* ed. by Paul Kirschner, rev. edn. (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 97.

10 Joseph Conrad, "Autocracy and War" in Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* ed. by Paul Kirschner, rev. edn. (London: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 309–334, p. 44.

termines a crisis of conscience that will find a solution only in an open confession of his betrayal. As already pointed out, though, the political dimension is mixed with private and more personal motives.

Before analysing the characters of Verloc and Razumov in detail, some brief observations on the short story "The Informer: an Ironic Tale" are worth mentioning. Published for the first time in December 1906 and later included in the collection of stories *A Set of Six* (1908), it represents an early study of issues, characters and style (as the irony of the title suggests) that will reappear in *The Secret Agent*. Here Conrad explores the world of anarchism, including people like the daughter of a government official, ready to support the movement as a way of asserting her individuality, and the Professor, "the true spirit of an extreme revolutionist",¹¹ who will be further developed as such in the novel. Besides, he also introduces a first sketch of a double agent, who undergoes a transformation from "Sevrin the noted anarchist" to "the most systematic of informers".¹²

The motives of this change are revealed by Mr X after reading Sevrin's diary, a theme which will reappear in *Under Western Eyes*. If Sevrin had been at first attracted to anarchism by the political ideal of humanitarianism, he had then become an informer when he was no longer supported by his optimism: "he doubted and became lost".¹³ As Sevrin keeps repeating when his double agency is found out, he acted "from conviction", revealing at least an allegiance to political ideology. Even in this story, though, the personal traits play an important role in the change undergone by Sevrin; as Mr X points out, "he was not enough of an optimist" to pursue his ideal to the end.¹⁴

The figure of the secret agent acquires greater relevance in the eponymous novel, serialized between October 1906 and January 1907 and the same year revised and published as a book. How-

11 Joseph Conrad, "The Informer: An Ironic Tale", in Joseph Conrad, *A Set of Six* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1916), pp. 87–125, p. 108.

12 Joseph Conrad, "The Informer", p. 118 and p. 114.

13 Joseph Conrad, "The Informer", p. 123.

14 Joseph Conrad, "The Informer", p. 124.

ever, if the title seems to suggest a plot characterized by action, it is instead an unadventurous and unheroic story based on political intrigue and espionage but dealt with in an unexciting way, as also pointed out in a contemporary review reported by Ian Watt in *Conrad: The Secret Agent: A Casebook*:

To pick up *The Secret Agent* with the expectation that it is a shilling shocker [...] would be a serious mistake. Nevertheless it contains the stuff whereof shilling shockers are made, but in Mr Conrad's developing hand it becomes something far different and far superior, even if less interesting. [...] What dramatic and narrative power there is in *The Secret Agent* is isolated and fragmentary, due more to Mr Conrad's exceptional power at the analysis of character and motive than to his skill as a teller of tales.¹⁵

Certainly not a hero, Verloc is though accurately portrayed in all his complexity, both in his role of double agent and in his private sphere, as the novel focuses on a double plot, one public and political regarding the failed attempt to blow up the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, the other turning around the destruction of Verloc's whole family.

His career is partly summarized in his dialogue with Mr Vladimir. After being caught during his first mission (regarding the stealing of French gun designs), betrayed by a woman, he got involved in activities as *agent provocateur* mixing with anarchist groups and cooperating with a foreign embassy, never specified but legitimately identifiable as the Russian one. His role acquired more prestige under Baron Stott-Wartenheim, who trusted him in the delivery of confidential dispatches, so secret that even Verloc came to be referred to under the coded name of agent Δ. However, the people Verloc is in contact with do not consider his role as crucial. Vladimir, after reading his reports, accuses him of being useless so that the positive image that Verloc possesses of himself, determined by vanity and self-complacency, is totally deflated. Even his anarchist friends tend to emphasize his mediocrity, as it can be gathered by Ossipon's comments upon him:

15 Ian Watt, *Conrad: The Secret Agent: A Casebook* (Basingstoke; London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 52.

More useful than important. Man of no ideas. Years ago he used to speak at meetings- in France, I believe. Not very well, though [...].The only talent he showed really was his ability to elude the attentions of the police somehow. Here, for instance, he did not seem to be looked after very closely.¹⁶

The only ability mentioned is ironically referred to Verloc's role of double agent, who also passes secret information on the anarchists' movements to Chief Inspector Heat.

This second activity is consistent with the *bourgeois* side of Verloc, who recognizes social institutions, as also confirmed by his choice, paradoxical for an anarchist, of getting married. "The protection of the social mechanism",¹⁷ as he states, represents his mission and he appears almost melodramatic when he describes to Winnie, unaware of what his tragic end will be, the risks of his job:

And I have been playing my head at that game. You didn't know. Quite right, too. What was the good of telling you that I stood the risk of having a knife stuck into me any time these seven years we've been married?¹⁸

Again, though, Verloc's choice of cooperation with the Establishment has little to do with political idealism, since it seems more determined by the attempt to live a quiet *bourgeois* life; the money he receives from the foreign power helps him as financial support to the limited income of the squalid shop he runs, while the connections with the police reduce the risks of being incriminated both for his contacts with anarchists and for the items he sells.

His double agency is mainly chosen for personal comfort, as a possibility for settling down in his routine of idleness, the dominant trait of his personality:

16 Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* ed. by Martin Seymour-Smith, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 97-8.

17 Joseph Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 54.

18 Joseph Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 216.

His idleness was not hygienic, but it suited him very well. He was in a manner devoted to it with a sort of inert fanaticism, or perhaps rather with a fanatical inertness. Born of industrious parents for a life of toil, he had embraced indolence from an impulse as profound, as inexplicable and as imperious as the impulse which directs a man's preference for one particular woman in a given thousand. He was too lazy even for a mere demagogue, for a workman orator, for a leader of labour. It was too much trouble.¹⁹

It is self-evident that, for an *agent*, Verloc acts very little; therefore, when Mr Vladimir reminds him that the secret service is not a "philanthropic institution" and asks him facts, he feels menaced in "his repose and his security" and, in an extreme act of cowardice, sends his mentally-ill brother-in-law in his place.

The constant intertwining of motives related to the social role with private reasons represents however a dominant feature not only in the portrayal of the double agent. It regards the anarchists, accused by the Professor himself of having no character, lacking independent thought and, above all, depending on social conventions; in the same way, the ambiguity of motives strikes also the very institution supposed to guarantee law and order. Neither the Assistant Commissioner nor Chief Inspector Heat seem interested in searching for truth for its own sake. Carrying out their investigation they try to protect their own little interests: the Assistant Commissioner wants to avoid the involvement of Michaelis, as the lady patroness of Michaelis and his wife are on friendly terms, while Chief Inspector Heat wants to keep Verloc out of the investigation, as he is his own informer and has contributed to his rapid career. In order to defend his own reputation and exploiting the 'rules of the game', which involve the legal system but also an unreliable press only looking for scoops, he deliberately tries to shift the blame on Michaelis, though aware he is probably innocent:

For, if Michaelis no doubt knew something about this outrage, the Chief Inspector was fairly certain that he did not know too much. This

19 Joseph Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 52.

was just as well. He knew much less – the Chief Inspector was positive – than certain other individuals he had in his mind, but whose arrest seemed to him inexpedient, besides being a more complicated matter, on account of the rules of the game. The rules of the game did not protect so much Michaelis, who was an ex-convict. It would be stupid not to take advantage of legal facilities, and the journalists who had written him up with emotional gush would be ready to write him down with emotional indignation.²⁰

Instead of cooperating on the case, we see the Assistant Commissioner and the Inspector work separately to reach their own aims. Paradoxically, though, their investigation proves effective, as the political case is quickly solved, while they are unable to prevent the tragic effects on the Verlocs.

The way Conrad describes the inner relationships within the police, where official tasks are mixed with personal ambitions and hidden motives, and where therefore no one can ever be trusted, will have a significant follow-up in later spy fiction. The organization, which seems to be an autonomous character, is described not only in terms of loyalty to the system, but characterized by a certain amount of secrecy within it, as clearly stated in the following extract:

A department is to those it employs a complex personality with ideas and even fads of its own. It depends on the loyal devotion of its servants, and the devoted loyalty of trusted servants is associated with a certain amount of affectionate contempt, which keeps it sweet, as it were. By a benevolent provision of Nature no man is a hero to his valet, or else the heroes would have to brush their own clothes. Likewise no department appears perfectly wise to the intimacy of its workers. A department does not know so much as some of its servants. Being a dispassionate organism, it can never be perfectly informed. It would not be good for its efficiency to know too much.²¹

However, secrecy is a relative concept and, if at times it is better not to reveal everything, its effectiveness depends on the way

20 Joseph Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 132.

21 Joseph Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 109.

it is used, as the Assistant Commissioner observes when rebuking the Chief Inspector: “Your idea of secrecy seems to consist in keeping the chief of your department in the dark. That’s stretching it perhaps a little too far, isn’t it?”²² For the same reason the Assistant Commissioner holds a negative opinion of espionage activities, as they can potentially create more damage than advantage:

In principle, I should lay it down that the existence of secret agents should not be tolerated, as tending to augment the positive dangers of the evil against which they are used. That the spy will fabricate his information is a mere commonplace. But in the sphere of political and revolutionary action, relying partly on violence, the professional spy has every facility to fabricate the very facts themselves, and will spread the double evil of emulation in one direction, and of panic, hasty legislation, unreflecting hate, in the other.²³

It is worth pointing out that the difficulty of trusting the right people and the hidden motives that dominate the political and public sphere in the novel are mirrored in the plot regarding Verloc’s family. The fact that *The Secret Agent* plays on the close relationship between public and private is clear from the very first chapter, where Conrad lingers on the description of the shop, with a part open to the public and a “back parlour” leading to the private side of the building “in which Mr Verloc carried on his business of a seller of shady wares, exercised his vocation of a protector of society, and cultivated his domestic virtues”.²⁴

Verloc’s marriage lies, at a superficial level, on mutual trust: Winnie considers him a good husband and she even encourages him to spend more time with Stevie, enjoying the idea that they look like father and son; in the same way, Verloc, “inclined to put his trust in any woman who had given herself to him”, trusts his

22 Joseph Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 140.

23 Joseph Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 144. This quotation cannot but remind spy fiction readers of Graham Greene’s sarcastic description of British Intelligence in *Our Man in Havana*, where agent James Wormold invents secret information, including a fictitious network of spies, thus causing real victims.

24 Joseph Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 47.

wife and believes he is being “loved for himself”. However, as the narrator observes,

their accord was perfect, but it was not precise. It was a tacit accord, congenial to Mrs Verloc’s incuriosity and to Mr Verloc’s habits of mind, which were indolent and secret. They refrained from going to the bottom of facts and motives.²⁵

The real motives have been kept reciprocally hidden. For Mr Verloc marriage suits his bourgeois nature and, moreover, he has set up his business with his wife’s money. Winnie has chosen Verloc not “for himself”, but because he accepted the presence of her mother and brother in their family. Even the institution of marriage is thus based on superficial loyalties and unmentionable secrets.

In this context, public or private, there are no heroes and Verloc betrays everyone at all levels: Winnie, who had believed in his genuine attention towards Stevie; his anarchist friends, who understand they have been spied upon all the time; Chief Inspector Heat and Mr Vladimir, when he decides to confess his activity as secret agent in exchange for protection. The figure of the secret agent, though, is crucial because it becomes representative of man’s social condition in the city, as pointed out by Jacques Berthoud:

the figure of Verloc, which gives the novel its title, becomes paradigmatic, for it suggests that in metropolitan life every citizen is in effect a secret agent- in the sense that his or her social roles become mere masks, external to the self, and thus incapable of nourishing the self. [...] Verloc himself lives off envy and rancour as an anarchist, departmental ambitions as a police informer, reactionary conceit as an embassy spy, and prurience as a shopkeeper; but as a result his identity dissolves into a ‘moral nihilism’ that becomes utterly unable to imagine why to use Stevie as he does is a crime, or why to suffer his loss as Winnie does is more than an inconvenience.²⁶

25 Joseph Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 222.

26 Jacques Berthoud, pp. 118–19.

Double-agency, simulation and moral nihilism seem to pervade the whole atmosphere of the novel and appear strongly affected by the setting of a city which looks more as a jungle²⁷ than as a centre of civilization. This is the reason that led Conrad to justify aspects of his work in the note of 1920 against criticisms “based on the ground of sordid surroundings and the moral squalor of the tale”.²⁸

The political theme and the issues of trust and betrayal are significant also in *Under Western Eyes* (1911), whose setting is split between St Petersburg, where the crucial episode regarding Haldin’s revolutionary act and Razumov’s betrayal take place, and Geneva, where the narration focuses on the inhabitants of La Petite Russie. The effects of the political world in the private lives of individuals in a Russia torn between autocracy and revolution are seen through the experiences narrated by a number of characters and, most emblematically, through Razumov who, unlike the other characters, is described as a person deliberately seeking non-commitment.

The reader is in fact told that “in discussion he was easily swayed by argument and authority. With his younger compatriots he took the attitude of an inscrutable listener, a listener of the kind that hears you out intelligently and then- just changes the subject”,²⁹ while in his first conversation with Councillor Mikulin, Ramuzov declares himself a “Russian with patriotic instincts [...] developed by a faculty of independent thinking – of detached thinking. In that respect I am more free than any social democratic revolution could make me”.³⁰

27 The novel is rich in descriptions in which city life is compared to the animal world (e.g. ‘They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror, too, perhaps’ (Joseph Conrad, *Secret Agent*, p. 103)), while inanimate objects seem to acquire a life of their own (e.g. Verloc’s hat in the final scene).

28 Joseph Conrad, “Author’s Note” in Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* ed. by Martin Seymour-Smith, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 37–43, p. 37.

29 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* ed. by Paul Kirschner, rev. edn. (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 6.

30 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 71.

Razumov's attitude is also helped by his lack of family ties, being an illegitimate child, and absence of close friendships, so that, given his utter loneliness, he defines himself only in relation to his country: "He was as lonely in the world as a man swimming in the deep sea. The word Razumov was the mere label of a solitary individuality [...]. His closest parentage was defined in the statement that he was a Russian";³¹ his allegiance to the country is thus rooted in a psychological need to define his own identity, rather than on an ideological basis, which accounts for his outburst in a conversation with Peter Ivanovitch: "I don't want anyone to claim me. But Russia *can't* disown me. She cannot! [...] I am *it!*"³²

Despite his firm intention of being guided only by reason, as the name Razumov suggests, the impossibility of independence and non-involvement becomes clear with the arrival of Haldin who, after the attempt on Mr de P-, introduces himself in Razumov's life, counting on his "confidence": "I want to guide my conduct by reasonable convictions," he says, "but what security have I against something [...] walking in upon me as I sit here?"³³ Razumov feels therefore compelled to take sides: either he will help Haldin, thus becoming involved with the revolutionaries, or he will choose autocracy and denounce him, thus betraying Haldin's trust in him.

Razumov feels annoyed by this "complicity forced upon him", because it puts an end to his will of detachment, and he justifies his decision to betray Haldin on the ground of the very definition of the word betrayal: "What is betrayal? They talk of a man betraying his country, his friends, his sweetheart. There must be a moral bond first. All a man can betray is his conscience".³⁴ After pointing out all the nuances of the word confidence in the novel (trust, boldness, secret or private), Allan Hepburn observes that the confidence Razumov inspires, which does not imply reciprocal agreement, puts him constantly in "situations that compro-

31 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 10.

32 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 148.

33 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 57.

34 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 28.

mise his solipsism”, in Russia as in Geneva with the revolutionaries as well as with Nathalie. Complicity cannot be avoided.³⁵

Confidence, however, has consequences not only on the person receiving it, but also on those who seek it:

The act of ‘giving’ one’s confidence away suggests a touching act of friendship but one that also signifies a degree of loss of control over oneself. The gift entails a sacrifice of privacy. Once someone else shares our secrets, we place ourselves, to some extent, at their mercy.³⁶

This is certainly true for Haldin, who will be arrested and die after refusing to confess, but also applies to Razumov who, feeling the need to be understood, resorts to the confidence of Prince K. and then of the police, compelled afterwards to work for them. Razumov becomes in fact victim of the astuteness of Councillor Mikulin, able to exploit the side of men that allowed

to obtain a solid grasp and a perfect command.[...] It did not matter to him what it was- vanity, despair, love, hate, greed, intelligent pride or stupid conceit, it was all one to him as long as the man could be made to serve. The obscure, unrelated young student Razumov, in that moment of great moral loneliness, was allowed to feel that he was an object of interest to a small group of people of high position. Prince K- was persuaded to intervene personally [...] And there was some pressure, too, besides the persuasiveness. Mr Razumov was always being made to feel that he had committed himself.³⁷

Razumov’s recruitment as a spy shows the ability of Mikulin to balance persuasion, obtained through deep knowledge of men’s weaknesses, and blackmail; being unwillingly recruited, though, he always appears a reluctant spy, never convinced of “the reality of his mission”³⁸ and bound to betray Mikulin’s plans.

35 Allan Hepburn, “Above Suspicion: Audience and Deception in *Under Western Eyes*”, *Studies in the Novel* 24.3 (1992): 282–297. www.jstor.org/stable/29532873. 21 03 2013, 289–90.

36 Allan Hepburn, “Above Suspicion”, p. 290.

37 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 216–17.

38 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 223.

Forced to play a role which is so closely related to his sense of guilt, Razumov reveals all the psychological difficulties of being a spy, obsessed by the paranoia of being spied upon and scared at the idea of revealing his true identity: when talking to Peter Ivanovitch he says to himself “Curse him, [...] he is waiting behind his spectacles for me to give myself away”, and at the end of the conversation he asks himself “How am I to go on day after day if I have no more power of resistance—moral resistance?”;³⁹ similarly, when Sophia Antonovna asks him if he is only playing a part, the narrator observes:

Razumov had felt that woman’s observation of him like a physical contact, like a hand resting lightly on his shoulders. At that moment he received the mysterious impression of her having made up her mind for a closer grip. He stiffened himself inwardly to bear it without betraying himself [...],⁴⁰

a stiffening which is visible in the almost immobile facial expressions.

Furthermore, he finds it hard to make up lies to hide his betrayal and to use words to deceive everybody; when he finally understands he is no longer being suspected, he feels relief and thinks “No more need of lies. I shall have only to listen and to keep my scorn from getting the upper hand of my caution”.⁴¹ The sense of relief, though, lasts very little as the only way of coming to terms with his own conscience will be confession, both private (through his memories) and public (to Nathalie and the revolutionists). This gesture also shows Razumov’s “revolutionary” soul, as he refuses “his instrumentality within an espionage plot”;⁴² just as he detested being forced to have a role in Haldin’s plot, he does not accept now to be a pawn in the game orchestrated by Mikulin. He deceives in this way both the revolutionists and the representatives of autocracy, refusing loyalties that have been imposed

39 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 162–63.

40 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 178.

41 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 201.

42 Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue*, p. 91.

upon him. The only not coerced act is significantly his confession, which comes when he is no longer suspected, in response to an allegiance which is not political but to his own conscience, betrayed with Haldin's betrayal. This explains the author's sympathetic attitude towards Razumov, underlined in the "Author's Note" of 1920, as he represents "an average conscience" and he never therefore appears "monstruous" in his "distraction".⁴³

The issues of spying and betraying are not exhausted with Razumov's story. In the novel there is in fact horrible Necator, known among the revolutionaries for his violence against the police and in charge of executions, who reacts to Razumov's confession without waiting for a common decision and makes him deaf; he turns out to be a spy himself and will ultimately be betrayed by Mikulin, probably afraid or tired of his methods. Above all, though, these topics appear crucial also at the level of narration, in a sort of metanarrative game. The Professor of languages in a way appears like a spy "out in the cold", in foreign territory not only because he is abroad, but because he explicitly declares he does not understand the Russians. He is often seen spying at a distance on Razumov and on Nathalie during their walks in the gardens or in town, he overhears conversations and has his own informer, the wife of a university Professor. He has the mission of reading the signs of the Russian political conflict, collecting clues at times wrongly interpreted and passing them to the reader; not an easy task, since "to us Europeans of the West, all ideas of political plots and conspiracies seem childish, crude inventions for the theatre or a novel".⁴⁴

The Professor's attitude towards the readers looks contradictory: he claims his lack of interpretation as the story is based on Razumov's document; on the other hand, he in fact attempts explanations of events that mislead the readers. This shows that even for the narrator non-commitment is impossible and that, with his way of telling the story, he can deceive the reader's confidence

43 Joseph Conrad, "Author's Note" in Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* ed. by Paul Kirschner, rev. edn. (London: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. lxxxiii–lxxxv, p. lxxxiv.

44 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 79.

in his objectivity. The novel opens with the Professor disclaiming his use of imagination in dealing with the story, confirmed again in the next section:

In the conduct of an invented story there are, no doubt, certain proprieties to be observed for the sake of clearness and effect. A man of imagination, however inexperienced in the art of narrative, has his instinct to guide him in the choice of his words, and in the development of the action. A grain of talent excuses many mistakes. But this is not a work of imagination; I have no talent; my excuse for this undertaking lies not in its art, but in its artlessness. Aware of my limitations and strong in the sincerity of my purpose, I would not try (were I able) to invent anything.⁴⁵

Yet, he expresses his own opinions as when he meets Razumov for the first time:

It occurred to me that his clean-shaven, almost swarthy face was really of the very mobile sort, and that the absolute stillness of it was the acquired habit of a revolutionist, of a conspirator everlastingly on his guard against self-betrayal in a world of secret spies.⁴⁶

The observation makes the reader expect Razumov is a revolutionist, while he is the spy, a fact that is withheld on purpose from the reader until the last section, when the narration of the first part ending with Mikulin's question "Where to?" finally finds an explanation.

The readers, therefore, have to be particularly alert, not only because the narration has a limited perspective, as the title *Under Western Eyes* clearly states, nor simply because it is also a translation from one language to another, but because they have to distinguish truth from lies⁴⁷ without help since, to use Razumov's

45 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 73.

46 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 133.

47 In "Autocracy and War" Conrad, referring to newspaper readers observes their general lack of judgement, showing his concern for the power of the word and the general inability to be careful readers:

All these speculations (with many others) have appeared gravely in print; and, if they have been gravely considered by only one reader out of each hundred,

words, “the colour of the ink and the shapes of the letters are the same”.⁴⁸

When the Professor ‘confesses’ that he cannot comprehend the Russian character, he invokes us as witnesses. What his “western eyes” fail to see in the events he transcribes, we probably miss as well, unless we read with greater acuity than he does.⁴⁹

Interestingly, this issue is also pointed out by Robert Snyder who, reflecting on the general features of spy fiction, emphasizes the close relationship between the act of decoding and the reading process: “by immersing us in a discursive world of encrypted signification, espionage fiction mirrors, stages, or reenacts the reading process itself, one wherein we become accomplices in a metatextual drama of interpretation”;⁵⁰ at the same time, though, the readers of espionage thrillers are made aware of the difficulty of the task:

within the essentially dramatic or mimetic framework of espionage thrillers, then, proliferates an array of probative cues that, taxing our faculties of deduction, reinforces not a faith in the inerrancy of logical inference but rather our dangerous susceptibility to misinterpretation.⁵¹

Conrad’s spies offer thus stimulating cues, as their role does not only imply the definition of one’s position and way of thinking in relation to organizations or other individuals, but also reveals the psychological difficulties of finding a balance and an ethical consistency among a multiplicity of allegiances. Reflect-

there must be something subtly noxious for the brain in the composition of newspaper ink; or else it is that the large page, the columns of words, the leaded headings, exalt the mind into a state of feverish credulity. The printed voice of the press makes a sort of still uproar, taking from men both the power to reflect and the faculty of genuine feeling; leaving them only the artificially created need of having something exciting to talk about (p. 319).

48 Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes*, p. 134.

49 Allan Hepburn, ‘Above Suspicion’ p. 287.

50 Robert Lance Snyder, *The Art of Indirection in British Espionage Fiction: A Critical Study of Six Novelists* (Jefferson: Mc Farland, 2011), p. 7.

51 Robert Lance Snyder, p. 8.

ing on espionage as a psychological as well as political phenomenon certainly represents the writer's major contribution to the genre, which inspired a number of spy fiction masters, above all John le Carré. Not less intriguing, though, is the issue of decodification of signs, whose reliability is unknown; this complex task, certainly part of the spy's activity, extends in fact to the reader in his/her process of text interpretation and to every human being in the understanding of reality.

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AN ANTI-BOND HERO AND HIS WORDS:
TOMAS ALFREDSON'S
TINKER TAILOR SOLDIER SPY

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Defined in psychological terms, a fanatic is a man who
consciously overcompensates a secret doubt.
Aldous Huxley

Of the complexity of Tomas Alfredson's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*,¹ a 2011 film based on John le Carré's novel (1974), silence is the main constituent.

1 *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*: Production: Karla Films Paradis Films and Kinowelt Filmproduktion, UK – Germany, 2011; col. 127'; director: Tomas Alfredson; cast: Gary Oldman–George Smiley, Kathy Burke–Connie Sachs, Benedict Cumberbatch–Peter Guillam, David Dencik–Toby Easterhase, Colin Firth–Bill Haydon, Stephen Graham–Jerry Westerby, Tom Hardy–Ricki Tarr, Ciarán Hinds–Roy Bland, John Hurt–Control, Toby Jones–Percy Allenine, Svetlana Khodchenkova–Irina, Simon McBurney–Oliver Lacon, Mark Strong–Jim Prideaux, Tom Stuart–Ben, Philip Hill–Pearson–Norman, William Haddock–Bill Roach, Roger Lloyd-Pack–Mendel, John le Carré–man at the party; story: John le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*; writing credits: Bridget O'Connor, Peter Straughan; cinematography: Hoyte Van Hoytema; music: Alberto Iglesias; film editing: Dino Jonsäter; production design: Maria Djurkovic; costume design: Jacqueline Durran; special effects: Framestore. In the early 1970s during the Cold War, the head of British Intelligence, Control, resigns after an operation – with Jim Prideaux – in Budapest, Hungary goes badly wrong. It transpires that Control believed one of four senior figures in the service was in fact a Russian agent 'a mole' and the Hungary operation was an attempt to identify which of them it was. Smiley had been forced into retirement by the departure of Control, but is asked by a senior government figure to investigate a story told to him by a rogue agent, Ricky Tarr, that there was a mole. Smiley considers that the failure of the Hungary operation and the continuing success of Operation Witchcraft (an apparent source of significant Soviet intelligence) confirms this, and takes up the task of finding him. When Smiley's investigation is over, Ricky Tarr will be proved to have colluded with the Soviet secret services in order to favour Irina's flight to the West because he was in love with her. Bill Haydon, who was supported by those

The obvious role of silence and of its many realisations in the film is that of being counterpoint to the many dialogues that are typical of le Carré's narrative style; it is a strategy he resorts to in order to clarify crucial clues that will drive the reader towards two levels of comprehension: the plot of the spy fiction and the human interactions between the secret agents of Section 6 of the British Military Intelligence Service, MI6.

Whenever the viewer is called to pick a connection, it is silence that imposes itself first and foremost as conveyor of meaning and of the dramatic framework (where montage declares the consequentiality of the actions that George Smiley analyses in order to identify the 'mole', the double-dealing colleague),² and, second, at the formal level, as the dramatic feature which, enhanced by the close-ups, highlights the reaction, the gesture, the facial attitude and reveals purpose, intention, and identity.

So, for instance, while in the novel the vice-secretary of the Treasury urges his interlocutor George Smiley to identify the traitor, and Smiley hurls back his refusal: "Go to the

newly risen to power in the Circus under Percy Alleline, will be identified as the mole. The Hungary accident will be revealed as staged by Bill Haydon to evict Control. After the accident Jim Prideaux was sent by the Circus to be a teacher in a school, while being Bill Haydon's lover. Bill Haydon had started an affair with Smiley's wife in order to weaken his position in the Circus.

- 2 It appears that the figure of the 'mole', the double dealing agent which Smiley, the hero of the novel *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* identifies in his colleague Bill Haydon was suggested to John le Carré (an MI6 secret agent himself from the late fifties till the early sixties) by Kim Philby, known as the best agent of the international Intelligence organisation called "The Cambridge Spy Ring", in that he was master in double-dealing. He was nominally in the service of Great Britain, while in actual fact he served the Soviet Union, first in NKVD then in KGB as he was a convinced Marxist. The story told in the novel *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* appears to be a response to the facts of Philby disclosing many British secret agents, le Carré among them, causing the end of their careers. Considering le Carré's severity against the Intelligence Service and the success his books encountered, one might say that Philby unintentionally supported le Carré. Cfr. A. Dawtrey, 'Tinker Tailor scribe keeps stiff upper lip', *Variety*, 19 November, 2011; <http://www.johnlecarre.com/news/2011/11/21/an-interview-with-tinker-tailor-screenwriter-peter-straughan>; P. Bertinetti, *Agenti segreti. I maestri della spy story inglese* (Roma: Edizioni dell'Asino, 2015).

competition!”³ in the film the protagonist responds to the request with silent indifference, paralleled with the silent faces of his colleagues, who, one after the other, cross his mind’s eye, while each is suggested as a possible culprit. Silence performs its function of focussing the cinema-goer’s attention on two levels, which manifest the two-way relationships between each action and the several characters.

Silence is therefore a ‘full pause’ or, rather, a pause that invites the viewer to establish the connections presiding over the detective story inside the spy fiction – causal, logical, inferential, associative connections –, and also to become aware of interpersonal relationships, emotions and interactions of all sorts, friendship, love, family, and so on. Further, silence symbolically reveals betrayal (the film director’s aesthetics embodies it in subtraction) through denying its representation: George Smiley, while being on the look-out for the traitor of people and country, is forced to relive, beginning to end, his wife’s betrayal.⁴ Silence, in actual fact, is the symbol of the all-pervasive reticence the characters maintain with each other while mutually betraying, hiding and denying the sharing of information. The rhetoric of silence is made manifest in the very faces and in the very bodies of the great British actors Gary Oldman (George Smiley), Colin Firth (Bill Haydon), John Hurt (Control), Ciarán Hinds (Roy Bland), true to the best British dramatic tradition, which combines patent simulation and concealment, instead of insisting on exploiting interriority. Impassiveness, fixity and apparent inexpressiveness,

3 ““We can’t move. We can’t investigate because all the instruments of enquiry are in the Circus’ hands, perhaps in the mole’s hand. We can’t watch, or listen, or open mail. [...] We can’t interrogate, we can’t take steps to limit a particular person’s access to delicate secrets. To do any of these things would be to run the risk of alarming the mole. It’s the oldest question of all, George. Who can spy on the spies?” [...] ‘Then go to the competition!’ he [George] called.” John le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (London: Hodden & Stoughton 1974) pp. 131, 132. Cfr. L. Tutt, “How to tailor a spy classic”, *Screen International*, 8 December 2011.

4 R. Dodes, “The Perplexing Case of the Cerebral Thriller”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 2011.

are a further manifestation of silence and a distinctive trait of George Smiley's implacable self-control, an attitude he shares with the several characters, all of them aware that a non-controlled glance or gesture might turn into an undesirable act of self-revelation. So the reticence shown in faces and bodies perfectly stands for the culture of suspicion and paranoia which characterises the years of the Cold War, when antagonism was the rule of a geopolitical state of affairs ("... such a long cruel war")⁵ but also of everyday ordinary human relationships. Le Carré himself confirms the attitude while speaking of his own serving as an MI6 agent: "No one trusted anyone. The paranoia was a common disease".⁶

Through the inquisitive eyes of paranoid George Smiley, the reader and the viewer see a potential traitor in each individual. Universal guilt impends over the one and the many. In actual fact, at the end of his investigations Smiley identifies the traitor, the 'mole', Bill Haydon, and this will bring about confirmation of what Smiley suspected concerning discredited Control, the once admired ex-chief: "There's a rotten apple and he's infecting the others".⁷ While the eventual discovery of an overall unreliable, rotten system deprives the reader and the viewer of a comforting catharsis which might spring from the identification of one and only one culprit, a scapegoat, it leaves the same reader and viewer alone with the sad awareness of the "game of fiction" where true and false are indistinguishable: the microscopic antagonisms of interpersonal relationships and the macroscopic one of international affairs are dominating factors, while ideological or patriotic belonging do not matter in the least. This assumption, all-pervasive in le Carré's novel as a severe criticism of degenerated Intelligence which often comes to the surface in the indirect free speech of George Smiley, is made most evident in one of the film's scenes (not in the novel) beautifully delineated in the

5 Le Carré, p. 237.

6 This statement was made by in an interview given when the film *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* by Alfredson was presented at the Venice Film Festival (2012), available in the Italian dvd edition of the film by Medusa Film.

7 Le Carré, p. 506.

script and acted with magisterial ambiguity by Colin Firth,⁸ with the supreme neutrality required of the double-dealing spy impersonated by him as Bill Haydon, when commenting on a dossier attributed to KGB and causing expected anger in Control who is about to reveal, as he suspected, the many rotten apples at work in his section: “The style is terrible. It’s an evident fabrication from beginning to end. Just it could be true”, maintains Bill Haydon. “If the file is genuine...” replies George Smiley, “Nothing is genuine anymore!” bursts Control in reaction. A micromimic performance by Colin Firth’s, close of kin to tightrope walking and the somersaults of an acrobat: by the way, the Circus is the name by which le Carré designates the MI6.⁹

Both the novel and the film bring to the fore – in those years of witch-hunting which lasted till the fall of the Wall in Berlin – the fact that the least hint by anybody this side or that side of the border of those two enemy political blocks might cause the most severe, sometimes tragic, reaction. From this point of observation even the slightest quivering of a hand – the hand of the waiter who is on a secret mission – determines the true/false Jim Prideaux incident in Budapest, which will set George Smiley’s investigation in the UK in motion.

The condition of the secret agent may be taken to be the other face of that of the gangster. As the snapping of fingers or a nod of the head by a gangster may decree the life or the death sentence of one (much as if the gangster were a god of antiquity),¹⁰ the quivering of the hand of an agent incapable of self-control or an involuntary grimace may mean life or death of a human; not only, it may also affect relationship between states and, at a time when nuclear threats are very much a possibility, the destiny of man on this planet. Therefore, while the gangster hero of a novel or a film may delude an audience into believing that the world around is safe, that the world is set in motion by the will

8 Xan Brooks, “Colin Firth on *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*: ‘It’s very hard to have friendships in that line of work’”, *The Guardian*, 16 September 2011.

9 The Circus, London’s Cambridge Circus, where the MI6 premises are in le Carré’s novel suggest the pun on the circus, a place of acrobatic entertainment.

10 R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957), p. 606.

that determines the gesture, the secret agent, le Carré's agent in particular, delivers on to the audience the awareness that gestures and their interpretations are uncertain and dangerous, because anxiety may entail uncontrollable consequences which may lead to tragedy. It is not by chance then that le Carré makes Jim Prideaux utter: "If there's one thing that distinguishes a good watcher from a bad one, it's the gentle art of doing and playing damn all convincingly".¹¹

The fallibility of the Intelligence Services that le Carré highlights in his novels through a masterful mixture of irony and drama appears again to find its origin in the Cold War, where imagination and reality have become indistinguishable. Well before globalisation, secret agents were the first to see how close-knitted and interdependent were the connections between the world's nations and how much human responsibility had gone beyond the limits of Kantian ethics. The political chess-board of the Cold War made the destiny of the individual coincide with that of the human community and made them precariously hang from a network of connections where reality and imagination, the mentally planned and the acted, illusion, disillusion and the actual are inextricably messed up.

The symbol of the chess-board often recurs in the film in combination with snaps of the several secret agents glued to the chess pieces; though this rendering is not particularly original, Alfredson, the director, chose it instead of using names, which is a frequent *tòpos* in spy fiction; it is a valid strategy to convey meaning to the viewer: not only the literality of the characters' status and the development of their relating to each other, but also the symbolic value, which hints at the secret agent's paradoxical condition; on the one hand the agent appears to be endowed with extraordinary powers, when, like a god he seems to be able to preside over people's destiny, the destiny of countries and of the whole planet, while, on the other, he is as impotent as a marionette, in his being moved by somebody else, in his being "in the service of somebody else", even more so because of being

11 Le Carré, p. 478.

fettered to the need of secrecy, worsened by the inevitability of double-dealing (Bill Haydon the mole and his accomplices), fettered to their real-faked world, by the web of their indecipherable actions, where personal responsibility is limitless and beyond control.

The symbolic *leit motiv* of the chess-board to state the paradox of power and impotence in the secret agent, and even more in the double-dealer, emphasises the paradox of personal responsibility, specifically when one considers that the symbol is constantly matched in the film with the rigmarole mentioned in the title. The chess-board pieces and the characters of the rigmarole – “Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Rich Man, Beggar Man, Thief”¹² – duplicate, in regard to the secret agent, the dialectics between the real and the fictional, as if each spy, caught in the web of pretending, played with his own and other people’s destiny, the destiny of the world even, with the scant sense of responsibility that characterises play and child.

As a matter of fact, another recursive presence in the novel and the film is that of children, both as witnesses and victims of the choices of adults, where innocence and guilt, purity and corruption, confront each other dramatically. The novel begins with the friendship between Jim Prideaux and the young pupil of the school where Jim teaches (the friendship then comes to a stop for the boy’s safety), while the film begins with the true/false accident occurred to Prideaux and the death of a child. The Intelligence Service training school is called by le Carré, with his typical irony, the “Nursery”, with a clear allusion to the infantile attitude of secret agents who appear to be unaware of responsibility and irresponsibility.

Among the many good reasons for the long-standing international success of le Carré stands out the subtle comprehension of the human being shown by his character George Smiley, with whom the reader of his novels easily feels sympathetic.

12 G. Opie and P. Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951, 2nd edn., 1997), pp. 404–405.

Intending to make his protagonist to counter James Bond, le Carré endowed him with traits Bond missed entirely, one of them being his concern for human kind. Ian Fleming's character (impersonated by fetish movie stars) is a nice and genial figure deprived of real-life emotions and most appropriately suits modern society in his embodying the late modern gentleman archetype of self-centred western society. On the contrary, George Smiley is critical of this society, as testified by his constant inadequacy, his ordinary looks, his being the man in the grey flannel suit, a man who does not speak much, an introvert, one with simple manners, like everybody else. Though a bit of an anti-conformist, he, like most people, is a suffering man.¹³

It is not by chance then that the many cinema interpreters of James Bond have performed the character hyperbolically, to reflect Ian Fleming's prose and the language of comic strips, while in order to render George Smiley both Alec Guinness first (in two TV series, one of 1979, after *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, and one of 1982, drawn from the novel *Smiley's People*), and Gary Oldman, in Alfredson's film, choose understatement for their dramatic manner, aiming at psychological and social realism, which is a most appropriate acting manner, so typical of the British dramatic tradition.¹⁴

In *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* le Carré foregrounds the anti-hero of the "Smiley cycle", whose other titles are *Call for the Dead* (1961), *A Murder of Quality* (1962), *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977) and *Smiley's People* (1980):

Mr. George Smiley was not naturally equipped for hurrying in the rain, least of all at dead of night. [...] Small, podgy and at best middle-aged, he was by appearance one of London's meek who do not inherit the earth. His legs were short, his gait anything but agile, his dress costly, ill-fitting and extremely wet. His overcoat, which had a hint of widowhood about it, was of that black, loose weave which is designed

13 Cfr. P. Bertinetti, *Agenti segreti*, p. 165; Bertinetti, "A Delicate Truth: ovverossia, le Carré è un grande scrittore", *Spy Fiction: un genere per grandi autori* (Turin: Trauben 2014), pp. 89–94.

14 B. Child, "Gary Oldman tipped as lead recruit in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* film", *The Guardian*, 8 June 2010.

to retain moisture. Either the sleeves were too long or his arms too short for [...] the cuffs all but concealed the fingers.¹⁵

According to the characterisation provided by the novel, Alfredson chooses to collocate Smiley against a dark rainy background all through the film, surrounded by an extradiegetic background music, composed by Alberto Iglesias, *The Smiley Theme*, slow and sad in imitation of some cool Scandinavian jazz.¹⁶ Not only this, though, the director manages to deal with the stuffy squalor of the whole environment of le Carré's Intelligence by using a variety of shades of grey and a cold detached scenery, complying with what le Carré does in his novel, where the setting is clerical, bureaucratic, humdrum and offensive.

George Smiley's looks, however, are only superficially mediocre and bureaucratic, Stakhanov-like, emotionless and deprived of privacy; his psychological complexity rests precisely on this deceiving patina. Le Carré himself explains the human complexity of his character: "I give to Smiley my inferiority complex in relationships. I come from a dysfunctional family".¹⁷

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- 15 J. le Carré, p. 41. "When I came to invent my leading character, George Smiley, I should give him something of Vivian Greenj's unlikely wisdom, wrapped in academic learning, and something of Bingham's devious resourcefulness and simple patriotism also. All fictional characters are amalgams; all spring from much deeper wells than their apparent counterparts in life. All in the end, like the poor suspects in my files, are refitted and remoulded in the writer's imagination, until they are probably closer to his own nature than to anybody else's. But now that Bingham is dead... it seems only right that I should acknowledge my debt to him: not merely as a component of George Smiley, but as the man who first put the spark to my writing career". John Le Carré, "Introduction" (1992), in *Call for the Dead* (New York: Walker & Company, 2004), p. xv.
- 16 Cfr. P. Mereghetti, "La talpa Oldman, una spia quasi perfetta nella guerra fredda di le Carré", *Corriere della Sera*, 11 January 2012; Cfr. A. Brocas, "Une Taupe terrestre", *Le Magazine Littéraire*, n. 516 February 2012, p. 21; D. Fontaine, "La taupe", *Le Canard Enchaîné*, n. 4763, 8 February 2012, p. 6.
- 17 This statement was made by le Carré in an interview given when the film *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* by Alfredson was presented at the Venice Film Festival (2012), available in the Italian dvd edition of the film by Medusa Film.

Though behind thick lenses, the bureaucratic anti-Bond glance observes the world from a novel perspective, perhaps even a prohibited perspective; it is a sharp, perceptive glance, one that understands and comprehends. Throughout the novel, George Smiley lavishes his withdrawn comments, muses on life and its meaning, asks embarrassing questions, urges answers from the top brass of politics, and never condemns anybody beyond hope.

The filmic verbal expression of the protagonist's thoughts is limited to a minimum and is most often conveyed by silences that, as far as Smiley is concerned, might be labelled "existential": "George Smiley had assumed for the main — writes le Carré — a Buddha-like inscrutability"¹⁸ Unlike other agents, in particular double-dealing ones, George Smiley's silence is not put-up, it is rather a spontaneous and anti-conformist statement of his human condition. Many are the scenes which Gary Oldman beautifully performs in the film, which contribute far better than any dialogue to the shaping of the character; the cinema-goers understand them easily and participate with their own personal emotions.

This happens for example at the time Control is sacked: when Smiley takes leave of Control, whom he had once admired and trusted, and perhaps even considered a friend. While walking Control to the door, George Smiley, instead of just saying hallo, stands before Control and looks at him insistently: he stands still, does not utter a word. Similarly, when Smiley discovers that among the snags of the secret agents suspected of betrayal and glued to the chess pieces there is his own face also, he stands speechless for a long time. Again, when he sees his wife Ann in the company of another man, he reacts by remaining perfectly still and speechless. Last, when Bill Haydon has been identified as the mole and is expanding on his double betrayal and says that he had started his affair with Ann to respond to a request from the KGB to hit Smiley where he was most vulnerable and cause him to stop his investigation, Smiley's reaction is shown through

18 J. le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, p. 80.

silence of voice and body, unique for duration, intensity and explicitness.

Silence bursts into Smiley's voice and body whenever he is at his most explicit manifestation of feelings. This paradox contains another. While, on the one hand, silence radically interiorises the gestural code which should characterise all secret agents, on the other, it also signals the refusal of the professional cynicism of the secret agent. In this way Smiley erects a no trespassing barrier, a wall, an "iron curtain" against continual and brutal violation of human feelings, including the sentiment of loyalty.

This attitude is worded in the novel as follows: "The last illusion of the illusionless man".¹⁹ This illusion stands against the disillusionment of the love of country, of politics, and ideology that brings Smiley to realise the sameness of people and ideologies this side and that side of the arbitrary and fictitious frontiers erected at the time of the Cold War. Only thanks to this awareness made universal – Smiley is very much aware of this – the war will come to an end, so long as the notion can be insinuated into the "enemy's" fanaticism. Smiley says that "Karla", the head of KGB, "is not fireproof because he's a fanatic". Aldous Huxley's words probably inspired le Carré. Huxley once said: "Defined in psychological terms, a fanatic is a man who consciously over-compensates a secret doubt".²⁰

It is perhaps in this ability to discern between illusions to preserve (the illusions of human sentiments) and illusions to shed (those of fanaticism) that George Smiley's complex humanity – anti-conformist, authentic and suffering – takes shape. It is a fact that le Carré's critical disapproval of conflict and antagonism is rooted in his being prone to sympathy and comprehension. Antagonism and conflict dehumanise. Conflict and antagonism are at the same time cause and effect of all systems of power, Intelligence Services included. The Cold War was in a way their consequence like all other forms of hostility characteristic of late modernity.

19 J. le Carré, p. 606.

20 A. Huxley, *Proper Studies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), p. 13.

Everywhere in le Carré's fiction, feelings are at the core of the human condition, far more than it is the case with the "human factor" of his colleague/competitor Graham Greene. This is not only shown in the protagonist's character, it is confirmed by the very texture of the whole of his fiction. Three, in fact, are the love stories which leave some mark on the development of the events. The story of George Smiley and his wife Ann – whose face significantly is never revealed; the story of Ricky Tarr, a young MI6 agent, and Irina, a KGB agent; last the story of Bill Haydon and Jim Prideaux. Through the unhappy endings of these stories in *Thinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, perhaps more markedly than in other le Carré novels, comes the sad awareness that the existential condition of the secret agent necessitates the renunciation of personal sentiments in favour of giving oneself up to the most brutal exploitation by the agency, self-sacrifice is incredibly un-heroic. This awareness urges Smiley to give advice to his young collaborator, Peter Guillam, towards facing all personal sentimental commitments that might make him vulnerable with the Circus' policy before actually giving himself up to the Circus itself. A piece of advice this that at the same time exposes the risks of the commitment and declares the philosophy, the *modus operandi et vivendi* that is required for the survival of the individual.

From the hyper-rational and bureaucratic world of codes in cipher, of blood-soaked dossiers, and wire-tapping, through George Smiley's moral deliberation apropos of which illusions to abandon and which to fight for, comes a twofold appeal to the human sentiments of the reader and the viewer of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. It appears that their hearts and brains have positively responded with unconditional approval.

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