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Crying Monster

The Personal and the Political in Espionage Fiction

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Abstract:

Across espionage fiction there is a constant tension between personal and political values. In the works of John Le Carré, espionage, as a manifestation of political values, invades the personal lives of spies and their associates, and eventually totally replaces their personal identities with operational, utilitarian ones. For Le Carré, espionage diminishes personal well-being of its subjects, thereby destroying the values that it is supposed to protect. In lying and deceiving to defeat a perceived monstrous opponent, the deceiver becomes monstrous themself. The works of Muriel Spark and James Robertson inform on this account and suggest that victims of political pressures have the option to disengage with them and focus on their personal values, thereby avoiding the monstrous transformation. The paper concludes that these three works in tandem warn readers that many dominant institutions exacerbate internal conflicts, and invite individuals to forgo their humanity in pursuit of a perceived greater good. However, these works also show us how focusing on personal values can escape the political sphere and preserve our personal identities. The greatest danger of a monster is that, in our fear of it, we may forget what makes us human.

"Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster... for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." (Nietzsche)

In 1963, Kim Philby fled MI6 observation in Beirut to Moscow as the most successful double agent of the Cold War Era (Encyclopedia Britannica Publishers) (Corera). However, instead of the hero's welcome he had expected in Moscow, he was effectively placed under house arrest. His original handlers had disappeared in Stalin's purges, and he was treated with suspicion by Russian Intelligence (Macintyre, "Charming Traitor"). While he had escaped his western pursuers, the personal consequences of a career in deception and mistrust were harder to shake off, and by the end of his life in Moscow Philby had become a suicidal alcoholic (Macintyre, "Charming Traitor"). Years later Philby's close friend and MI6 colleague Nicholas Elliott was still struggling with the burdens of the secrecy surrounding Philby's defection. In May 1986, Elliott sat down with his former colleague John Le Carré to ease the burden of secrecy:

> Elliot in the most civilized of ways, seemed a bit lost. He was so deeply frustrated by our former service's refusal to let him reveal secrets which in his opinion had long passed their keep-to date…Above all, he wanted to talk to me about his colleague, and nemesis, Kim Philby. (Macintyre *A Spy Among Friends* 259)

Le Carré's subsequent novel, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is heavily based on his experience in the secret service, and Philby's defection. In it, Le Carré explores the real-world issue of how the political sphere can consume its agents' personal lives, at the cost of their mental health and interpersonal relationships. Muriel Spark's *The Hothouse by the East River,* and James Robertson's *The Professor of Truth,* are also closely based on reality, inspired by Spark's work with British Intelligence, and Robertson's research on the Lockerbie Plane Bombing respectively (Burnside). These novels inform on Le Carré's exploration and give an account of how challenging dominant political ideologies directly involves meeting them on their own

terms and giving up part of our humanity. Collectively, these works give a realistic account of how and why to engage in a political conflict is to risk sacrificing our personal happiness, and replacing it with the ideology we wish to overthrow. By this account, espionage fiction shows us why real spies like Elliott and Philby might never be able to escape the burdens of their life of deception: they have been made into agents of the very forces that they oppose.

In *Tinker, Tailor,* Smiley's political obligations have consumed his personal relationships; all of his friends are spies. The only people in his life for him to trust are those trained according to the "Secret World's core values of deception, duplicity and treachery" (Lassner 170). We see the tension between personal and political values as Smiley struggles to decipher who or what Haydon has betrayed, and yet still finds some metric by which Bill deserves his respect:

> In every capacity Haydon had overtly pursued one aim and secretly achieved its opposite. Smiley knew very well that even now he did not grasp the scope of that appalling duplicity; yet there was a part of him that rose already in Haydon's defence. Was Bill not also betrayed? (Le Carré 394)

Despite everything, Smiley has "a wistful notion of liking Haydon, and respecting him. Bill was a man, after all, who had had something to say and had said it" (419). The lines between the political and the personal are blurred, and in the resulting confusion Smiley finds it difficult to reconcile the facts of the betrayal with his personal emotions for his friend. He does not commit to mistrusting his friends, and yet neither can he completely trust them. He is even alienated from his wife by his career: "They shared no harmony. They had lost all calmness in one another's company; they were a mystery to each other…he knew no way to reach her." (166) The world of espionage has encroached on their marriage in his mind and hers, and in the form of her affair with Haydon which itself was politically motivated on Haydon's part (Le Carré 420). Smiley's relationship with his wife is appropriated by the political world; destroyed by, and replaced with, political concerns. We see that through

espionage, political values usurp the personal ones in the minds and lives of agents, and leave them alienated and mistrustful.

In this conflict, any commitment to personal values over political functionality becomes a weakness for political forces to exploit. Haydon claims Smiley's love for Anne is "the last illusion of the illusionless man" (Le Carré 420), a weakness that is used against Smiley. Smiley does challenge this claim: "Illusion? Was that really Karla's name for love? And Bill's?" (Le Carré 420), however even if Smiley does not give up on love completely, we have already seen that his marriage is beyond repair thanks to the invasive nature of his work. Not only are personal and political values incompatible, but it seems that when they clash, it is utility that emerges victorious over love.

Monaghan gives an account of why this might be the case in what he calls 'Le Carré's Unifying Vision': "For Le Carré, every individual personality is divided between the contradictory claims of reflection and feeling, or what Schiller calls" the 'Sentimental' and the 'Naïve' respectively (xii). The personal-political conflict might also be viewed in these terms; Smiley's struggle is to reconcile his personal feelings with his practical, political reflections. However the Naïve-Sentimental is not always interchangeable with the personal-political conflict. Only in a society that is obsessed with utility do political forces have such a polarising influence on humanity (Monaghan 3). It is not all political forces, but specifically the political forces of Le Carré's context that exacerbate the complex struggle of the Sentimental and the Naïve within us. And these forces are most explicitly at work in espionage: "Secret services were the only real measure of a nation's political health, the only real expression of its subconscious" (Le Carré 407). Le Carré's spies must completely sacrifice their personal identities for functional operational identities, making them the ultimate agents of utilitarian politics. Thus, these political systems align strongly the Sentimental and do not give any importance to the Naïve. Consequently, political forces,

manifested in espionage, exacerbate the already-complex struggle in their agents as they attempt to reconcile these two contradictory forces.

Le Carré implies that the Sentimental tends to usurp the personal not because of any inherent superiority of utilitarian values, but because we are conditioned to prefer utility by dominant political influences. He frequently shows that we do not actually have any good reason to prefer the Sentimental, since it harms our humanity and gives nothing in return. For example, as we have seen, often Sentimental, political forces cause the alienation of their subjects: Helen from Le Carré's *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover* notes that while the Naïve person "lives life and doesn't imitate it" (qtd. in Monaghan 2), to be Sentimental is to have "left the natural state behind and [to have] become…part of civilization, sort of…corrupt" (Monaghan 2). Spies are trained to imitate life, while their true nature becomes unnatural and corrupt. In this way they are alienated from their humanity and the rest of society. "The spy's very nature and condition resembles that of a leper" (Lassner 171) and as a result the spy becomes her own greatest victim because of the dehumanisation he experiences (Monaghan 33). The true tragedy of the Boy Who Cried Wolf is that, regardless of whether he is devoured by the monster, in violating the trust of his community, the boy himself becomes monstrous. As Lacon says, "The social contract cuts both ways" (Le Carré 394).

While Secret Services try to justify these sacrifices as being in service to a greater good, Le Carré suggests that this end cannot justify the means:

> I have equated, in hypothetical terms, the conduct of East and West in the espionage war. I have suggested that they use the same weapons – deceit – and even the same spies [. . .] I have posed this question: for how long can we defend ourselves – you and we – by methods of this kind, and still remain the kind of society that is worth defending? (qtd in Lassner 202)

Rather than protecting a greater good, espionage draws both combatants into a utilitarian conflict at the cost of the well-being of the people they are trying to protect. Ultimately, two warring societies become indistinguishable in their commitment to Sentimental achievement,

and their negligence to the individuals' well-being. Smiley expresses the same idea while interrogating Karla:

> Did it not occur to him that he and I by different routes might well have reached the same conclusions about life? Even if my conclusions were what he would call unliberated, surely our workings were identical? Did he not believe for example that political generality was meaningless? That only the particular in life had value for him now? That in the hands of politician's grand designs achieve nothing but new forms of misery? (Le Carré 243)

Both capitalism and communism are committed to 'political generality,' their respective 'grand designs' both leading to this same miserable result. The greater contrast is not between the East and West, but between the political generality and the 'particular in life'. Rather than a conflict between political ideologies, espionage for Le Carré is a struggle between our personal values and ideology in general. As we have seen from the alienating effects of political utility, subscribing to these dominant political values can only damage our humanity. And yet, because they are so prevalent, we are drawn to them. "The central problem in all Le Carré's novels is how to be fully human in a society whose institutions have lost all connection with individual feeling" (Monaghan 11). Engaging in espionage to preserve one's humanity compromises that humanity. It risks turning one into an unfeeling agent of utility that consumes the Naïve and further propagates political values.

Monaghan suggests that Smiley represents the ideal human, balancing the Sentimental and Naïve, and saving Le Carré's novels from 'complete pessimism' (xiii). However, as has already been suggested, Smiley's position is far from ideal. In his judgement of Haydon, he cannot commit to his humane intuition that "nothing is worth the destruction of another human being. Somewhere the path of pain and betrayal must end" (393). Instead, he suspends his judgment and settles for ambiguity: "Smiley shrugged it all aside, distrustful as ever of the standard shapes of human motive, and settled instead for a picture of one of those Russian dolls that open up, revealing one person inside the other, and another inside him" (420).

Without Smiley's help, Haydon is killed in an act of revenge. Despite only partially committing to the political world, Smiley's humanity seems compromised. He is not 'the glorious affirmation of the human' that Monaghan suggests he is (41).

Fortunately, Spark and Robertson have provided us with an alternative approach for preserving humanity. The characters in Spark's *Hothouse* are similarly trapped between personal and political forces, however unlike Le Carré, Spark presents a vision of how ultimately political forces collapse in the face of reality.

As with Smiley, and Elliott, Paul and Elsa are torn between their political commitment to conceal the truth, and the human need to reveal it. This is most clearly visible in their inability to engage in therapy; the truth-telling required to properly assimilate their past trauma is compromised by their training as spies; as Drabble cites from the real-life case of Angus Wilson, "Years of official secrecy inhibited analysis" (Stewart 37). This inability to properly assimilate their actions as political agents alienates them from their society (Stewart 50). Monaghan explains that when characters are unable to reconcile the Sentimental and the Naïve, they "take refuge in cultivating one pole of experience at the expense of the other" (xiii). We see this phenomenon in Elsa's insanity; in Monaghan's terms, she is unable to reconcile the Sentimental and the Naïve, and so escapes 'into a fantasy or madness,' becoming Naïve in excess at the expense of her reasoning faculties (27). Contrastingly, Paul escapes to the opposite pole of experience, clinging desperately to his time as a rational, Sentimental spy, when his life was "more vivid than it is now. Everything was more distinct. The hours of the day lasted longer" (Spark 25). He externalizes this desire in his obsession with Kiel, an artifact of his past life (Spark 31).

This impaired need to externalize is reminiscent of Nicholas Elliott and his confessions to Le Carré, and is also common to Smiley, as he desperately projects his own dilemmas onto Karla during the interrogation: "I exchanged my predicament for his, that is

the point, and as I now realize I began to conduct an interrogation with myself" (Le Carré 238). Exiled from humanity, Smiley, and Elliot, can only turn to other exiles as a substitute for a healthy community. However, Paul ultimately finds another escape available to him: accepting reality, in the form of his death.

Paul and Elsa, having died, are trapped in a more literal limbo than Smiley's. Le Carré writes that "In the world that [Elliot] and Philby had inhabited together for so long, the man whose cover story is not believed is the man who is operationally dead" (Macintyre *A Spy Among Friends* 260). By the political values of utility, death is when the agent ceases to function, not when he ceases to breath. Viewing Paul's death in these terms reveals how he has prolonged his existence unnaturally through an obsession with utility. Through regular flashbacks and his obsession with Kiel, Paul maintains his operational identity. As long as he can believe he is still operational, he can believe he is alive. Again we see the personal-political struggle has turned its agents into something less than human, "the ghosts of Britain's Churchillian wartime ambitions" (Piette 57), sustained by a continued denial of reality. However, while Smiley's inhibitions are tragic, Paul's inability to properly engage with the world around him is absurd to the point of satire. Additionally, while Smiley's struggle is ultimately unresolved, Paul's corrupted reality eventually collapses. By "confronting the fact that they did not survive the war… Paul and Elsa are able to abandon their self-deceptive existences and come to terms with reality" (Lopez 13). In the face of their impermanence and impotence, Paul's Sentimental, political values are exposed as being unrealistic; paradoxically, we see that his obsession with utility makes him useless. In *Hothouse* the natural conclusion of the personal-political conflict is to accept the unreality of ideology and commit to personal truths. Hence, Paul ultimately denies his operational life, and accepts his personal death.

The Professor of Truth reaffirms this message in several instances. When confronted with the reality of his death, Nilson, like Paul, disengages with his political self and commits to his personal morals as he goes about 'settling his debts' (Robertson 17). This involves telling the truth about his secret work, just as it did for Nicholas Elliott.

While Alan Tealing is not a spy, the politics of utility have already usurped his personal life when he meets Nilson. His deceased wife, Emily, is a perfect symbol of the personal world; she decides to give up her commitment to her nationality for Alan, and she is committed to her "life path" over any career path (Robertson 83). When she and their daughter are killed in a political bombing, Alan's life is consumed with the search for the truth of the attack. His search brings him into the political sphere and out of the personal, and as a consequence he is alienated:

> When we talked, I saw a gap opening between myself and most of the others, especially the American relatives. We saw and heard it all together, the same words and images, the same productions of evidence, the same arguments and counterarguments, but we drew different conclusions (96).

Emily's relatives are concerned with moving on with their personal lives, while Alan is obsessed with the facts. Given that they are operating under incompatible sets of values, they are unable to communicate, and Alan is ostracized.

However, as we have seen in *Hothouse,* this quest for the facts is based on an ideology that falls apart in the face of reality: The lawyer Braithwaite explains that "The thing that people always do…is confuse the law with justice, evidence with truth" (103). Our institutions' pursuit of truth is not inherently linked to morality, and in the extreme is in fact detrimental to a balanced life; Braithwaite continues: "What *are* the hard facts? What you say is irrelevant in this affair is not irrelevant in life. What is irrelevant *makes* life" (103). Living a balanced life, then, involves accepting the futility of a focus on function. As Parroulet tells Alan: "A man has his life, that is all. If there is worse or better, what does he know of that?"

(244). By the end of the novel, Alan has taken this realization to heart. He commits to his relationship with Carol (257) despite not knowing her reason for loving him (113), and where before his personal self had been killed by his operational self, his confrontation with the stark reality of the bushfire, and true complexity of Parroulet's humanity draw him back to reality and prompt him to think "Today I was alive" (220). The final words of the novel are "I was back from the dead, with news" (258). He has been released from his commitment to utility, and the fear and alienation that came with it: "I thought of my own fear, my looking over my shoulder, my wondering who might come in pursuit of me…there had been years of it, of fear and wondering, but there was nothing there now. Nobody was coming, and even if they were I didn't care" (254).

It is this fear that plagues Elliott and drove Philby to depression and drink. The avenues of escape that most spies have available—repression, half-confessions, and madness— are poor treatments for the symptoms of the alienating life as a political agent. In its realization, political, Sentimental ideology seems to destroy or appropriate elements of the Naïve, personal world. However, it can only consume us in so far as we adopt these values as our own. To resist it, all it takes is a recognition of the reality that we see in *Hothouse* and *The Professor of Truth*: that truth in the absolute is unimportant, and unreachable, compared to the subjective human experience. Additionally, these novels expose a common current in our political systems that drives us to prioritize the Sentimental over the Naïve, at the cost of our humanity. By this analysis, Spark, Le Carré and Robertson are at once giving us a lesson in the true value of life, and a warning against the corrupting, utilitarian influences of our institutions. The greatest danger of a monster is that, in our fear of it, we may forget what makes us human.

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