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Secret Agents and the Search for Truth

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Abstract: This essay contends that the dark arts of espionage provide writers and film makers with fertile ground to test the pursuit of truth and its enemies. John Le Carre's novel *The Tailor of Panama* (1996) and John Boorman's film of the novel brilliantly reveal how imagination, sales talk and self-deception combine with political chicanery to fabricate a 'big lie' that leads to the invasion of Panama. Other, more recent invasions based on fabricated intelligence are evoked. In addition to novels and films, biographical studies and memoirs of former spies can reveal ways in which politics, ambition and personal anxieties combine to deceive others—and sometimes secret agents themselves. Nevertheless, the perilous pursuit of truth remains a core feature of espionage literature and its associated arts.

Key words: Espionage, literature and film, secrets, truth, imagination, performance.

Introduction

Secrets and lies abound wherever public requirements and private needs come into conflict. Nowhere is this more evident than in the lives of secret agents who work in the service of a government or a cause. Yet while the task of some agents may be to plant disinformation in order to mislead or confuse their enemy, the purported goal of espionage is usually to learn the 'truth' of a situation—the power structure of a regime, for instance, or the battle plans of an opponent. When government or other bureaucracies are directing the activities of spies, and knowledge of operations is restricted to those who 'need to know', the 'whole truth' of a situation may be almost impossible for a single person to know or understand. Hence the appositeness of the phrase from T.S. Eliot's poem "Gerontion", which was popularised by the CIA's chief of counter-intelligence, James Jesus Angleton, when he described the experience of espionage as being caught "in a wilderness of mirrors".[i] (Angleton seems to have been intrigued by Eliot's persona and is said to have adopted a Thomas Stearns Eliot appearance (Helms 153)).

Secret Intelligence and 'Truth'

Although many workers in the burgeoning intelligence services attached to Western governments talk of the boredom and bureaucratic red tape that bedevil their working lives, it is remarkable how many over the past century have also claimed the importance

of imagination, both to their work and to their lives more generally. A good example is Michael Thwaites, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation's former chief of counter-intelligence who supervised the defection to Australia in 1954 of Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov, who were KGB agents posing as diplomats in the embassy of the USSR in Canberra at the time. In his account of these events, *Truth Will Out*, Thwaites mentions the circumstances of his own recruitment to ASIO from a lectureship in English at the University of Melbourne. "Out of the blue" he says, Colonel Charles Spry, director-general of ASIO, invited him to a meeting. Spry told Thwaites that "a very effective Soviet spy ring [was] operating in Australia" and Australia's Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, had asked Colonel Spry to upgrade the security services. "You're a poet aren't you?" Spry said. (Thwaites had won the King's Medal for poetry when he was a student at Oxford.) "You have imagination. We want imagination in the organization and people with analytical skills" (Farquharson 25). Thwaites accepted the invitation and made his contribution to Australian and international history with the defection of the Petrovs followed by Thwaites's ghost-written biography of the Russian spies' lives, *Empire of Fear*.

The exercise of imagination, and the movement of imaginative sympathy, can of course complicate moral dilemmas. In Thwaites's case his imagination seems to have operated within the moral boundaries of his Anglican religious upbringing and the precepts of Moral Rearmament, the anti-Communist movement which he had adopted in post-war years. Thwaites's axis of good and evil was thus quite strictly defined. But in the fictional works of Graham Greene and John Le Carré, for example, two acknowledged masters of espionage fiction, these moral boundaries are more blurred as their imaginations engage with the conflicting demands of keeping secrets and telling lies.

The psychological perils of immersing oneself in the secret world are encapsulated in Le Carré's *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* when the author reflects on the role of his protagonist, Alec Leamas, who has been sent by British Intelligence to work undercover in East Germany:

> In itself, the practice of deception is not particularly exacting; it is a matter of experience, of professional *expertise*; it is a facility most of us can acquire. But while a confidence trickster, a play actor or a gambler can return from his performance to the ranks of his admirers, the secret agent enjoys no such relief. (Le Carré 149)

Le Carré expands on this. Deception in such circumstances, he says, is first of all a matter of self-defense. The agent "must protect himself not only from without but from within, and against the most natural of impulses." Most difficult of all, "he must under all circumstances withhold himself from those in whom he should naturally confide," including family, lovers and friends (Le Carré 149).

Writers of fiction or biography about individuals involved in espionage engage with the psychological effects of sustained deception in a variety of ways, as we shall see. Psychiatrists also have their ways and means of doing this. Psychological profiling of factors in a person's upbringing, background and behaviour which may prefigure an effective career in intelligence is widely used by psychologists in intelligence agencies, but may be of limited value. Case studies or composite descriptions based on a number

of case studies can also provide insights. For example, psychiatrist David Charney, who has treated a number of high profile 'caught spies' in the U.S. including Robert Hanssen, has developed a model of stages in the experience of a 'composite spy.'[ii] Charney's composite figure typically experiences nine stages as he moves to a decision to spy for a foreign power, is recruited, proceeds with his tasks, retreats, goes into dormancy for a time, then is arrested, when the anger, brooding and remorse set in. Charney rejects easy assumptions about greed—the typical kneejerk reaction from an intelligence agency to 'traitors' in their ranks—that "the greedy bugger did it for the money." The 'trained subconscious mind' of the psychiatrist is a more effective tool, he claims, than the rush to judgment. In Charney's view, a core psychological insight can be derived from the cases of the caught spy: he (95 percent are men) suffers from "an intolerable sense of personal failure as privately defined by the person."

Novels and Films: *Our Man in Havana, The Tailor of Panama*

I wish to argue here that the most profound insights into the mental state and behaviour of men and women engaged in espionage are provided by writers of novels and life-stories—autobiography and biography. A central feature of such narratives is often the capacity of individuals to deal with secrets and lies. Films can sometimes complicate and enrich the insights of novelists and biographers.

Two novels which engage closely with these issues are Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana* (1958) and John Le Carré's *The Tailor of Panama* (1996), both of which are set in Latin America. The film of *The Tailor of Panama*, directed by John Boorman and starring Australian actor Geoffrey Rush as Harry Pendel, the tailor, gives another dimension to the presentation of these issues. Le Carré acknowledged the formative influence of Greene's novel on his own when he remarked that, "After Greene's *Our Man in Havana* the notion of an intelligence fabricator would not leave me alone."[iii] Indeed, Greene's vacuum cleaner salesman in Havana and Le Carré's tailor in Panama both have a gift of the gab which attracts both admiration and scepticism. Their sometimes coruscating sales talk carries both themselves and their listeners away at times; and the slips they make occasionally reveal gaps in their assumed personae, keeping readers on their toes. They are often on the edge of being 'caught out'. But what is remarkable about each of them is that they manage to convince key people, and even at times themselves, that they have secret intelligence of international significance to impart when what they offer are the products of imagination and invention.

The novel and film of *The Tailor of Panama* are closely linked. John Le Carré was executive producer and author of the screenplay for the film under Boorman's direction. Geoffrey Rush, who plays the film's protagonist, was commuting from Melbourne to Panama for the filming on location, and to Dublin, where studio filming was done. Rush has said that Le Carré's novel was a companion-piece and reference work for him to understand the character of Harry Pendel, the half Irish, half Jewish London Eastender who learnt his tailoring in prison but transforms himself into a tailor with pedigree in Panama.[iv] There was some consideration of filming in Puerto Rico but Boorman insisted that it be done on location in Panama itself,[v] where Noriega had invented a Communist opposition and Harry Pendel in the film invents a 'silent Opposition' for his handlers in British intelligence.

Characters in films come with the cultural baggage of their previous roles. Geoffrey Rush is a brilliant impresario and he has remarked that his previous role as the Marquis de Sade partly informed his playing of Harry Pendel. Similarly, it might be said, he carried *The Tailor of Panama* with him when he subsequently played Peter Sellers in his many guises. The role of Andy Osnard, the inexperienced British secret service agent who recruits and runs Harry Pendel as a spy in Panama also carries cinematic cultural baggage. Pierce Brosnan, who plays Osnard in the film, was consciously countering his recent persona of James Bond. Another clever piece of intertextuality in the film is Boorman's absurdist playwright Harold Pinter as Harry Pendel's Uncle Benny, the Jewish Londoner who has set him on his path of crime and redemption and reappears as Harry's unreliable but persuasive inner voice of conscience, with gems such as: "Try sincerity, that's a virtue."

Le Carré's character Harry Pendel is the author's most brilliant invention of a con-man since Magnus Pym's father Rick in *A Perfect Spy*. Both characters seem to emerge from Le Carré's memories of his con-man father, Ronald Cornwell, who was jailed for fraud during his son's early childhood and went bankrupt twice during his son's early twenties. *The Tailor of Panama*, for all its humorous invention—in the spirit of what Greene called his 'entertainment', *Our Man in Havana,* but far more buoyant than Greene's novel—revolves around the most consequential lie imaginable, the fabrication of intelligence which leads to the invasion of another country. In this, as in other respects, Le Carré's novel anticipates the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, with British and Australian support. Le Carré, it should be said, strongly opposed the latter invasion.

Among the most discomforting insights into secrets and lies in *The Tailor of Panama* is how closely allied they are to wit, humour and performativity. Le Carré shows, as Freud has also shown, that while jokes may seem innocuous, they often arise from subconscious anxieties. The chief of these in Le Carré's novel is the fear of discovery, a fear that leads Harry to scale the heights of fantasy. As he had learnt to do in prison, Harry becomes a performer: "A performer is a performer. If your audience isn't with you, it's against you," he thinks. The author explains: "[W]ith his own fictions in tatters, he needed to enrich the fictions of others" (Le Carré 64). Harry knows he has "an excessive dose of fluence" (67) but he can't stop himself. The rationalisation and self-justification take over as Harry ponders his inability to tell his wife Louisa about his past and he tries to persuade himself that "*Everything in the world is true if you invent it hard enough and love the person it's for*!" (77). As he slides across the various accents and registers at his command—Irish, Cockney, Jewish and the professional patter of a tailor who has remade his past—Harry Pendel exposes the human vulnerability which makes him an endearing figure despite the calamities he sets in train.

Harry Pendel is not alone in his manipulation of truth and reality. His handler for British intelligence, Andy Osnard, after failing at several other jobs, seems to find a suitable vocation in MI6. Le Carré writes ironically of Osnard's perception of his career:

> Osnard had found his Grail. Here at last was his true Church of England, his rotten borough with a handsome budget. Here were sceptics, dreamers, zealots and mad abbots. And the cash to make them real. (Le Carré 165)

The metaphoric foundations of secret intelligence in religion, theatre and economics are laid. To these we must add the Imperial theme, for Osnard is told by his bosses that "The British task is to persuade the Americans to fill the vacuum they've created [in Panama]…We're the last of the Romans. We have the knowledge but they have the power" (Le Carré 169).

These are the deeply flawed ideological bases from which an anti-heroic James Bond look-alike figure in the movie of *The Tailor of Panama* emerges. When Harry tells Andy Osnard of opposition among some Panamanians to the regime in power, Osnard elevates this to an upper case 'Silent Opposition'. He rewrites the gossip from Harry who has been ironically codenamed BUCHAN (after the author of spy fiction, John Buchan), until the material "fitted like perfectly turned pegs into analysts' Black Holes" (195). This new fiction, or hot intelligence, has been made from a tailor's cuttings. The metaphor is apt. As Harry tells himself in one of his disconcertingly revealing asides to himself, it is "All fluence. Loose threads, plucked from the air, woven and cut to measure" (200). While the odd sceptical voice is raised about the lack of 'substance' or 'collateral' of this intelligence by evaluators back at London Station, such voices are overridden by the perceived urgency of a 'visionary' conclusion which will lead to intervention. We heard all this again in the run-up to the Iraq war. A senior American, desperate for a 'smoking gun' or other 'peg' on which to hang the invasion of Panama, says: "This is a moment for decisive action and having the national conscience adapt retrospectively. The national conscience will do that – we can help it" (247). But unlike Cuba, where Castro denied the existence of his Russian rockets, while photographs showed they were there, nothing so decisive can be shown in Panama. Denials of an alleged silent opposition to the Panamanian government seemed to strengthen its likelihood. Whatever basis of evidence the Americans chose to believe, the American invasion of Panama, overseen by President H.W. Bush and codenamed Operation Safe Passage occurred. Le Carré's unique contribution, through the fictional means at his disposal, is to show how apparently harmless observations, gossip and storytelling, if mixed in certain ways, can become a lethal cocktail and lead to tragic consequences.

History and Memoir – Points of View

In examining the representations of secrets and lies in works described as fiction or non-fiction, it is important to establish and to recognise the significance of point-of-view. In the Cold War, as in subsequent phases of confrontation between powerful opponents or enemies, the portrayal of truth has varied radically according to the viewpoint of the perceiver. Thus the KGB perceptions of Panamanian Presidents Torrijos and Noriega varied according to their previous value in combating American interests in the region. The Mitrokhin archives, smuggled out of Russia in 1992 by KGB archivist Vladimir Mitrokhin, with the help of the British Secret Intelligence Service, reveal KGB attempts in the mid-1970s to make new 'confidential contacts' among 'progressive' anti-American political leaders including Torrijos (Andrew and Mitrokhin 107). As Mitrokhin's files show, the KGB attempted to reinforce Torrijos's suspicion of U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his administration by forging a document which purported to show how the U.S. was "dragging out the Panama Canal negotiations and removing Torrijos himself from power" (Andrew and Mitrokhin 110). Forgery is one obvious way

of distorting the truth, of telling lies. It would be naïve to think that such 'disinformation' did not occur from the American side too.

Whatever the truth about Torrijos's involvement in drug trafficking—and President Carter was inclined to believe Torrijos's innocence—American propaganda portrayed his successor, Manuel Noriega, as a would-be Castro and therefore an enemy of the U.S. Subsequently, Noriega became "the first foreign head of state to face criminal charges in a U.S. court [and was] sentenced to forty years imprisonment on eight counts of cocaine trafficking, racketeering and money laundering" (Andrew and Mitrokhin 111). The layers of rumour, propaganda, lies and simple truth in these events defies definitive conclusion. In these circumstances, perhaps an informed work of fiction, such as *The Tailor of Panama*, may offer more avenues to a truthful account of these events than chronological histories or legalistic accounts based on sworn testimony.

In the past decade, literary studies have followed popular interests in giving greatly increased attention to the genre of 'life-stories', or autobiography and biography. What can such studies offer those of us interested in the nature of secrets and lies and their human consequences? In particular, what might we learn about the search for truth from biographies and autobiographies of secret agents or spies?

From a welter of memoirs by former CIA agents, Duane R. Clarridge's *A Spy for All Seasons* gives promise of throwing light on that question. Clarridge's life in CIA took him to Nepal, India, Turkey, Italy and Iran, but the critical events in his career took place when he headed the Latin America Caribbean division in the early 1980s. An attractive feature of Clarridge's narrative is its bluff, no-bullshit tone suggesting honesty and directness. He acknowledges he is an "aggressive personality" (300). Moreover he displays an aura of masculine self-confidence as he describes the mountains of work to be done and his typical way of relaxing:

> The first thing in the morning, when facing twelve inches or more of incoming and perhaps half as much of outgoing cable traffic to read, I was aided by strong coffee and a nice, heavy-bodied, six-inch Honduran cigar. One of the perks of being in Latin America division was access to a variety of fine cigars from Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, and, once in a while, even Cuba. (Clarridge 226)

Elsewhere, Clarridge describes heavy sessions of Scottish whiskey-drinking with a variety of Latin American leaders.

While the U.S. intervention in Grenada and the war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua devoured large amounts of "Dewey" Clarridge's time, his memoir also throws some light, or at least colour, on the situation in Panama. As part of the CIA's covert operations in Central America, Clarridge decided to visit Manuel Noriega "to explore the possibility of setting up a training camp in Panama" (Clarridge 235). "'Sometimes in the spy business', he remarks, 'you don't have a choice with whom you deal; unfortunately, it is often the unsavoury individuals who have the critical information'" (237).

Clarridge also indicates that he relishes such occasions (237). At Noriega's 'modest' home, the two men drink Old Parr Scotch, Noriega's favourite, and he gives Clarridge a box of Cuban cigars. Clarridge notes that Noriega was "a great collector of frogs, made from a wide variety of materials, including some of semi-precious stones" (237). He notes that the Spanish word '*sapo*' is a word for a toad or, perhaps in some cases, a frog and is also a colloquialism for 'spy' (238). Is this an invented James Bond touch in the narrative? Or an indication of Noriega's ambivalent regard for spies—even, or perhaps especially, from the CIA? At any rate, Noriega is receptive to Clarridge's proposal of a training base and offers the CIA Snake Island off the west coast of Panama—an offer that was later rescinded when Noriega became nervous that it would become an issue in the forthcoming elections. Clarridge adds that he suspects the reason for his change of mind was pressure from Cuba (238).

Are such episodes in a memoir of any value in establishing broader understanding of the use of secrets and lies in the early 1980s? The British historian of intelligence, Christopher Andrew, taking an overview of Cold War operations in Latin America, observes that "KGB operations were greatly assisted by the clumsy and sometimes brutal American response to Latin American revolutionary movements" (Andrew and Mitrokhin 30). As head of Latin American operations for the CIA in the early 1980s, Clarridge must take some of the blame for this—especially for the mining of ports, which was evidently his idea (Clarridge 269). Clarridge's credibility was damaged badly when he was indicted on seven counts of lying to Congress and the Tower Commission during the Iran-contra hearings, only to be pardoned by George Bush senior on the eve of his departure from the presidency in 1992 (394, 397). Even in the crossfire of competing ideologies, in which Latin America has been heavily embroiled, it is surely valuable to observe ways in which certain secrets are kept and lies are told. With such knowledge, our approach to truth-telling may be less naïve in the future. The danger is perhaps cynicism about the value of honesty and truth-telling in human affairs.

Conclusion

Let us conclude with several books which reassert the significance and value of the never-ending search for truth in human affairs in the twenty-first century. These books are Bernard Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness*, Paul John Eakin's *The Ethics of Life Writing* and Joseph Wilson's *The Politics of Truth*.

Against postmodern assertions of the endless deferral of meaning and the relativity of all versions of 'truth', Bernard Williams argues with philosophical rigour that "truth has an internal connection with beliefs and assertions (…) [and that] truth figures in the connection as a value" (Williams 84). Williams makes the following statement:

> Truthfulness implies a respect for the truth. This relates to the two basic virtues of truth, which I shall call Accuracy and Sincerity: you do the best you can to acquire true beliefs, and what you say reveals what you believe. The authority of academics must be rooted in their truthfulness in both these respects: they take care, and they do not lie. (Williams 11)

Williams concludes his careful philosophical analysis of what he calls a "genealogy" of truth and truthfulness on a note of hope:

> The hope can no longer be that the truth, enough truth, the whole truth, will itself set us free (…) The hope is that [human beings who communicate] will keep going in something like the more courageous, intransigent, and socially effective forms that they have acquired over their history; that some institutions can exist that will both support and express them; that the ways in which future people will come to make sense of things will enable them to see the truth and not be broken by it. (Williams 268-9)

On a somewhat similar note, Paul John Eakin argues that life writing can be a form of moral inquiry in pursuit of something like truth:

> When we tell or write down our lives, our stories establish our identities both as content – I am the person who did these things – and as an act – I am someone with a story to tell. And we do something even more fundamental – we establish ourselves as persons…(Eakin 5)

However, as Joseph Wilson's autobiographical study, *The Politics of Truth* shows, men and women of conscience can have an uphill battle when the values they espouse conflict with those of an incumbent government. Wilson's book is both an account of his life and career as an American diplomat in Africa, Iraq and elsewhere and of what he calls 'the lies that led to war and betrayed my wife's CIA identity.'[vi] Partly as a result of claims made in Wilson's autobiography, U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney's former chief-of-staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, was indicted in October 2005 on five counts of perjury, making false statements and obstruction of justice, during investigations by Special Counsel Patrick J. Fitzgerald.[vii] He was subsequently imprisoned. Wilson argued that shortly after he had publicly asserted that the Bush administration had twisted intelligence about uranium in Niger to justify war with Iraq, senior officials in the White House had leaked the identity of Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame, who was a CIA undercover operative, in order to discredit Wilson and his exposure of twisted intelligence. Such cover-ups are often the source of new lies, as these events revealed.

What is the impact of such events on secret agents themselves? We can discern something of this in the figure of Valerie Plame, the real life CIA agent whose anonymity and secret service career were "blown" by the leaks which were published in newspapers in July 2003. The impact of these disclosures on the once-secret agent is graphically depicted by her husband:

> …Valerie's life was turned upside down. Nobody (…) could comprehend what it must be like for somebody who has practiced discretion and lived her cover for years - like a character in a stage play where the curtain never comes down – to suddenly find herself a household name. She likened it, aptly, to an out-of-body experience, floating above the new reality, unable to do anything but watch helplessly while people who knew nothing about her speculated about what she did. (Wilson 388)

Secrets and lies are intertwined here. Valerie Plame had been required to lie to friends and acquaintances about her working life to maintain her cover. She had learnt to play a part. In her husband Joseph Wilson's account, these are the necessary subterfuges of a secret service career. Far more serious are the lies involved when a President orders the invasion of another country on the basis of fabricated 'evidence' that the other country is developing nuclear weapons. A similar scale of values underlies John Le Carré's *The Tailor of Panama*. Harry Pendel's little white lies that grow in the telling pale before the arrogance of a government that manipulates intelligence to suit its precarious hold on reality. It is never a foregone conclusion that 'truth will out' in the world of spies and counter-spies. But this should not prevent the exercise of imagination and analytical skills in its perilous pursuit.

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[i] According to Hayden Peake, Angleton characterized Soviet disinformation and intelligence operations as a "wilderness of mirrors" in a TV interview. When author David C. Martin used the phrase as the title of his book, it became 'a popular epithet for counter-intelligence' (*The Private Life of Kim Philby*, 3

[ii] David Charney, "The Psychology of Insider Spies," lecture at the Center for Peace and Security Studies, Georgetown University, 23 February, 2006. The quotes which follow are from this lecture.

[iii] Le Carré, Acknowledgements, *The Tailor of Panama* (novel)

[iv] *The Tailor of Panama*, directed by John Boorman (2001), Interview on DVD

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Wilson, *The Politics of Truth: Inside the Lies that Led to War and Betrayed My Wife's CIA Identity*.

[vii] Carol D. Leonnig, "Libby's Lawyers Seek Papers on Plame's CIA Employment," *The Washington Post*, 1 February, 2006, p. A5.

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