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Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR

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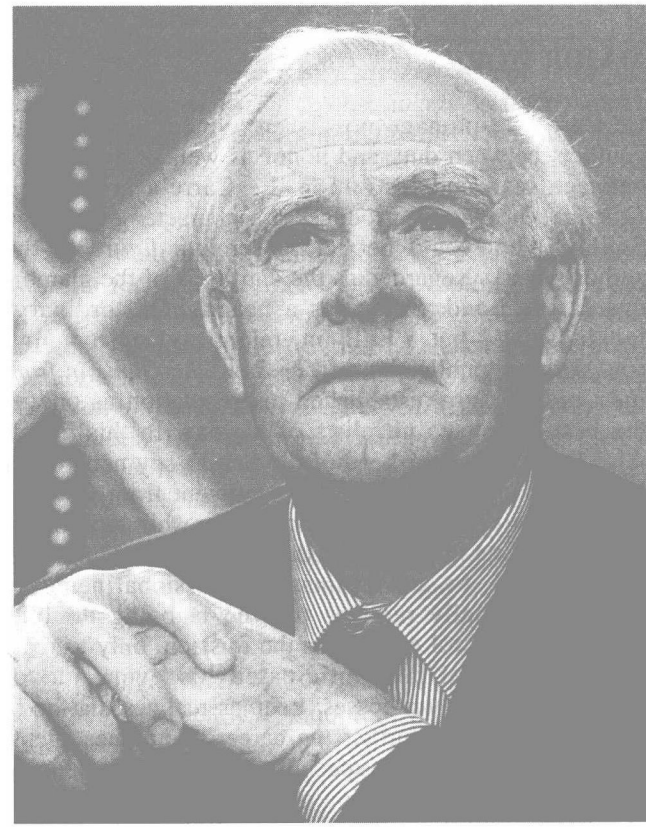
Contents

John le Carré
1931-

(Pseudonym of David John Moore Cornwell) English novelist and screenwriter.

The following entry presents an overview of le Carré's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC,* Volumes 3, 5, 9, 15, and 28.



INTRODUCTION

Le Carré is recognized as one of the leading authors of the realistic spy novel, lauded for his exploration of such themes as duty, love, betrayal, alienation, identity, and the dynamic between fathers and sons. Viewing his fiction as a reflection of the political and social realities in a dynamic and changing world, commentators have often traced his development as one who transitioned from writing primarily about Cold War concerns to an author who examines modern issues including globalization, rogue arms dealers, the power of multinational corporations, and the dangers of international terrorism. Many reviewers assert that le Carré's work has elevated the genre of espionage fiction to an entirely new level.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Le Carré was born in Poole, Dorset, on October 19, 1931. His father, Ronald Cornwell, was involved in suspect financial dealings, a few of which resulted in bankruptcy and incarceration. When le Carré was five years old, his mother, Olive, left the family, and le Carré and his brother, Tony, lived with their grandparents for a short time. Le Carré's complex relationship with his father has been reflected in his work, and the troubled father-son dynamic is a recurring motif in his novels. After he was sent to boarding school and separated from his brother, le Carré suffered from loneliness and alienation, themes that surface in his fiction. Le Carré left boarding school at the age of sixteen and his father sent him to Switzerland to study German language and literature at the University of Bern. In 1949 he returned to England and joined the army, and was eventually assigned to the intelligence corps because of his language skills. In recent years le Carré has admitted that he worked for military intelligence ("the Service") from 1949 to the early 1960s. He was posted to Vienna, Austria, which was then occupied by British, American, and Soviet forces. Le Carré's observations on the Cold War during those years—especially the ruthlessness of intelligence work—became a central theme in his espionage novels. In 1954 he moved back to England, ostensibly to teach school in Glastonbury and begin graduate studies at Oxford University. Le Carré has since admitted that he infiltrated several left-wing political groups in order to gather information on behalf of M.I.5. In 1956 he received his degree in modern languages from Oxford. He spent two years as assistant master at Eton College, and then worked as a freelance illustrator. In 1960 he joined the foreign intelligence service, known as M.I.6. While commuting every morning on the train, le Carré wrote his first novel, *Call for the Dead* (1961). Because members of the Foreign Service could not publish under their own names, he chose the pseudonym "John le Carré." In 1961 he was assigned to the British embassy in Bonn, Germany; it was there that he wrote his second novel, *A Murder of Quality* (1962). He then was transferred to Hamburg, Germany, where he wrote *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963). The novel

received enthusiastic reviews, achieving tremendous commercial success, and le Carré was able to quit the Foreign Service to become a full-time writer. The novel received a Gold Dagger award from the Crime Writers Association in 1963, the Somerset Maugham Award in 1964, and the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1965. Le Carré lives with his second wife in Cornwall, England.

MAJOR WORKS

Le Carré's espionage novels are concerned with the conflicts between duty and honor as well as the tension between man and institution. Le Carré's first novel, *Call for the Dead,* introduces the character of George Smiley, who would become a seminal figure in the author's work. Regarded as the antithesis of the glamorous James Bond, Smiley is a nearsighted, ordinary-looking man—but a brilliant, relentless, and cunning spy. With the publication of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold,* le Carré established his reputation as one of the best espionage novelists of his day. In this novel, Alec Leamas, former head of the British spy network in East Germany, takes one last assignment from Control, the ruthless head of the Service, before his retirement. Control directs him to discredit Hans-Dieter Mundt, an East German spy and Leamas's professional nemesis. Leamas gradually realizes that he is being double-crossed by Control and aborts the mission, only to realize that Control had anticipated his every move. Betrayed by his own bosses, Leamas realizes that he is being sacrificed to further the career of another agent. The theme of betrayal, especially by one's own country and employer, is a recurring one in le Carré's fiction. It also figures prominently in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974). After leaving the Service, Smiley is drawn back in to investigate the rumors of a mole in English intelligence, placed by "Karla," a Russian spy master. During his investigation, Smiley discovers that the mole has not only betrayed his family and friends, but has also slept with Smiley's wife.

In le Carré's next novel, *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977), Smiley takes over leadership of the Service and attempts to restore its compromised integrity through a thorough review of what has been exposed by the Russian mole. Eventually he is betrayed by his peers and unceremoniously fired, despite his honorable efforts. In *Smiley's People* (1980), Smiley brings down Karla by exploiting the Russian agent's fatherly love for his emotionally disturbed daughter. In the process, he realizes that he has become what he hates. Le Carré's next novel, *The Little Drummer Girl* (1983), introduces his first female protagonist, an actress named Charlie. Recruited by Israeli intelligence to infiltrate a Palestinian terrorist organization, Charlie blurs the lines between reality and deception and is unclear about her role and goals within her mission. The father-son relationship figures prominently in *A Perfect Spy* (1986). Manipulative swindler Richard Thomas Pym is a charming but selfish man and experiences a troubled relationship with his son, Magnus Pym. As an adult, Magnus becomes a spy, then a double agent. As Magnus tries to explain his life's decisions in a letter to his son, Tom, he grows to find self-knowledge. In *The Russia House* (1989), a publisher finds himself entangled in Cold War espionage while on a business trip to Moscow, when a mysterious woman hands him a manuscript that details the overrated Soviet military threat.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Cold War, le Carré began to focus his attention away from the Cold War. *The Secret Pilgrim* (1991) signals this transition; composed of a series of vignettes, the book is sometimes viewed as a series of stories united by the presence of the character of Ned Palfrey, a British spy master who reminisces with George Smiley about their time in "the game." In *The Night Manager* (1993), an amoral, jet-set arms dealer named Dick Roper is brought down by a charming and controlled former hotel manager named Jonathan Pine. When Roper inadvertently kills Pine's lover, Pine infiltrates Roper's inner circle and exposes him. *Our Game* (1995) chronicles the literal and spiritual journey of former British agent Tim Cranmer as he investigates the disappearance of his friend, Larry Pettifer. Also a former member of British intelligence, Larry disappears while fighting with freedom fighters in a beleaguered Caucasus republic. Le Carré's next book, *The Tailor of Panama* (1996), revolves around Henry Pendel, an English tailor who has built an impressive shop in Panama that caters to the political and social elite. Recruited to spy on his customers on behalf of British intelligence, the ever-resourceful Pendel fabricates information to please his bosses and benefit financially.

Le Carré's next novel, *Single & Single* (1999), revisits the author's interest in the conflicted father-son relationship, a theme of personal significance. In the novel, Oliver Single endures a troubled relationship with his charming father, Tiger. When Oliver informs on his father's illegal business dealings, he puts his father's life in danger. The 2001 novel *The Constant Gardener* introduces a new villain—the pharmaceutical industry. When a pregnant activist is murdered in Africa while investigating reported flaws in a soon-to-be-released tuberculosis cure, her husband, Justin, begins a search for her killer and becomes an activist for truth himself. In the novel *Absolute Friends* (2003), le Carré's protagonist, Ted Mundy, and his longtime friend, Sasha, struggle to find their place as spies in a post-Cold War world. When they become involved with a well-funded anti-American, anti-globalization movement, they are betrayed by their former British employers and are killed as part of the "War on Terror."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Often compared to authors Graham Greene and Eric Ambler, le Carré is regarded as one of the leading writers in the espionage genre. Some commentators argue that not only did le Carré excel in his early espionage fiction, but that he also helped to redefine the genre after the end of the Cold War. Other critics disagree, maintaining that le Carré's post-Cold War fiction is considerably inferior to his earlier work. His legacy, they assert, lies with his early realistic spy novels that reflect the moral bankruptcy of the Cold War and the complex and often duplicitous relationships between people and modern institutions. Reviewers commend le Carré for the authenticity and realism of his espionage fiction, noting in particular his use of slang, detail of setting and characterizations, and the isolation, alienation, and moral confusion involved in espionage operations. Autobiographical aspects of le Carré's fiction figure prominently in critical discussions, as commentators trace parallels between his complicated and troubled relationship with his father and the father-son dynamic in such novels as *A Perfect Spy* and *Single & Single.*

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Call for the Dead (novel) 1961; also published as *The Deadly Affair,* 1966
A Murder of Quality (novel) 1962
The Spy Who Came in from the Cold (novel) 1963
The Looking Glass War (novel) 1965
A Small Town in Germany (novel) 1968
The Naïve and Sentimental Lover (novel) 1971
Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy (novel) 1974
The Honourable Schoolboy (novel) 1977
Smiley's People (novel) 1980
**The Quest for Karla* (novels) 1982
The Little Drummer Girl (novel) 1983
A Perfect Spy (novel) 1986
The Russia House (novel) 1989
The Secret Pilgrim (novel) 1991
The Night Manager (novel) 1993
Our Game (novel) 1995
The Tailor of Panama (novel) 1996
Single & Single (novel) 1999
The Constant Gardener (novel) 2001
The Tailor of Panama (screenplay) 2001
Absolute Friends (novel) 2003

*Contains *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; *The Honourable Schoolboy*; and *Smiley's People.*

CRITICISM

Thomas R. Edwards (review date 19 May 1986)

SOURCE: Edwards, Thomas R. "Father, Son, Soldier, Spy." *New Republic* 194, no. 3 (19 May 1986): 32-4.

[*In the following review, Edwards provides a mixed assessment of* A Perfect Spy, *asserting that it is "too densely compounded of thriller, social comedy, political allegory, and personal plaint for any element fully to prosper."*]

Despite its encouraging title, ***A Perfect Spy*** is not exactly what most of John le Carré's fans have been waiting for. The "Secret World" of espionage does play a large part in it, drawn in greater detail than ever before; the title is no fraud. But a darker part of the author's mind, one more evident in ***A Small Town in Germany, The Little Drummer Girl,*** and (making due allowances) ***The Naive and Sentimental Lover*** than in the George Smiley "Circus" novels, here exercises itself with renewed insistence, and thriller readers will have to adjust their expectations a bit. Deprived of the usual formula, some will no doubt squall and try to spit this new stuff out, but that is not le Carré's concern, nor is it mine.

The protagonist of ***A Perfect Spy*** is certainly a spy. Magnus Pym learned snooping, imposture, and lying during his childhood in the 1930s, by trying to penetrate and understand the complex business and personal secrets of his father, Rick, an egregious confidence man and swindler, while concealing such secrets from the "respectable" world in which children after all hope to live. At 17, when stranded in postwar Switzerland by the collapse of one of his father's schemes, Pym subsists by selling bits of information about the refugee demimonde to British intelligence. Studying at Oxford during one of Rick's periods of temporary liquidity, he spies on left-wing student groups for The Firm. While in military intelligence during his National Service in Austria, he establishes a productive network of agents on the other side of the Iron Curtain. When he's demobbed, the secret services recruit him for full-time spying under commercial and then diplomatic cover, and his brilliant successes eventually take him to major posts in Washington and (as the novel opens) in Vienna.

But Pym is a double agent—technically so since his army days, when a Czech "defector in place" induced him to exchange information for their mutual benefit, effectively so ever since he first learned both to love his scandalous father and to know him for the terrible fraud he was. To know secrets, for Pym, is to be bound happily to those whose secrets they are. He serves (and

betrays) first his father and then both Jack Brotherhood, his British recruiter and spy master, and Poppy, his captivating Red controller, somehow knowing all the while that there is no self, no "Pym," at the heart of his impersonations and lies. Poppy observes that he is "put together from bits of other people." Brotherhood sees that he's composed of fantasies that "he chopped . . . up and gave a bit [of] to each person."

The book begins near the end of Pym's story, when, somehow having been liberated by Rick's death, he disappears from the view of his British and Czech masters and of the CIA, which has strong doubts about his loyalty. Hiding out in a seaside rooming house where (as "Mr. Canterbury") he has kept a secret sanctuary for years, he writes out his story in letters to his schoolboy son Tom, letters also addressed to all those whom he has served and deceived. Meanwhile an authorial voice describes the efforts of his wife, Mary, Brotherhood, and Poppy to find and save him (and themselves) from the "freedom" he has opted for.

Long ago R. P. Blackmur called metaphor "the double agent," for its way of linking qualities that at once support and (since metaphors are not true) betray each other. Pym has always wanted to be a writer; his narrative to Tom is in effect the novel he tried for years to write. But spying has been his true work of fiction. It has taught him to disappear into "characters" who can represent him, but into whom any self he might have had is absorbed and dispersed, as if in some *Künstlerroman* of Hawthorne's or Conrad's or Mann's. He has always traded in fictions—the famous network of East European agents is almost wholly imaginary, their supposed reports largely supplied by Poppy. But metaphors go both ways: if writing fiction is a good trope for espionage, then espionage is also a good trope for writing fiction, and ***A Perfect Spy*** is at least as much a comment by the author on his own literary tradecraft as it is a comment on the Great Game of espionage itself.

The living sources of le Carré's novels have long been a matter for speculation. It is no secret that David Cornwell, who writes as "John le Carré," served in the British Foreign Service before beginning his literary career, and many have supposed that personal participation in espionage work stands behind his books. Writing on le Carré in a recent issue of the *New York Times Magazine,* Joseph Lelyveld offers the "informed guess" (informed by hints from Cornwell himself) that, unlike its predecessors, the new novel was not submitted for official clearance lest it be censored or suppressed for representing too closely the author's past involvement in real and sensitive events.

The civilian probably won't feel much worry about this—nothing in Pym's professional history, be it truth or fiction, can startle hardened readers of spy novels or students of the career of Kim Philby. But the matter of sources grows more interesting when Lelyveld goes on to reveal how extensively le Carré has drawn on the private history of David Cornwell in fashioning Pym's life. Pym's father, Rick, whose megalomaniac criminality seems too large and appalling to have any but literary origins—in Dickens, say, or Pynchon—is in fact closely modeled on the author's own father. Ronnie Cornwell, like Rick Pym, was an incorrigible con artist who parlayed charm, nerve, and absolute self-belief into marvelous, if always temporary, semblances of wealth and success.

Both men were black marketeers in World War II. Both set up elaborate networks of dummy corporations, periodically went bankrupt, served prison terms for embezzlement, stood for Parliament only to have their histories exposed in public meetings. Both lived and entertained grandly, on other people's money or none at all, amid an admiring crew of henchmen and doxies. Lelyveld says that Cornwell *père*'s climactic crash in 1954 left him owing $30,000,000 in today's money, and like Rick Pym he died (in 1975) penniless in the midst of apparent affluence.

Having such a father would leave its wounds on anyone, and it can easily be assumed that David Cornwell suffered in many of the ways Magnus Pym does. (A strikingly similar father appears less centrally in ***The Naive and Sentimental Lover,*** and Ronnie Cornwell threatened his son with a lawsuit over it.) The suggestion that being a double agent and being a novelist can represent similar responses to such an origin is an intriguing one. But Rick looms too large in Pym's life for the health of this novel. Pym's obsession with him grows boring with repetition, and its literary intent seems blurred. Are we simply to pity Pym for his bad luck in a father, or is some irony supposed to be accumulating around his relentless self-pity? How exactly is the self-mocking jocularity of his own rather Dickensian narrative meant to work?

The problem is compounded by what seems to me le Carré's greatest strength as a writer, his mastery of a weary sympathy and sad understanding in which lofty, amused distaste seems always on the verge of despair about our foolish, sinful species. (This may be a natural tone for ex-intelligence officers who write fiction—think of Graham Greene too.) Such a voice can serve splendidly when secondary figures are in view—Poppy, Jack Brotherhood, and Mary Pym are treated with an affectionate disdain that allows them room to move and breathe surprisingly freely, and most of the walk-on characters are drawn with a deftly malicious sense of their significant reality, and its limits, that Jane Austen, Forster, or Evelyn Waugh would appreciate. But this style can't make clear contact with Pym himself—like le Carré (in Lelyveld's account of interviewing him), Pym is a superb mimic, but his impersonations of himself emanate from some central space empty of all but echoes.

In some ways such complaints don't matter. ***A Perfect Spy*** will not wholly disappoint the devotee of thrillers. If there's never any doubt that Pym is a traitor, still the process of finding out when, why, and how he became one is pleasantly intricate. And the minimizing of "primary" suspense frees up le Carré's powers of ironic social observation as the earlier books never quite do:

> The village was one of those half-urbanised Georgian settlements on the edge of Bath where English Catholics of a certain standing have elected to gather in their exile. The cottage lay at the country end of it, a tiny sandstone mansion with a steep narrow garden descending to a stretch of river, and they sat in the cluttered kitchen on wheelback chairs, surrounded by washing-up, and vaguely votive bric-a-brac: a cracked ceramic plaque of the Virgin Mary from Lourdes; a disintegrating rush cross jammed behind the cooker; a child's paper mobile of angels rotating in the draught; a photograph of Ronald Knox. While they talked, filthy grandchildren wandered in and stared at them before tall mothers swept them off. It was a household in permanent and benevolent disorder, pervaded by the gentle thrill of religious persecution.

If the book did no more than maneuver itself into positions from which such writing could be done, it would be worth reading.

But ***A Perfect Spy*** is more than good writing and observing, more than a thriller, more even than a novelist's troubled pondering of the sources, and costs, of his talent. It is also a kind of summing up of the social and political conditions within which le Carré has found his career, the public materials his imagination has possessed more strongly than any other British novelist of his generation. I mean, of course, the cold war, which has marked Europeans in ways even the most concerned and anxious American has trouble imagining, and the consequent erosion of their trust in both traditional arrangements of experience and the newer ideologies that offer to replace these for the greater good. It is an elegant touch that has Pym communicate with Poppy through a book code based on the *Simplicissimus* of Grimmelshausen, who fought on both sides of that first Thirty Years' War.

Magnus Pym is a traitor, but he is not a Communist. As le Carré and others have portrayed it, the British intelligence services are (or lately were) a microcosm of the old ruling class, whose arrogant incompetence has cost Britain so dearly. Like all of le Carré's other spy protagonists, Pym was not born to his professional station. His roots lie in the provincial, mercantile, dissenting middle classes, whence he rises (like his father, in a way) by his wits, taking a First at Oxford in 17th-century German literature (George Smiley's subject too), marrying above his class (again like Smiley), and entering a Service in which all are at least nominal gentlemen. Le Carré's real gentlemen-spies (if not actual traitors, like Philby and Bill Haydon in ***Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy***) are mostly inept, complacent fools, around whom the shrewder KGB and even the better-equipped if dumber CIA can run rings until someone like Smiley puts things more or less to rights.

Pym is damaged not simply by his own emptiness but by the unworthy objects that invite its service and devotion. Poppy puts it in a way that le Carré surely endorses:

> All the junk that made you what you are: the privileges, the snobbery, the hypocrisy, the churches, the schools, the fathers, the class systems, the historical lies, the little lords of the countryside, the little lords of big business, and all the greedy wars that result from them, we are sweeping that away for ever. For your sake. Because we are making a society that will never produce such sad little fellows as Sir Magnus.

It's of course a self-serving argument—Pym's wife acutely thinks Poppy a "sham" when she meets him—and Pym responds to it not politically but personally, glad to be assured that Poppy is still his "friend." But I must suppose that le Carré has something important invested in this description of what England does to its sons.

There may be a similar investment in what ***A Perfect Spy*** makes of America. It pictures a CIA inhabited by rednecks, jargoneers, computer freaks, and docile careerists, where talk like this generally sets the tone:

> "Gentlemen," Wexler resumed—except he said "junn-lemen" . . . "Our position, Sir Eric," Wexler resumed, with something unpleasantly close to a bow in the direction of Mountjoy's knighthood, "that is—the ah Agency position overall on this thing—at this important meeting, and at this moment in time—is that we have here an accumulation of indicators from a wide range of sources on the one hand, and new data on the other which we consider pretty much conclusive in respect of our unease. . . . It looks to us therefore that the ah logistics here require us to go back over the ah course a little distance and—when we've done that—to ah slot the new stuff in where we can all take a good look at it in light of what has—ah latterly gone before."

Le Carré does permit this mumbling dunce to be right about Pym's treachery when the elegant gents of MI5 are dead wrong, but the cartoon-like rendering of American stylelessness, and the animus that causes it, are much too apparent. There is more subtlety in Pym's own account of his response to America itself:

> Pym never felt more free in his life until the night Rick died. Everything he still contrived to love in himself was here to love in the people round him. A willingness to open themselves to strangers. A guile that was only there to protect their innocence. A fantasy that fired but never owned them. A capacity to be swayed by everything, while still remaining sovereign.

But there seems no reason to think that le Carré finds such "freedom" any more winning when embodied in a whole nation than when it's simply embodied in poor Pym himself.

But this book is not really an anti-American parable. Pym's tragedy, or pathos, is that the illusions he has lived by are no more intelligible when put in national or ideological terms than when put in personal terms. It may be that le Carré, whose responsiveness to the tones and textures of experience seems more impressive than his powers of analysis, really isn't sure just what happened to Pym. But I suspect that this rich but puzzling novel wants to be a story about how love keeps promising us a better life that it somehow never quite makes good on. Certainly there are signs of such a meaning at every turn. Pym calls himself someone who "can't rest till he's touched the love in people, and then can't rest till he's hacked his way out of it." An ex-mistress remarks that "he doesn't have affairs. He has lives." He thinks to himself that "love is whatever you can still betray. . . . Betrayal can only happen if you love." An old schoolmate and Tory pederast observes that he "didn't care about money. Love was all he cared about. Didn't know where to find it. Clown really. Tried too hard." He both loves and fears America because it offers such easy access to "lives he had not lived."

This insistent troping of "life" and "love" never quite clarifies itself, perhaps because the link between Pym's discontent and the author's is too deeply buried to permit stable, interpretable irony. ***A Perfect Spy*** is not a perfect novel, being too densely compounded of thriller, social comedy, political allegory, and personal plaint for any element fully to prosper. But it is a remarkable *something,* most remarkable, I think, in its way of showing a powerful writer trying to bend a genre he has definitively mastered into the service of meanings that are not so much the genre's as his own—trying to make fiction out of a special, strongly felt experience of modern life for whose urgencies fiction, with its necessary reticences and impostures, is at best an imperfect vehicle. It was well worth trying, and it is absorbing to watch the effort unfold, but as Poppy says of Pym and his baffled quest for an adequate form of service: "There are so many ways of taking vengeance on the world. Sometimes literature is simply not enough."

Tony Barley (essay date 1986)

SOURCE: Barley, Tony. "Contexts: Genre and Ideology, Persons and Politics." In *Taking Sides: The Fiction of John le Carré,* pp. 1-26. Milton Keynes, England: Open University Press, 1986.

[*In the following essay, Barley describes le Carré as one of the foremost authors of espionage fiction and surveys critical responses to the author's work.*]

> Since the external disorder, and extravagant lies,
> The baroque frontiers, the surrealist police;
> What can truth treasure, or heart bless,
> But a narrow strictness?
>
> (Auden, 1977, p. 111)

It is clear that there are many John le Carrés; or perhaps it would be closer to the truth to say that le Carré's fiction has many faces and voices, and that they compete with one another, appealing variously to different kinds of reader. There is, to take one example, the le Carré who pays homage to the poet W. H. Auden by quoting from his early work from time to time, and by appropriating his mythology. Auden's abandoned agents, arbitrary borders, indistinguishable enemies, malign authorities and false guides figure in le Carré too and, like Auden's solitaries, le Carré's isolates are prompted into stark reflections on motive, value and allegiance, anxiously seeking solace in dreams of imaginary companions or in purely private moralities. Just a step away from Auden is the presence of his near contemporary—Graham Greene—the writer with whom le Carré is most often compared and with whose novels of conscience le Carré's debate. In fact, the later author's consciousness of 'literary' traditions is far broader than these comparisons suggest but it is likely that the immense commercial success of his fiction lies elsewhere than in its literary continuities. Undoubtedly, that success has more to do with le Carré's voice as the knowing insider, familiar to a fault with the secret life of the Security, Intelligence and Diplomatic Services. This le Carré is the pseudonymous, tantalizing source who leaks privileged information from what his readers are delighted to believe is the hidden heart of society. With mysteriously topical foresight, this le Carré seems to predict the next astounding exposure of yet another real-life spy and, equally engagingly, this le Carré records in careful detail the mundanities and inefficiencies of the secret world. Close at hand is le Carré the amused ironist and comedian of manners, fluently mimicking the language of the old boy network and discreetly observing the sad absurdities of its bureaucracies. Alongside, is le Carré the harsh moral satirist, condemning the criminal excesses and dangerous fantasies of society's ostensible guardians.

And then there is le Carré the myth-maker, the creator of an almost entirely fictional Intelligence jargon, the awed narrator of the exploits of Smiley and Karla, and the elegist of declining Imperial power and lost national purpose. Equally, there is le Carré the 'social realist', the hard-nosed, vernacular reporter of the squalid and sordid. While on an altogether different plane, there is le Carré the political novelist, dramatizer and analyst of opponent positions, commentator on the practices of the Cold War, and historian of diverse crises—the Berlin Wall, rising Neo-Nazism in West Germany, the defeat of American Imperialism in South-East Asia, the Israeli invasion of the Lebanon. And from the political to the personal, there is le Carré the psychologist, attuned to domestic, marital transactions, and the projections and transferences which characterize relationships under

stress. Somewhere or other, there is also the le Carré who may be the biographer (or autobiographer) of David John Moore Cornwell, but he is not the subject of this book. Most strikingly and obviously, there is le Carré the story-teller, the popular writer, the armchair and train journey entertainer, the master of the spy-thriller. All these aspects and identities offer themselves as legitimate starting-points for a description of le Carré's fiction.

For the most part this book will concentrate on le Carré's *political* and *psychological* materials and their specific intersections, as it is in these areas that le Carré's own preferred interests (and most distinctive achievements) seem mainly located. Nevertheless it would certainly beg too many questions to ignore entirely le Carré's role and reputation as perhaps the foremost exponent of the modern spy-thriller. So in this introductory chapter [of *Taking Sides: The Fiction of John le Carré*] I look first at his relationship to genre, discussing his selective use of thriller patterns and his divergences from the generic norms; secondly, I turn to some of the typical critical responses to him as a writer of popular fiction. In particular, I begin to explore le Carré's novels as other than unproblematic props for Western ideology and examine briefly their general dealings with West versus East, including their approaches to the State, nationality, social class and gender. Finally, paving the way for a more detailed consideration of his 'mature' thrillers, I introduce some notions of how far and in what respects le Carré writes both a 'personal' and 'political' fiction. I argue that his idiosyncratic formal structures arise as the direct expression of his political and psychological subject matter—his repetitions, debate or interrogation structures and political/personal montage effects all stem from the apparently intractable political/personal confusions he so pointedly dramatizes.

The Spy-thriller and John le Carré

Notwithstanding the presence there of a Secret Service hero, le Carré's first two novels, ***Call for the Dead*** (1961) and ***A Murder of Quality*** (1962) are more akin to the classic English detective story than to the spy-thriller. Although ***Call for the Dead*** charts George Smiley's investigations into the death of a suspected spy, its political dimension is downplayed in favour of the narrow 'psychological' approach required by detective fiction in which the tactics and deductions of the hero earn pride of place. In similar vein, ***A Murder of Quality*** eschews the extensive range of action expected of the spy-thriller and le Carré confines himself to the exclusive world of the British public school, always focusing attention inwards rather than looking out towards the larger political sphere. Smiley's Espionage and Security Service experience in this novel is merely a convention—it serves solely to suggest his expertise and ability in tracking down the guilty. As John Halperin has shown (1980, pp. 17-37), the thematic preoccupations of these early novels were to be reworked, developed and extended in ***Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy.***

But by 1974—the publication date of ***Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy***—le Carré's identity as *the* writer of spy-thrillers was well established, and with the exception of those first two novels and ***The Naive and Sentimental Lover*** (a sabbatical excursion from the world of espionage into the private fantasies of its small cast of non-political characters), all his remaining novels to date have attracted to themselves the spy-thriller label. Because it is on these that the extent of his achievement has been (judiciously) gauged, his seven spy-thrillers furnish the primary material for the present study. At once, however, they come up against problems of category which irritatingly refuse to disappear. Ever since the publication of ***The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*** in 1963, his reviewers have seen le Carré as standing with one foot inside the genre boundaries and with the other outside, and consistently and predictably their commentaries have been concerned with evaluating his capacity to 'write something more than a thriller' (Hicks, 24 July 1965). Evidently the sense of le Carré's generic incongruity is more of an issue for literary criticism than it is for the author himself, and where the author characteristically dismisses the subject in his interviews, the genre analysts feel obliged to negotiate le Carré's 'difference' as best they can. In his *Anatomy of the Spy Thriller* for example, Bruce Merry disparages le Carré's ungeneric narrative structures and his self-conscious, 'highbrow' quest in search of the 'Great Novel' (1977, pp. 51, 214). John Atkins, on the other hand, simply reverses this judgement, insisting that le Carré's 'best spy novels are also mainstream novels' (1984, p. 170). Unfortunately, the conflation of a language of category with a language of evaluation raises more difficulties than it solves and consequently it is not my aim to pursue its implications. Nor am I interested to advance some revamped definition of the thriller so as to accommodate le Carré to the genre in some more comfortable way, nor even to speculate on the possibility that his work may somehow transform and redirect the thriller tradition. Those are areas for other projects. Nonetheless, an initial perspective on le Carré's relationship to the spy-thriller in terms of form and function is genuinely helpful in pointing towards what is distinctive in his fiction, and Bruce Merry's cogent analysis of the genre provides a solid framework against which to place le Carré's idiosyncrasies.

Merry abstracts the formal aspects of the thriller and considers too the system of values it habitually displays. The spy-thriller offers a non-mimetic, causal action, with an accelerating, narrowing storyline. It is divided into separate narrative sections and incorporates a decreasing quantity of episodic or recapitulated material. The narrative progresses in an increasingly suspense-laden and focused movement which culminates