



John le Carré's *The Secret Pilgrim* and the End of the Cold War

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Abstract. *The Secret Pilgrim* was John le Carré's first novel to consider the end of the cold war. The author describes how the novel's embedded structure reveals le Carré's political perspective more clearly than previous works and argues that this narrative frame is an adaptation to the sudden collapse of le Carré's traditional subject matter.

In a speech given at University of Edinburgh, John le Carré remarked that only the spy novel could reveal the world's hidden agendas (qtd. in Atwood 21). His own representational agendas of betrayal and duplicity in the cold war (and after) are revealed in an unusual way in his *The Secret Pilgrim* (1990). The book, which contains a series of discrete episodes linked with a frame narrative, reveals the relationship between le Carré's political thought and narrative technique more clearly than any of his other works because of the bareness of its structure. A source for le Carré's title may be Rupert Brooke's poem "Dust":

And every mote, on earth or air,
Will speed and gleam, down later days,
And like a secret pilgrim far
By eager and invisible ways,
Nor ever rest, nor ever lie,
Till, beyond thinking, out of view,
One mote of all the dust that's I
Shall meet one atom that was you. (49)

The transmutation of the body into its elements in death, and the romantic possibility of preservation of some spirit beyond it, are the immediate references in Brooke's poem; the particulate imagery of atoms and motes is also significant. The individual, in le Carré's political aesthetic, must face the world alone, and this transcendent loneliness is the highest glory (see figure 1). Unity with the social aspects of being, as opposed to a quasi-Platonic contact with a transforming love, is undesirable and unachievable. The fragmented

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narrative structure of *The Secret Pilgrim* reveals in its construction the consequences of this constraining belief, traced by “eager and invisible ways.”

A market-based view of the origin of *The Secret Pilgrim*'s narrative frame is that it provides a way to link many discrete scenes or vignettes that share no common origin, while maintaining enough of a recording and linking consciousness—in the figure of Ned—to be marketed as a “novel.”

Although this is the pragmatic interpretation, the complications that will be explored do not contradict it. In this essay, the consequences of this framing mechanism will be examined, as well as how the mechanism constrains and generates the embedded narratives within. Narratives create a storyworld—what Jeffrey Williams describes as “the universe or economy of their own functioning or figuring, and they are validated or grounded within that economy” (7)—and the contours of their functioning and figuring reveal the formative pressures of political reality.

George Smiley appears as a main character in le Carré's first two novels, *Call for the Dead* (1961) and *A Murder of Quality* (1962); and he has token appearances in several of the subsequent works, including *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963), which established le Carré's reputation as an espionage realist and cold-war psychologist. With what was termed the “Karla Trilogy”—the three books *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974); *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977); and *Smiley's People* (1977)—le Carré became the most critically acclaimed English espionage novelist of his generation. The protagonist of these works—waging silent war against the treachery within and then against Karla, the Soviet spymaster responsible for it—was the portly, donnish Smiley, an anti-Bond. Memorialized in the popular imagination by Alec Guinness's portrayal in the BBC adaptations (*The Secret Pilgrim* is dedicated to Guinness), Smiley is both an amateur philologist and cuckold; Karla employs the latter fact against him in the first novel of the trilogy. Smiley is forced to blackmail Karla in the final novel with the threat of exposing his mentally ill daughter, a sordid act that closes the trilogy's circle of treachery.

Two of le Carré's novels from the 1980s, *A Perfect Spy* (1986) and *The Russia House* (1989), feature protagonists who betray the service for self-avowedly apolitical reasons. Barley Blair does so for love, and Magnus Pym acts out of a deep-rooted conflict with his father. Ned, the protagonist of *The Secret Pilgrim*, makes his first appearance in *The Russia House* as Blair's handler. A minor character there, Smiley is demoted because of the catastrophe of Blair's defection, occupying a training position at the beginning of *The Secret Pilgrim*. Ned has experienced firsthand the conflict between political system and personal choice, and his moral development is cast against the historical development of the British Secret Service's role in the cold war (and immediate aftermath), with Smiley's avatar engendering the episodes of his memory.

The Secret Pilgrim was the first post-Soviet novel published by le Carré, and many



Figure 1: John le Carré at the University of Bern in 2008, where he received an honorary doctorate. Photograph by Manu Friederich. Image courtesy of the University of Bern.

foretold bad commercial tidings because of this lost backdrop — not just for le Carré but for the espionage novel in general. The spy-entertainment industry and le Carré have managed to carry on — even flourish — with asymmetric terrorist organizations replacing the Soviets as the main source of security anxiety. Terrorism — present in the background of *The Night Manager* (1993), *Our Game* (1994), *The Tailor of Panama* (1996), and *Single and Single* (1999) — returned to the forefront of his novels *Absolute Friends* (2003) and *A Most Wanted Man* (2008) twenty years after the publication of *The Little Drummer Girl* in 1983, his novel of the Palestinian conflict. He was an angry critic of the Bush administration's military operations in the public sphere as well. Le Carré's reputation was made as a literate contrast to the prevalent romantic jingoism associated with Ian Fleming. Although attention to the realities of the situation described is by no means an invention of le Carré's — Joseph Conrad, Eric Ambler, and Graham Greene are only the most apparent predecessors — his novels captured the public imagination in a way that theirs did not.

Since *The Secret Pilgrim*'s narrative frame is so prominent, the details of its construction are relatively conspicuous. Jerry Palmer sees a parallel between the ideology of the thriller's narrative structure and Aristotle's concept of *endoxa*, the rhetorical device of narrative expediency (67). Palmer separates "individualism" — the thematic sine qua non for the thriller in his view — from *endoxa*. Palmer's use of the concept is a helpful starting point for the analysis of le Carré's novel since the parallels between events in Ned's career and the settings of le Carré's other novels suggest expediency. The story of Hansen, for example, which takes place in Southeast Asia, is reminiscent in setting to that of *The Honourable Schoolboy*. When Ned visits Gretta, a terrorist detained in a Israeli jail, there are also similarities to situations in *The Little Drummer Girl*. The framing device allows le Carré to offer a parable of sorts about identity formation, as Smiley's after-dinner speech recapitulates Ned's entire career.

The Secret Pilgrim's narrative frame has been referred to as a Kipling and Conrad trick: a group of aging British ex-colonials or functionaries sitting around a fireplace with brandy and cigars waxing nostalgic, the diegetic frame of a dozen British empire films (Cobbs 202). An important distinction is that the embedded narratives are triggered in Ned's mind by a stray remark of Smiley's and thus are not shared stories (which is an explanation of the title: even at the end of his journey, Ned cannot share the tales of his pilgrimage). Ned relates the narrative while remembering an evening at the training facility Sarratt when he invited Smiley to lecture his students. The embedded narratives are recollections of Ned's remembrances that evening, which are sparked by Smiley's conversation. Within the embedded narratives (Ned remembering something that Smiley said that made Ned remember something), there are several further recursions where Ned remembers previously mentioned incidents. The second episode in the book is triggered by Smiley's extended speech:

There are some people who, when their past is threatened, get frightened of losing everything they thought they had, and perhaps everything they thought they were as well. Now I don't feel that one bit. The purpose of my life was to end the time that I lived in. So if my past were around today, you could say I'd failed. But it's not around. We won. Not that the victory matters a damn. And perhaps we didn't win anyway. Perhaps they just lost. Or perhaps, without the bonds of ideological conflict to restrain us any more, our troubles are just beginning. Never mind. What matters is that the long war is over. What matters is the hope ... if I regret anything at all, it's the way we wasted our time and skills. All the false alleys, and bogus friends, the misapplication of our energies. All the delusions we had about what we were. (12)

The first step in Smiley's speech is to distinguish himself from those who are constrained by what he views as "ideology." In Smiley's sense, "ideology" refers to strict adherence to doctrine instead of a flexible and transcendent humanist viewpoint. Smiley sees the "ideological" struggle that determined the boundaries of his previous existence as defunct (because he associates it strictly with the cold war), and he has outlived and therefore triumphed over it. His side won, the perceived ideological triumph mirroring his own victoriously transcendent moment; but Smiley quickly qualifies that statement to accord with his humanist stance: "Not that the victory matters a damn." The next rhetorical maneuver is to dispute the concept of ideological victory. Blurring the distinctions between competing ideologies and refusing to consign them to polarizing positions such as "victor" and "loser" is a further attempt to escape the constraints of a thought-system. The next statement is a recognition of his own paradox: Without an oversimplified perceived ideological dichotomy, "our troubles are just beginning." He then follows with a curt "never mind," a purposefully noticeable displacement. The next two statements emphasize the discontinuity of ideological conflict: "[The] long war is over," and "what matters is the hope" (12). The last statements are then phrased in the form of a series of regrets, which lament Smiley's service to forces he desired to transcend; and transcendence remains the controlling idea.

After Smiley's speech, Ned imagines himself observed by the doddering espiocrat: "And suddenly I felt like one of my own students. It was the sixties again. I was a fledgling spy, and George Smiley — tolerant, patient, clever George — was observing my first attempts at flight" (13). A "fledgling" is a bird that has developed enough plumage to take wing. Feathers are a natural part of avian ontogeny; being indoctrinated into the service is less natural. A young bird can no more decide to abandon feathers than Ned could have voluntarily halted puberty, the effects of which he was later to have so enjoyed. (Chapter 4 of *The Secret Pilgrim* is the most explicit representation of Ned's virility, a contrast to the passive and perpetually cuckolded Smiley.) Unable to fly away, Ned is enveloped in the same vortex that Smiley convinces himself that he can escape.

After an ironically nostalgic account of his youth as a spy-in-training, Ned gives his own version of Smiley's speech:

We too in our way had come to maturity at a great moment in history; even if it was the reverse of this one. Stagnation and hostility stared at us from every corner of the globe. The Red Peril was everywhere, not least on our own sacred hearth. The Berlin Wall had been up two years and by the looks of things it would stay up for another two hundred. The Middle East was a volcano, just as it is now, except that in those days Nasser was our chosen British hate object, not least because he was giving Arabs back their dignity and playing hooky with the Russians in the bargain. In Cyprus, Africa, and South East Asia the lesser breeds without the law were rising against their own colonial masters. And if we few brave British occasionally felt our power diminished by this—well, there was always Cousin America to cut us back into the world's game. (13)

The first issue of note is the juxtaposition of historical markers; Ned is careful to establish the time of his narrative as roughly 1964 and also the present time is suggested to be twenty-five or so years later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ned's thoughts are clearly ironic. He is mocking the naïve beliefs that he and his peers shared as service recruits. By implication, his current belief system has changed. His years of experience have convinced him that the world is too complex to be viewed in such Manichean terms. Ned's mention of the loss of the British Empire and the attitude about such loss shared by his colleagues is a level of abstraction removed from his earlier associations. Ned's later comments are ironic because

they are filled with self-contradiction; if he truly believed that the “lesser breeds without the law” were misbehaving, then he would not characterize the “brave British” as in need of asking for help from anyone in order to contain them. He presents this ideology both to distance himself from it and to remind himself what he once was. Smiley’s speech both initiates and constrains these sentiments.

“Let me apologize for myself in advance,” Ned begins, “I knew very little of other ranks in those days” (15). The action of his story revolves around a bodyguard assignment for the wife of a visiting Arab dignitary, whom Ned’s mentor, Monty (who also appears in several other le Carré novels), refers to as “Fat Boy” (16). Ned describes him as “the wastrel brother of the ruler of an oil-rich sheikdom” and is suspicious of him from the beginning. His wife, whom Ned is given the job of guarding, is code-named “the Panda,” “on account of the dark circles around her eyes when she was unveiled, and her wistful and solitary deportment, which gave the air of an endangered species” (18). Dark circles around the eyes are a sign of fatigue, and the unveiling is another embedded symbol of transcendence. It is wearying, as Ned makes clear, but certainly possible.

Ned’s misadventure begins when he spies a man paying what seems to be too much attention to his charge. The Arab man, whom Ned dubs “the Monkey,” follows the wife around carefully, yet they seem to recognize each other. When Ned feels that the man is about to attack her, he rushes at him, only to be restrained by Monty, who has accurately perceived the situation: The man was sent by the dignitary to pay for the items that his wife had pilfered out of London shops. Monty’s parting advice is “[t]hat’s the trouble with our job, Ned. Life’s looking one way, we’re looking the other” (28).

Ned could have just as easily ended his tale with the revelation of the identity of “the Monkey.” With the prevailing narrative endoxa, Monty’s speech had to be included to provide closure. His homily is yet another variation on Smiley’s initiating idea; our system of perceptual habits and shortcuts obscures the evidence of our senses, but we can, from other vantage points, lift this veil through insight, reflection, or experience. Because this is the final transformation of Smiley’s idea, it is the most abstract. But the theme of transcendence is still readily apparent.

The longest embedded narrative is the story of Hansen. It is based upon the real-life experiences of François Bizot (who wrote a memoir, *The Gate*, with a foreword by le Carré), a Frenchman (Hansen is half-Dutch, like Ned, in le Carré’s version) captured by the Khmer Rouge. A young spy-in-training, Earnest Perigrew, asks Smiley a question about colonialism that provokes Ned’s recollection. Perigrew was the “son of British missionaries to West Africa, and one of those people the Service is almost bound to employ, on account of their rare knowledge and linguistic qualifications” (206). Ned describes his question as having “started reasonably, then degenerated into a tirade against Britain’s indifference towards her former enslaved subjects” (206). Smiley answers:

“Yes well I think I rather agree with you,” said Smiley courteously to the general surprise, when he had heard Perigrew to the end. “The sad answer is, I’m afraid, that the Cold War produced in us a kind of *vicarious* colonialism. On the one hand, we abandoned practically every article of our national identity to American foreign policy. On the other we bought ourselves a stay of execution for our vision of our colonial selves. Worse still, we encouraged the Americans to behave in the same way. Not that they needed our encouragement, but they were pleased to have it, naturally.” (206; emphasis in original)

Ned’s response to this speech, which serves as a transitional marker to the embedded narrative, is “Hansen had said much the same. And in much the same language. But where

Smiley had lost little of his urbanity, Hansen had glared into my face with eyes lit by the red hells from which he had returned” (206–07).

Hansen is, like Ned, drawn to the service out of a combination of maternal and patriotic duty. His mother was English and was involved in the Dutch resistance in the war. Whereas Ned entered the service straight from school, Hansen became a Jesuit missionary. He later became an orientalist and was seduced by the culture of the East. More prosaically, he seduced young girls (and boys) of Indonesia, Thailand, and Cambodia, and was nearly defrocked because of it. Ordered by the Jesuits to return to Europe to repent and recover, Hansen refused and was placed under house arrest, from which he quickly escaped. He became a bouncer at a brothel in Djakarta and presented himself to the British Consul to atone a while later. Determined now to devote himself to fighting communism (“his newly adopted anti-Christ” [210]), he offered his services, which were quickly seized upon, as Hansen offered rare talents and access to an increasingly volatile area (this first contact is said to occur sometime after large-scale U.S. involvement in Vietnam and surrounding countries). After he established and operated a large-scale Western spy network in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge captured his Cambodian wife and daughter. His wife dies, and his daughter, Marie (“not an American name ... it was European” [226]), is forced by the Khmer Rouge to denounce him as a spy. After this betrayal, Hansen is left behind and later tracks down Marie at the brothel where she works. He is with her when Ned finds him at Smiley’s desperate request; and he confesses his story to Ned in his shared bungalow, which is described as “unlit [and] designed for fornication” (222).

Smiley’s description of British involvement in its former colonies is literally under-scored: “*vicarious* colonialism” (206). His immediate sense is that the British were aiding and abetting their American masters, and both he and Ned are not free of the disgust mingled with nostalgia at Britain’s former imperial glory and its assumption by the United States. The “stay of execution” that Smiley speaks of is a self-criticism, but Ned remembers most clearly Hansen’s “eyes lit by the red hells from which he had returned” (207). The previous episode describes Ned’s interrogation of a young German terrorist named Britta who is imprisoned in Israel. Before he relates this encounter, he recalls the entire period of his life as a “single search the object of which was unclear to me. And that the object, when I found him, turned out to be the lapsed spy, Hansen.” Adds Ned, Hansen “in his Cambodian jungle was my Kurtz at the heart of darkness.” A bit later, Ned thinks that he had begun to think of himself as “ridiculous, a hero in the style not of Buchan but of Quixote” (175). There are more direct literary allusions in this paragraph than any other in the novel, and they serve as thematic indicators of the centrality of Hansen’s story in the development of Ned’s worldview. The allusions to the jingoism of John Buchan, the ambiguity of Joseph Conrad, and the satire of Miguel de Cervantes all reinforce the narrator’s sense of mediated reality: As the British have tried to relive their former glory through the American empire, so Ned retells his life as filtered through Smiley’s glory. Hansen, who has participated without mediation in the “red hells” of colonialism, can say from experience that “we have sinned against the children of Eden. God forgive us” (224).

The moral tragedy that mirrors the larger moral tragedy of the colonial involvement in Southeast Asia is Hansen’s incestuous relationship with his daughter. Ned’s narrative wants to leave implicit the confessional elements of Hansen’s own narrative and interject his own confession onto its interpretive grid. “Grid” is how Ned translates Hansen’s French description of the Khmer Rouge’s torture device, and the chaining that Hansen details—the apparently pointless and impractical torture inflicted upon him and other prisoners—reflects the larger project of forced transformation. For as monstrous as their doctrine was,

the chilling recognition shared by Hansen, Ned, and Smiley is that the history of colonial involvement in this “Eden” is the same torture wrought on an entire civilization. As Hansen says, “Once you have embarked upon the impossible concept of God, you will know that real love permits no rejection” (226). The “impossible concept” is also the equally impossible project of colonialism, in which real love permits only acquisition.

The Hansen episode from *The Secret Pilgrim* displays an episode in the development of the narrator Ned’s life, a memory shared by Smiley, and the entire life history of Hansen himself, which reflects the preoccupations of both its tellers. There are also the occasional figurants such as Perigrew who serve to stimulate Smiley and thus the narrative, but who also represent a generation waiting to learn its own lessons.

Hansen’s transgressive love for his daughter, who blends the colonial other with him, serves as a mirror into Ned and Smiley’s souls—the roots of their own position and what it entails. When Ned, at the end of the embedded narrative, thinks that “once, waking from a bad dream, I was guilty of a seditious thought about Rumbelow [the chief of station who handled Hansen’s case originally] and the Fifth Floor. I wished I could pack off the whole tribe of them on Hansen’s march into the jungle, Smiley included” (245), he reveals his awareness of Smiley’s lesson. Both Smiley and Ned’s development have been experienced vicariously; the word becomes a metaphor for the entire enterprise of espionage, and, by extension, for the process of understanding through reading. le Carré wrote that, while listening to Bizot’s story, “I felt an increasing desire for more. I longed to enter his experience, inhabit it, and as a storyteller, give it the shape I mistakenly believed it must receive in order to have an impact on the reader” (Foreword viii). The “shape” he gives to the experience reveals the formative pressure of his own ideology.

Ned’s final thought is “[y]et I was content, as I am content to this day whenever I think of Hansen. I had found what I was looking for—a man like myself, but one who in his search for meaning had discovered a worthwhile object for his life; who had paid every price and not counted it a sacrifice; who was paying it still and would pay it till he died; who cared nothing for compromise, nothing for his pride, nothing for ourselves or the opinion of others; who had reduced his life to the one thing that mattered to him, and was free” (245). Ned believes that Hansen is a man like himself, but one who has removed himself completely from the social aspects of existence. His relation with his daughter has become everything to him; he no longer cares about the Catholic Church, Cambodia, colonialism, or his duty to mother and country. Ned conspicuously lacks this strength, but he regards it as the highest attainment. The denial of liberal humanism, that we are not capable of sustained political action that does not horribly compromise our own humanity—as in the case of the Khmer Rouge—necessarily renounces the possibility of social transformation. Ned, remembering the events of *The Russia House*, thinks “[watching] my most valuable agent betray his country for his love, I could never quite muster the outrage required of me by my masters” (245); and the rejection of outrage in place of sympathy is not only a rejection of a senseless bureaucratism and duty but also an implicit rejection of any collective action not based on personal relationships—a final transformation of Smiley’s wisdom.

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