

Re-Formations of the Thriller: Raymond Chandler and John Le Carré

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Crime fiction is hugely popular and some of its authors have been recognized not only as best sellers but also as major artists—Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins and Graham Greene, for example. Mainstream literary studies have tended to bypass the form, but that attitude is steadily changing as crime fiction is being increasingly studied, especially as a genre which deals, in varying ways, with issues and problems of the contemporary world.

The thriller is first and last a modern form. Stories about crime and detection only go back as far as the start of the nineteenth century, when specialist detectives were needed to solve crimes in the rapidly expanded cities of industrializing northern Europe. The international spy thriller is really a twentieth-century form as both knowledge and anxiety about international tension have grown more widespread. The history of the thriller has been well described by Julian Symons and its social and historical roots have been analysed by Ernest Mandel.¹

Crime fiction, like all cultural forms, has many variant patterns, but they all rest on a central structure of threat and resolution, at once alarming and consoling. Because of this essential emotive basis, the term “thriller” is best used as a synonym for crime fiction in general, not as a name for one of its sub-genres: these are better classified in terms of their basic setting and mechanisms, such as country-house clue-puzzle, police procedural, private eye adventure, international spy story and so on. Within those categories there can still be substantial variation: for example, a basic link exists between the old-fashioned hero detectives like Sherlock Holmes and the technologically-aware amateur crime fighters who are now so popular on television.

As well as having such varieties, the thriller, like other cultural forms, has distinct variation in the level and quality of the analysis that is made of the world. Some thrillers are naive to the point of inanity—like the early Sexton Blake stories where every villain was a fiendish foreigner and heroic Sexton needed only to flex his wrists to burst any manacles. Or they can be more damagingly naive, like Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer, a hard-hat private eye who rep-

1 Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder* (2nd edn, London 1983); Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London 1984).

resents the American Way of Life at its most nationalistic, one-eyed, even fascist. Spillane was horrendously popular; his books were printed in millions at a time.

Other thrillers are "critical", written in a much more complex way, directed towards criticizing and exposing such dangerous simplicities and towards constructing a more thoughtful account of the way in which society works, or might work. To consider these thrillers in detail can be a rewarding process, but it soon becomes clear that the analysis of such novels cannot restrict itself to an appraisal of them in purely literary and aesthetic terms, terms such as: are they well-made, what are the artistic traditions involved, how skilful or clumsy is the writing? Because thrillers are themselves so deeply and dynamically embedded in the conflicts of modern society, their qualities do not exist at the literary level alone, indeed may not be very strong at that level; critics and students must themselves make a socially engaged and informed response or fail to grasp the full role of crime fiction in the contemporary world.

Chandler and Le Carré are classic producers of the critical thriller, authors who have a high literary reputation and also considerable sales: they have sometimes been treated as novelists who happen to write about crime and espionage and they tend to see themselves in that way.² But to look fairly closely at what they are doing will reveal that they are in fact criticizing the thriller form within which they work, exposing some of its limitations and going on to offer statements about what they as authors most value. So the power and character of their work is best seen in, and against, the context of crime fiction itself.

Raymond Chandler was born in America in 1888 and educated in Britain; he settled in California after 1918. After working as an executive in an oil company he drifted into writing crime stories. He had previously written finely crafted poems and essays, but suddenly saw the appeal of the new American "tough guy" stories. These were appearing in *Black Mask*, a now famous "pulp" magazine

- 2 In a letter to a friend Chandler put it this way: "I believe there is a peculiar kind of satisfaction in taking a type of literature which the pundits regard as below the salt and making of it something which the fair-minded among them are forced to treat with a little respect. You must never admit to yourself that the kind of writing you and I do is by definition inferior. It is as good as the man who writes it and record proves it will outlast 99.44 per cent of the touted best sellers." (*Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler*, ed. F. McShane, London 1981, pp. 386-7.) Le Carré has often been reviewed as a "novelist", and he discussed this in an interview with Melvyn Bragg, "The Things a Spy Can Do", *Listener*, 22 January 1976, p. 90.

(so-called because it was printed on poor quality wood-pulp paper, unlike the expensive "slick" magazines like *Harper's* or *Saturday Evening Post*). Dashiell Hammett was one of the leading "tough guy" authors; their essence was that they rejected the Agatha Christie type of country-house clue-puzzle, seeing it as an artificial construct resting on nothing more valid than a set of tricky clues. Murder for them was not a body quietly stabbed in the library with an antique Assyrian dagger. Murder was a man cut in half by a machine gun in a back street, a corpse in a canyon with a fractured skull. Chandler said they gave murder back to the people who committed it. The dusty streets and wide plains of the American cities, the roaring cars and stuttering guns of the gang wars, the hard talk and harder drinking of the American criminal world: the tough guy writers stated that this was what crime was really like.³

Hammett went further, and so did the early Chandler. They saw corruption behind crime, a corrupt linkage of gangsters, politicians, businessmen, even judges. It sounds a very modern perception, and was drastically shocking in its time. In this world moved the tough and two-fisted detective, brave, wary and above all honest, protecting his client and himself, but working first and last for truth and justice. He was not a policeman; they were part of the machinery of the newly perceived corrupt state. He was a private eye—that came to be a very rich and richly developed phrase. The private eye watches on his own and judges for himself. He very often continues his investigation after a client asks for it to be stopped, as it is closing in on an unacceptable truth. He is his own man; he is a hero of that central value of modern society, individualism.

Chandler is the great artist of this hero. Hammett's heroes were always at least partly criminal in attitude and had communal, anti-individual instincts. Chandler tends away from that position to shape a lonely, tough, ironic but basically sensitive and self-defensive individual hero. Inside the tough shell is a quivering sensitivity. It might be anyone in that place Chandler outlines so well, Los Angeles, the first of the car-based megacities.

To examine *The Big Sleep* and *The Lady in the Lake* together is not difficult, because most of Chandler's novels have the same basic pattern. He often said he was bad at inventing plots, but it also seems that basically he was happy with the type of statement that was coming

3 The classic statement of this is in Chandler's essay "The Simple Art of Murder", to be found in the short story collection *Pearls are a Nuisance* (London 1964).

through his plots. In both cases, by the way, the novel is based on a combination of two previously published short stories: *The Big Sleep* is a compound of "The Curtain" and "Killer in the Rain"; *The Lady in the Lake* is based on "Bay City Blues" and "The Lady in the Lake".⁴

A structural pattern of the Chandler novel can be assembled from *The Big Sleep* and *The Lady in the Lake*; *Farewell My Lovely* is added here, partly because it has been widely admired as Chandler's best book but also to indicate that this pattern does not derive from accidental resemblances between two novels.

- 1 Something is troubling an important family—their name suggests they are the nearest that Americans come to nobility:

BS Colonel Sternwood
LL Derace Kingsley
FML Grayle

- 2 A homosexual man is somehow involved but is brutally murdered

BS Arthur Geiger
LL Chris Lavery
FML Lyn Marriott

(Note: Marlowe is the one who finds his body, has had close contact with him, but is hostile to him)

- 3 In the following action these characters appear:

A corrupt policeman:

BS Captain Gregory
LL Delgarmo
FML Bay City police

An untrustworthy but attractive woman:

BS Carmen Sternwood
LL Mildred Haviland
FML Mrs Grayle

A "tough" man who is the victim of the untrustworthy but attractive woman:

BS Regan
LL Chess (and Kingsley?)
FML Malloy

(Marlowe likes this man—or what he hears about him in Regan's case—and shares vicariously the threat he faces)

A small-time detective who is honest but destroyed:

- 4 The best analysis of Chandler's use of his own material is in Philip Durham, *Down These Mean Streets a Man Must Go* (Chapel Hill 1963); see Chapter 8, "The Technique".

SYDNEY STUDIES

BS Jones
LL Talley
FML —

A major gangster:

BS Eddie Mars
LL Lou Condy (off stage)
FML Laird Brunette

Plus — A reasonably honest policeman who recognizes corruption but does what he can
— A minor woman whom Marlowe likes, usually a literary professional
— A glamorous but inaccessible woman.

These characters act out the complex but effective pattern of a Chandler plot, which moves in a firm but essentially concealed direction.

The basic structure is this. The mysterious action is offered as if it is related to urban corruption of the sort outlined by Hammett and, in his earlier stories, by Chandler—this material is actually in the short stories Chandler recycled for the novels. The Sternwood problem in *The Big Sleep* seems to be a matter of blackmail by Geiger backed by Brody or, ultimately, Mars. The disappearance of Mrs Kingsley in *The Lady in the Lake* appears to be the result of the problems related to the death of Dr Almore's wife, which seems to have links to gangsters and police corruption. The themes of gangsters and police corruption recur throughout the stories.

Yet the problem is in fact in no way connected with corruption. In *The Big Sleep* Eddie Mars profits from the disappearance of Rusty Regan but had no involvement in his death; he is a secondary figure in the whole process. In *The Lady in the Lake*, the Almore case fades from interest, and even the frightening policeman Delgarmo is overshadowed as a threat; all these corrupt men are actually the victims of the one potent criminal, the tough, treacherous and many-sided Mildred Haviland, who is just as dangerous as was Carmen Sternwood, the fearful gun-wielding younger sister in *The Big Sleep*.

So the story actually spirals in to a crime committed by one woman, deadly, powerful and in Mildred's case very skilful at concealing her traces; in Carmen's case rich and powerful enough, through her family, to have the same power of disguise. What was in Hammett and what seems to be in Chandler an investigation of urban dramas is ultimately a story about personal fear of the private woman. And that is felt most of all by the private man, the private eye.

The hero himself has a central set of characteristics that etch deeply

this powerful and basically neurotic plot pattern. He has a wisecrack for every occasion, but they are usually informed with mordant hostility to others: in *The Lady in the Lake* he watches "a wizened waiter with evil eyes and a face like a gnawed bone"; in *The Big Sleep* he says "her face fell apart like a bride's pie crust". Marlowe's own persona is a model of suffering virtue, enduring blows to the head, nights in jail, long car journeys: they leave him weary but undeterred. His duty to his client drives him on, even more his duty to himself as discoverer and defender. But he is also sensitive. As he burgles a house in *The Big Sleep* he says "I leaned against the door softly and lovingly" and when he returns home in *The Lady in the Lake* he finds, in spite of his bruised face and greying hair, his own sense of peace, of being at home, alone, with no one to bother him, no one to betray him.

Marlowe's anxieties are reflexively revealed in the people he values. He likes men who are quiet, enduring, deeply and unostentatiously tough like Patton the police constable in *The Lady in the Lake* and Ohls the dry detective of *The Big Sleep*. As for women, he can feel a brief rapport with literary professionals, Bridie the journalist in *The Lady in the Lake* and the bookshop attendant in *The Big Sleep*: he enjoys that brief, unsexual contact. He also relishes from a distance those unobtainable beauties Vivian Regan of *The Big Sleep* and Adrienne Fromsett in *The Lady in the Lake*. Their glamour is bound up with their semi-noble American connections and their lack of real threat lies in the fact that they belong to the big men he so admires: Regan is dead, of course, but Marlowe is no more than an admiring attendant to his widow and her erratic advances are courteously and contentedly parried.

Tough and sensitive, lonely and neurotic, Marlowe is a voyeur and evaluator of city life. In a famous scene from *The Big Sleep* that even the splendid Bogart film could not quite match, he sits in his car and watches people reacting to the heavy rain, with all their confusion and all their comedy. Marlowe is an early and powerful example of the outsider and is happy to be that; he has himself worked out and all his defences erected. Except of course for those dangerous people who might, like Carmen, come disturbingly close. She and Mildred and even, it seems, a man, Chris Lavery have a strong sexual aura that Marlowe senses. But women hold a gun on him and Lavery spits on the carpet at his feet. Attraction and affront are intimately related.

In his response to these threats, the rough edge of Marlowe's personality is revealed: stripping his bed to pieces after Carmen's departure, insulting Lavery, gratified by Mildred's painful death.

Marlowe is thrown out of his tough and sensitive balance by those who seem both to attract and threaten him, whether a beautiful amoral woman or a handsome empty-headed man. But such a judgement of Marlowe is inherently a distanced one. In those sequences in the novel the fluent and forceful power of Chandler's writing makes the central character seem convincing, almost sympathetic: it is only when the stylistic spell is resisted that his attitudes can be seen as simplistic and even socially destructive.

Chandler appears to have shared those views, and yet it is only rarely that his writing allows itself to seem sentimental or neurotic. One example is the end of *The Big Sleep*, which is clearly self-indulgent and over-written, saying too much about Marlowe's sensitivity and protracting too long his poetic anxiety about the threatening ambient world. The end of *The Lady in the Lake* is more carefully contained than the end of *The Big Sleep* and hardly lets the tough-guy mask slip at all. But it still has traces of the same naive and over-sensitive self-interest, and the neurotic side of Marlowe comes out earlier in the novel when, in Chapter 5, he hates the mountain tourists for being so vulgar. That passage has a shrill tone that cuts through the normally persuasive style which is meant to be a central technique of conviction in a Chandler novel.

Chandler, of course, knew how good he was as a stylist and how important his style was to persuade people both of his status as a writer and also to convince them of the rightness of the attitudes he passed on through Marlowe. He apparently used to cut his typing paper in half so that he could just concentrate on one perfect paragraph at a time. The other side of that detailed care was casualness in the larger structure, and his plots do seem to ramble; the join between the two stories he used as a basis of each novel is not always smooth. It is a somewhat strained coincidence that Chris Lavery lives opposite Dr Almore in *The Lady in the Lake*, so bringing together rather awkwardly the Mrs Kingsley plot with the story centred on Mildred Haviland. In the same sort of way, *The Big Sleep* clearly starts up again in Chapter 21 after the end of the Geiger story.

But it is not true to say, as some do, that Chandler could not plot effectively. Chapter eight of *The Big Sleep* is a powerfully developed piece of sustained narrative, and the whole process of finding the body in the lake is built up in a masterly way. Nor should credit be given to the fable that Chandler did not know why Owen Taylor died in *The Big Sleep*. Howard Hawks, the film maker, seems to have started a rumour to this effect that is often repeated, but careful reading of the novel makes it clear. Taylor drove the car off the pier to kill

himself; Brody had previously knocked him on the head to obtain the plate of the photograph of Carmen. Such rumours were no doubt encouraged by the fact that Chandler mocked his own cavalier attitude to plotting by saying that when he was in doubt he would have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand. But as he was probably aware, that approach actually intensifies the impact of the novels; these rather rambling and threat-based plots seem to fit and even emphasize the hero's wandering, vague quest, where only his courage and endurance lead him to the truth through clouds of confusion. The films, with their carefully streamlined plots, quite lose this important aspect of Chandler's work. Marlowe is no masterful armchair intellectual who knows everything ahead of the reader; he is much more like a symbol or companion of the reader, a sensitive soul in a hostile world—and one which is hostile as has already been discussed, not because of the patterns of real crime, but because of the pressures placed by other people on that sensitive individual.

Different responses are possible to Marlowe and the attitudes and values that are offered through him. For Chandler, he was fully admirable, as was so vividly stated in the essay "The Simple Art of Murder":⁵

But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid . . . He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor—by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in the world and a good enough man for any world.

Robert B. Parker, creator of the very successful modern private eye series about "Spenser", finds no problem in agreeing with that view but does finally see room for others to disagree:⁶

In a world of corruption and schlock Marlowe is tough enough and brave enough to maintain a system of values that is humanistic, romantic, sentimental, and chivalric. He is a man of honor.

Honor has several virtues. It may be maintained in defeat as well as in triumph. It is inner-directed. And it proves as permanent a stay against confusion as one is likely to come across in the post-Christian age. In a dishonorable world, to persist in honorable behavior is to court adversity. But since adversity serves to authenticate honorable behavior it provides meaning, or a substitute for meaning. We are in an unobliging universe. Whether or not we admire Marlowe's ideals, his willingness to incur injury

5 See note 3.

6 See Parker's short essay on Chandler in *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, ed. J. M. Reilly (London 1980).

and risk death rather than forsake them invests both his ideals and his behavior with moral seriousness.

There is indeed room for dissent from Marlowe's "ideals". Writers of modern feminist thrillers like Barbara Wilson or Jan McKemmish have acted out their distaste for the inherent sexism of the male private eye.⁷ Another view would see narcissistic neurosis in the elision of interest in real corruption and economic distress, those major forces of the period when Chandler started to write.⁸ Another way of treating the same formation would be to see the attitude of Chandler and Marlowe as merely aspects of American urban anomie in an early and authoritative form. This has been explored by one of Chandler's best-equipped and furthest reaching critics, Fredric Jameson:⁹

The form of Chandler's books reflects an initial American separation of people from each other, their need to be linked by some external force (in this case the detective) if they are ever to be fitted together as parts of the same picture puzzle. And this separation is projected out onto space itself: no matter how crowded the street in question, the various solitudes never really merge into a collective experience, there is always distance between them. Each dingy office is separated from the next; each room in the rooming house from the one next to it; each dwelling from the pavement beyond it. This is why the most characteristic leitmotif of Chandler's books is the figure standing, looking out of one world, peering vaguely or attentively across into another.

Heroic and narcissistic, urban and alienated, Marlowe was created by Chandler with vivid power as an emblem of man in the twentieth-century city, the inhabitants of which both shape and are shaped by that strange and forbidding formation—like crime fiction itself, so much a part of the modern world and its problems.

John Le Carré's real name is David Cornwell. Born in England in 1931, he was a teacher, then a member of the British foreign service and about 1960 he turned to writing. After a classic clue-puzzle (*A Murder of Quality*) and a well received murder mystery set in the world of espionage (*Call for the Dead*), Le Carré had a sensational success in 1963 with *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. Acclaimed by critics and book-buyers alike, the novel is established as a classic, yet, like Chandler's stories, in many ways it works against the

7 See Wilson's *Murder in the Collective* (London 1986) and McKemmish's *A Gap in the Records* (Melbourne 1985).

8 See the comments in my book *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London 1980), pp. 153-6.

9 F. Jameson, "On Raymond Chandler", *Southern Review* (U.S.A.), 6 (1970), 633.

conventional patterns of the spy thriller, criticizes the naive politics of the traditional form and offers new and individual-based values.

Le Carré's starting-point was similar to Chandler's. The international spy novel was basically a rather slapdash mixture of naive nationalism and boyish pranks—Fleming's James Bond was the most up-to-date version, others were gentlemanly like John Buchan's Richard Hannay, cosmopolitan as in the stories of E. Phillips Oppenheim, or simply unpleasant—the aristocratic thuggery of the Bulldog Drummond stories by "Sapper", H. C. McNeile. In the late thirties Eric Ambler reacted against this tradition by writing realistic spy stories where international power politics deformed the lives of private individuals both criminal and innocent. *The Mask of Dimitrios* is a powerful and radical new beginning; it is equivalent to Hammett's *Red Harvest*.

During the nineteen fifties and sixties, in a growing tide of fictional and attitudinal realism in Britain, Len Deighton and John Le Carré both brought that concern for veracity about things and people to bear on the spy story. In *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, as in all successful thrillers, there is a basic and quite simple story which is made deeply obscure through the process of the novel. Leamas is withdrawn from Berlin after the failure of his spy network and a conspiracy begins, aimed by London to shore up the position of Mundt, their own agent who is the head of the East German secret service. He is under pressure from Fiedler his deputy—not an agent of London. So Leamas misbehaves, goes to jail and Mundt, knowing the plot, arranges that he should defect. When he does and gives evidence about a payment scheme that appears to incriminate Mundt, Fiedler is delighted and Mundt is arrested. But London has arranged matters so that Mundt can prove the whole thing was a set-up and Fiedler is disgraced. But there is more than that. One of the main ways in which Mundt destroys Leamas's story is to show that London looked after Liz Gold, the girl Leamas encountered on his faked way down; her rent is paid, Leamas's spy master visited her. She is brought to East Germany to testify and then, as they make their organized escape, she is shot. As a British communist she cannot be allowed back with her deadly knowledge that Fiedler was tricked.

So Liz Gold becomes the novel's symbol of the way in which an international power, however sincere in its efforts to defend its own side's position, actually crushes the innocent individual. Naive, utopian, feminine, Jewish, Liz is a true victim. Leamas has a recurring dream that is related: hurrying to meet Mundt once he nearly killed a whole family in a car, and his memory of the children's cheerful

waving is a constant reminder of how he nearly wiped out this little model of human freedom in his defence of the Free World. He remembers the family as Liz is shot.

This powerful ending occurs at the wall in Berlin, but suggests that freedom is not actually the same as building and defending a wall. Le Carré imaginatively concentrates his argument in his final scene. The case has been theoretically put by Fiedler, the East German loyalist, who asks Leamas just what the West's values are, what is the underlying ideology by which they can justify their constriction of the individual? The East has one, communism. And Le Carré has no time for that. But his own values and those of the novel operate in an area above (or perhaps below) politics, as is indicated by giving such a forceful statement to Fiedler, the official enemy of the West but an honest, patriotic and humane as well as hard-thinking man, not to the betraying Mundt who turned traitor to save his skin.

Leamas himself is a rather unthinking man who acts out the values of professional British espionage. He is anti-American, anti-establishment, an admirer of good neat spy-work. So much so that he definitely likes Peters, the East German agent who comes to debrief him after his pretended defection. As a result of his naivety, when he realizes what London has done, how they have used him and especially Liz, he feels "sick with shame". But he does more than just feel that. At the very end, he is up on the wall and Liz lies shot beneath it; that is the way both London and East Germany want it. But Leamas for once does something totally unprofessional: he climbs slowly down the wall and waits with the dying Liz until he too is shot. This moment of failure in espionage, even failure in patriotism, is the crisis of the novel, the point where its meaning is focussed.

Bruce Merry sees this as the crux of a developed tragedy: "Le Carré's thrillers are tragic novels precisely because the small fish which is ventured becomes sympathetic to the reader, shows unusual integrity and is then coldly sacrificed to the power game".¹⁰ Mandel interprets Leamas's full and final position less idealistically, seeing him as a social rebel: "the hero is not only fully aware of defending a dubious cause, but also expects to be regularly betrayed or stabbed in the back by the masters. Very gradually, the hero slips back into the role of a rebel, rather than a supporter of law and order."¹¹

Meanwhile Smiley, who stands on the other side of the wall, is just where Leamas was at the start, seeing his agent fail to come

10 B. Merry, *Anatomy of the Spy Thriller* (Dublin 1977), p. 214.

11 *Delightful Murder*, p. 123.

through safely—and for basically the same reasons, as international policy discards the individual. Smiley has found the whole affair he has stage-managed to be “distasteful”, but still goes on with what he judges his duty. Le Carré’s later novels abandon the valued rebel like Leamas and use increasingly discredited dissenters, like the quixotic Jerry Westerby in *The Honourable Schoolboy* or the apparently misguided Charlie in *The Little Drummer Girl*. Smiley emerges as the centre of consciousness, he combines his Leamas-like doubts with an ability to continue to act as if he has faith in the West, the secret service. Le Carré spoke about this equivocation in an interview as the central value of his later work.¹²

But *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, preceding those complicated apologies for the Western political tradition, remains sharp in its critique. John Snyder summed it up as “still Le Carré’s cleanest job; compact in structure, deftly deceptive in the unfolding of its triple-cross; and painfully human in the characterizations of the two victims of ‘our’ side’s necessary but evil mission, Fiedler and Liz,—the first a sincere Jewish Marxist who is second in command of the East German Abteilung, the latter the innocent mistress of Leamas the British agent.”¹³

The fact that Fiedler and Liz Gold represent primary values in the text points to a major difference between Le Carré’s technique and that used by Chandler. *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* is not a first person novel; in that pattern, the feelings of the central figure are all important, even supported by the author, as seems to be the case with Chandler. Le Carré’s third person narrative has a more widely spread range of attitudes and ideas, and he takes some care to keep the reader from having full sympathy with Leamas. Early on, in the opening sequence at the Berlin Wall, it seems that this masterful and determined man is the true value-bearing hero. But Le Carré goes on to withdraw full support from Leamas. He shows him becoming involved in the British plot both as a willing participant and also as a manipulated puppet. As Leamas withdraws from involved human feeling, Liz Gold becomes a figure of importance; her nervous warmth is an attitude to value more highly than Leamas’s mechanical patriotism—though she too has her shortcomings in what Le Carré suggests are her naive politics, even her womanish politics—there

12 “The Things a Spy Can Do”, *Listener*, 22 January 1976.

13 See his short essay on Le Carré in J. M. Reilly’s *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers* (London 1980).

is a trace or two of sexism here. Then Fiedler becomes the voice of both intellectual and human honesty. Through its major characters the novel reveals a complex set of responses, and it can also do that in brief glimpses of action: the British manipulations are sketched in sharply when Smiley is ominously watching what is going on or when Control's men suddenly visit Liz Gold after Leamas goes to East Germany. The meaning of the book is created through a total effect, through all the characters, not through one specially valuable figure, like the authoritative Marlowe in Chandler's stories.

But Chandler did sometimes slip from his firm control of revealing action and dialogue, and on those occasions pressed the point too much, revealing the urgency and the naivety of the authorial voice. Le Carré sometimes does that as well and the effect is just as disconcerting and just as revealing. The last scene of the novel is a good example. In tone it touches on melodrama. When Leamas is likened to a bull in the ring, when he recalls the image of the children in the car, the effect is a good deal less subtle than Le Carré's complex and suggestive plotting. And earlier, at the beginning of Chapter VIII, Le Carré lets himself go with a piece of highly "sensitive" writing about the people at the airport. The effect is quite disruptive: why does this clever voice say no more in the novel? Le Carré used that voice often in his later novels to buttress their central point, at once straightforward and tenuous, that individual tragedies are created by impersonal but regrettably necessary power games.

In his quest for credibility in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, Le Carré employs a great deal of what he calls "trade-craft". This presents the "realistic" details of spying such as a description of the structure of London centre, details of how to run a spy network, how to debrief a defector. Using this material to create conviction has a strange effect, because the book is actually *against* spying in moral terms because of its effect on people. There is a definite tension at the heart of the structure of the novel; what largely makes the book seem convincing is actually contradicted by the central values that are given impact by the conviction itself. Chandler did something very like this when he used detail about urban crime, urban corruption and social conflict to make rich and credible a story which actually *rejected* any real interest in society in favour of the individual itself. Both writers actually convince the reader by setting out social, public material which is actually at odds with their individual, private value systems. This remarkable formation is partly why the novels are so dynamic and full of tension: their own structure is itself dynamically tense.

Le Carré's sheer conviction, the authority of his impact was so great that he is, in a way, to blame for what absolutely modern readers can find to be a problem with the novel. Some say that London intervened so much in the Leamas-Liz relationship that it was an obvious set-up which Fiedler should have recognized and so defeated Mundt through the obviously theatrical character of the Leamas conspiracy. It is true that such double-bluffs and triple-agent tricks are the bread and butter of spy stories in the eighties, especially ones by Ludlum and Deighton and Le Carré himself. But they are only made possible because of the way in which Le Carré, in particular, educated a public to read a spy novel, in ways far more complicated than Buchan or Fleming or even Ambler had dreamed of.

Le Carré and Chandler both use the form of a modern thriller against its own simplifications in order to shape a modern statement about the value of the individual. To make more complex and critical the naive attitudes of many thrillers may well seem a valuable move by these writers. It is more doubtful whether they are totally valuable and worth following when they spiral in towards the individual as the only seat of true value. That itself might well seem a simplification, an escape from political realities both domestic and international.

The literary power of Chandler and Le Carré has made their attitudes seem valid; that very power makes it both more difficult and also more important to evaluate what they are saying, while applauding their skill in saying it. But even if there are things to criticize in their work, there can be little question that Chandler and Le Carré have both retained the traditionally successful shape of the thriller and stiffened it with criticism. They have raised complex questions in a form that can too often be given to simple answers; they have renovated the thriller with verve and literary power; they have sharpened its thrust with attitudes that, however much they may be questionable, are unquestionably contemporary.