

# The Spy Novel: Decrypting the Generic Code

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## ABSTRACT

This essay is an investigation of the popular spy novel; it compares American, British and Canadian examples of the genre, and finds close parallels in their depictions of hero, heroine, and villain. It also reveals a persistent underlying mythical pattern in their plots: the archetype of Theseus in the labyrinth, Ariadne with her saving clew of yarn, and the fearsome Minotaur. Also discussed are some variations on this pattern resulting from differences in the authors' political attitudes, as well as structural variations between earlier and more recent examples of the genre, particularly in adaptations for film.

## KEY WORDS

spy  
double agent  
labyrinth  
Theseus  
minotaur  
clue

espionage  
"mole" (covert operative)  
maze  
Ariadne  
clew  
archetype



The spy novel was a literary outgrowth of the so-called Cold War between West and East, the communist and capitalist alliances during the period between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the collapse of the Soviet Union beginning in 1991. The dread of a thermo-nuclear engagement between the great powers of the Soviet bloc and the United States and her allies in Western Europe—a war that came perilously close to actuality during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962—produced a climate of mutual paranoia. This in turn generated a fascination with the super-secret national intelligence services such as the British MI 5 and MI 6, the American FBI and CIA, the Russian NKVD and later KGB, France's *Deuxième Bureau*, and the East German Stasi, as well as another famed spy service not so directly connected with the Cold War, Israel's Mossad. The espionage agent quickly became not only a figure of general fascination but also a hero of fiction with a large international readership. Novels about him were often quickly adapted into films drawing even greater audiences, paying yet larger sums for the vicarious pleasure of watching the super-spy and his adversaries locked in covert and mortal combat. James Bond quickly replaced the gunslinger of the 1940s and '50s westerns as the most popular mythical hero of the era; cinematic police-detective heroes like Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry*, who also replaced the American cowboy-hero, are a more domesticized (Americanized) variation on the spy-heroes.

In this article I should like to point out some of the outstanding common features of a cross sample of spy novels, to speculate on the wherefores of these patterns, and along the way to intersperse some remarks on their implications as they bear on the psychology of both author and reader. My sampling in a brief article is necessarily limited

and my conclusions tentative, but I hope they will generate enough interest to stimulate more detailed research in the subject. Academics have tended to give short shrift to the spy novel, perhaps because, unlike the plotless postmodern novel, it is a highly popular and profitable genre. Yet its very celebrity suggests a psychological import greatly out of proportion to its lowly reputation as a vulgar form.

My sampling of novels is random, in the sense that they have been chosen from seven I had recently read simply for amusement, without any thought of producing an article on them. It was only after I had begun to notice structural and mythical similarities—even among authors of rather disparate styles—that the idea of examining their common denominators began to intrigue me. The works referred to are these, listed in the order of their publication:

- John le Carré, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*.  
(London, Sceptre, 1963)
- Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (London, Sceptre, 1974)
- Allan Folsom, *The Day After Tomorrow*  
(New York, Time Warner, 1994)
- Robert Ludlum, *Apocalypse Watch*.  
(New York, Bantam, 1995)
- Christopher Hyde, *Gathering of Saints*.  
(New York, Pocket Books, 1996)
- William D. Pease, *The Monkey's Fist*. (New York, 1996)
- Nelson De Mille, *The Lion's Game*.  
(New York, Time Warner, 2000).
- Robert Ludlum, *The Prometheus Deception*.  
(New York, St. Martin's, 2000)

Almost all of these novels have ranked at or near the top of U.S. bestseller lists. Their publication dates stretch over a span of thirty-seven years, but most have appeared after 1994.<sup>1</sup> I shall hereafter refer to these works by the first proper noun or two of their respective titles. Thus, le Carre's 1974 novel will be designated simply as *Tinker Tailor*, etc. Passing reference will be made to other works in the same genre

that are not on this list.

I propose to discuss briefly the following aspects of the spy novel: (1) the plot, (2) the hero, (3) the heroine, (4) the villain, (5) the secondary villain, (6) a persistent mythical pattern, (7) a few noticeable trends in more recent examples of the genre, and (8) some general implications of the foregoing.

### Plot

*The Labyrinth.* The narrative twists, shifts, turns, and double crosses of spy novels are always numerous and exceedingly suspenseful, and therein lies much of the satisfaction in reading them. For the hero of this genre invariably finds himself in the position of Theseus in the dark uncharted corridors of the labyrinth, searching for the dread Minotaur that he must destroy if the land is to be made safe.<sup>2</sup> At every turning or blind alley of this convoluted maze hidden agents of the Beast lie in wait for him, seeking to steer him in the wrong direction or, more often, to end his quest by killing him. Like Theseus, the secret agent also receives vital assistance from an Ariadne figure, a beautiful and often mysterious woman who herself has been a victim of the Minotaur, and who carries a guiding ball of thread in the form of secret information vital to the spy-hero's quest. In the course of their collaboration they usually fall in love, sometimes permanently, sometimes (as in the myth) only temporarily.

The labyrinth and the ball of thread marking its dark corridors serve as apt metaphors for the convolutions and solutions of all spy novels. But in more than a few cases these archetypes rise to the surface of the text in startlingly undisguised form. Thus, in the climactic scene of *Tinker Tailor*, the ball of yarn motif appears when George Smiley sits in a darkened house awaiting the arrival of the suspected double-agent, having previously fixed a line of string to help him make his way through the rooms—an instance of Theseus supplying his own spool of yarn (356). This threading the labyrinth motif tends to emerge most literally at the end of nearly all of these espionage novels, when the hero must somehow penetrate the inner lair of the Minotaur. Accordingly, when *Tinker Tailor's* Inspector Black finally tracks the murderer

who knows the German Enigma code up to the very dome of St. Paul's cathedral, the detective confronts an almost literal labyrinth:

Half a dozen small curved doors were set into the wall around the gallery, each one giving access to a series of narrow corridors and staircases that ran up between the inner and outer supporting piers as well as to an entirely separate group of passages leading up the circular "drum" of the dome and then outside the open roof [. . .] it appeared to Black that the dome and the drum supporting it were honey-combed with hidden passageways. (422)

The same labyrinth motif appears as undercover agent Paul Osborne tracks a group of neo-Nazis to their grizzly laboratory secretly tunneled into ice deep beneath a high alpine resort (*Day After*). Similarly, consular agent Drew Latham and his operations team must break into a secret compound known as the "pharaoh's tomb," which has heavily patrolled walls outside, guarded secret chambers inside, and behind an electronically protected steel door the "tomb" chamber—housing the "Minotaur" himself (*Apocalypse*). Finally, undercover operative Nick Bryson and his Ariadne must penetrate deep into the bowels of the Beast's labyrinth, variously described as a "digital fortress," "smart house" and "high-tech Xanadu"<sup>3</sup>—a marvel of state-of-the-art electronic security, with impassable corridors, basements and shafts, under constant surveillance by highly trained guards carrying electronic weapons out of *Star Trek* (*Prometheus*). To the casual view this secret lair is a modest-looking lakeside retreat, but in reality it comprises a gigantic complex burrowed deep into the earth, with

hidden cameras everywhere, even secreted within the interior stone walls [. . .] [T]he electronic badges that all visitors wore did more than change the music and the lighting: they also kept track of every visitor's whereabouts to within six inches. The system was said to be monitored at the Systematix campus [of a large electronics company specializ-

ing in surveillance]. The place was said to be more heavily guarded than the White House.” (*Prometheus* 488)

But penetrate the “invulnerable” citadel they do, with Ariadne saving Theseus from certain death and leading the wounded hero to safety outside its now burning walls.

Unlike the Theseus of Greek lore, the spy-hero rarely confronts the Minotaur directly; for the modern Beast almost invariably lurks off-stage as inaccessible head of the enemy intelligence agency, pacing back and forth at the very center of a worldwide labyrinth and snarling orders to his far-flung network of underlings. Therefore the hero usually only does battle with the undercover agents who serve as the Beast’s extended eyes, ears, muzzle—and horns. There are occasional exceptions to this pattern, as when George Smiley meets the evil Karla long before the latter becomes head of Soviet intelligence; and ironically, that meeting gives Karla an insight into Smiley’s character that she later uses against him (*Tinker Tailor*). But for the most part, the direct adversary of the spy-hero assumes the various forms of enemy spy, double agent, professional assassin or maniacal terrorist—seldom the chief antagonist himself. The latter’s invisibility drapes him in an even more sinister pall.

Why this consistent repetition of the labyrinth-Minotaur motif? Imitation of successful fictional predecessors is certainly an important factor, as in all genres. But beyond that, the recurrence of the maze symbol at the end of spy novels seems to argue for the coherence and strength of the archetype, an instinctive realization that the hero’s final labor should consist of entering the domain of the Other to confront the alien and unknown. At the most obvious level, the labyrinth represents the vicissitudes and blind turnings in the course of life itself, whose future is unpredictable even from moment to moment, and at whose end Death patiently awaits. Theseus embodies the wish to successfully negotiate these turnings, vanquish the Beast, and return alive—that is, to master Fate and live forever. Jungians might give a slightly different twist to this quest, seeing it as a confrontation with the unconscious Shadow, a frightening but necessary step in the process of self-knowl-

edge or “individuation.” Thus the espionage agent’s job of uncovering secrets that threaten national independence could be interpreted as a metaphor for facing and coming to terms with the demons of the unconscious that otherwise prevent personal independence and development. Not that the authors of spy novels have been busy reading up on Greek mythology or Jungian psychology. It’s just that when they summon up tales of espionage they automatically hook into a series of events with ancient and deep mythological roots, an underground network of living patterns with a labyrinthine logic of their own.

### The Hero

*Odd-man-in.* The main character of the spy novel is frequently depicted as an outsider to the intelligence establishment, respected by the inside regulars but nonetheless perceived as an abrasive oddball if not a downright threat. The most common pattern is to cast the hero as a police homicide detective (often retired) who is drawn into the intelligence labyrinth either because of his special talents, or because he has unwittingly stumbled onto highly sensitive security information. Thus the British MI 5 calls in Inspector Detective Black of Scotland Yard only after they learn that he is tracking a killer suspected to have Britain’s most highly guarded secret—the German army’s Enigma code (*Gathering*). Although this secret is being held back even from Scotland Yard, the people at MI 5 need the Jewish Inspector because he is the only one who seems to have a lead on the suspect. Yet only reluctantly do they bring Black inside the establishment and inform him of what he has already partly guessed. Near the end, when an agent from another British intelligence service hints that he wants him to spy on his own agency, Black flatly refuses to become a “traitor,” but is left feeling cold and empty: “Assaulted by emotion and event, Morris Black had made himself an emotionless castaway in the eye of the storm that raged around him” (*Gathering* 437).

The same pattern of eccentricity appears in the figure of Police Homicide Detective John Corey, who is called in by the FBI as a special contract agent to help find an extremely dangerous Arab terrorist on the loose in United States. Corey’s tough-talking, cynical machismo,

his open contempt for FBI etiquette and “political correctness” ruffles the feathers of a Bureau woman, Kate, assigned as his partner in the investigation. Corey’s initial reaction to walking into “Fedland,” as he calls FBI headquarters, typifies this temperamental friction between the police detective hero and the intelligence establishment:

I got a coffee the right color and noticed a tray of donuts that said NYPD [New York Police Department] and a tray of croissants and brioche that said CIA and a tray of oatmeal cookies that said FBI. Someone had a sense of humor.  
(*Lion's Game* 12)

Variations of the odd-man-in theme are so common in the novels sampled that it might save time to mention the only two in which the exception seems to prove the rule. In the first instance, La Carré’s hero George Smiley is indeed an experienced MI 5 agent, one of the best; but he has just retired from the “Circus,” as he calls the intelligence service. As he contemplates his future he regrets having been unable to “live a self-sufficient life independent of institutions.” He also begins to question the previously unquestioned values by which he has conducted his life: “emotional attachments which have long outlived their purpose. *Viz* my wife, *viz* the Circus, *viz* living in London” (*Tinker Tailor* 31). Even when he decides to go after a double agent or “mole” he suspects to be working within the Circus itself, Smiley necessarily operates in relative isolation, relying only on a few professional friends, some of them also retired. Contemplating his own retirement, Smiley fancies that he will probably “set up as a mild eccentric, discursive, withdrawn, but possessing one or two loveable habits such as muttering to himself as he bumbled along pavements” (32).

Similarly, in Ludlum’s *Apocalypse Watch* the co-hero Drew Latham works as a special intelligence agent for the U.S. consulate in Paris. But his attitude toward the American and allied espionage services is highly wary, so much so that when the heroine asks him if he has refused to confide in a colleague because he doesn’t trust him, Latham replies, “I do [trust him]. I also know that he basically trusts the system,



he's lived with it for decades [. . .]. So he'd have trouble with what I'm going to do" (165). Latham's impatience with the intelligence establishment and his independent moves—so essential, as it turns out, for negotiating this narrative's extremely complex labyrinth—link this insider with his more unconventional fictional counterparts who also ruffle the feathers of those who "trust the system."

Of course, writers in the classical detective tradition of Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle may still prefer eccentric, solitary investigators impatient with the pig-headed plodding of Scotland Yard types. This pattern persists in many related popular genres: murder mysteries (Agatha Christie), political conspiracy thrillers, war novels and science fiction (Harrison Ford's role in the classic sci-fi film "Blade Runner" comes to mind). Clearly, there is psychological profit to be gained from making the truth-sleuthing hero achieve his success despite the "system"—as does the boozing and philandering reporter played by Clint Eastwood in the film *True Crime*. Audiences clearly delight in champions who march to a different drummer, however rough or refined the rhythm (preferably rough in recent works).<sup>4</sup>

The major difference between these other "odd men out" and the intelligence agent proper is that the latter finds himself much more dependent on the sophisticated technology of the intelligence gathering services; and as a result he must necessarily work within the establishment, however impeded by its tiresome routine, incompetence, internal rivalry, or subversion by double agents. Thus, while his independence of spirit may make him chafe at service procedures, and his unconventional methods in turn may raise the eyebrows of his colleagues, the spy-hero needs the intelligence service. And the service must tolerate him for his extraordinary gifts.

*The Sixth Sense.* In order to qualify as a hero in the spy genre the central character must possess special powers that raise him above other players in the labyrinthine and dangerous game of international espionage. It is not enough for the "deep-cover agent" to be highly qualified by an acute intellect honed to a fine edge by experience in the field, or "tradecraft," as it is called. The hero must always have something extra, some mysterious power of intuition, a certain supra-

rational instinct that warns him of danger from unexpected quarters, alerts him to distrust the apparently trustworthy, and leads him to act on hunches and theories that at first seem bizarre to his colleagues.

Scotland Yard Inspector Morris Black is the first to suspect that a London serial killer somehow knows the nights on which the Luftwaffe will bomb London, and even in which district the raid will come. How does Black intuit this? Through a gift that other professionals call “the Sight”:

The Sight wasn’t something ever found mentioned in the popular press, and if asked, few if any detectives employed by Scotland Yard would ever admit to its existence. But everyone knew it was real, and anyone who’d ever worked with Morris Black knew that he had it in abundance. Some of his coworkers thought of the Sight in almost metaphysical terms—an extra sense that some were given and others denied—but Black himself viewed it as the subtle difference between craft and art. (*Gathering* 49)

George Smiley’s renowned sixth sense leads him to suspect that a double agent or “mole” has infiltrated MI 5 and is passing the most highly classified information on to the Soviets. Acting independently from retirement, Smiley goes after the mole, even though he has few colleagues to support him and the investigation is exceedingly dangerous. Although le Carré never describes Smiley’s extraordinary powers of intuition in the abstract, an early passage provides a striking example of the lightening speed and sureness of his instincts. Returning home one day, he steps inside his flat while worrying about various matters, the most disturbing among them his wife’s dubious fidelity:

He was still pondering the question when his gaze fell upon an unfamiliar umbrella in the stand, a silk one with a leather handle and a gold ring with no initial. *And it passed through his mind with a speed which has no place in time* that since the umbrella was dry it must have arrived there before six

fifteen when the rain began, for there was no moisture in the stand either. Also that it was an elegant umbrella and the ferrule was barely scratched though it was not new. And that therefore the umbrella belonged to someone agile, even young, like Ann's latest swain. But that since the owner had known about the [door] wedges and had known how to put them back once he was inside the house, and had the wit to lay the mail against the door after disturbing and no doubt reading it, then most likely he knew Smiley, too; and was not a lover but a professional like himself, who had at some time worked closely with him and knew his handwriting, as it is called in the jargon. (*Tinker Tailor* 33–34; italics mine)

Allan Folsom's police Detective Paddy McVey also possesses this power of "Sight," to such a degree that his services are requested by Interpol to solve a baffling series of apparently motiveless beheadings. Folsom describes McVey's ESP in reference to his colleagues' esteem for him:

[. . .] from the day he solved the "hillside torture murders" [. . .] nobody called him anything but McVey—not the brass, not his fellow detectives, not the press, not even his wife.

A homicide detective for LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] since 1955, he'd buried two wives and put three kids through college. The day he turned sixty-five he tried to retire. It didn't work. The phone kept ringing. "Call McVey, he knows every way there is to cut up a hooker." "Get McVey, he's got nothing to do, maybe he'll come over and look at it." "I don't know, call McVey." Finally he moved to the fishing cabin he'd built in the mountains near Big Bear Lake and had the phone taken out. But he'd barely stored his gear and had the cable TV hooked up when old detective pals started coming up to fish. And it wasn't long before they got around to asking the same questions they'd asked over the phone. Finally he gave up, padlocked the

cabin and went back to work full time. (*Day After* 19-20)

At the opposite end of the professional ladder is the young consular agent Drew Latham, whose inexperience at first gives his colleagues misgivings about his abilities, but who later proves beyond all doubt that he too possesses the requisite mysterious "Sight." As a fellow agent describes it to Latham's lady friend, That Cons[ular]-Op[erations] friend of yours, who I didn't think too much of, frankly, is first rate. He looks beyond the fogs [. . .]. The smoke that covers the truth. He shoots through it because he has the instinct that tells him it's there [. . .]. It's more than thorough [. . .] it's a talent. I'd go undercover with him anytime. He's my kind of control (*Apocalypse* 685).

It could of course be argued that the intelligence agent's special powers of perception are not essentially different from those of the hero of the closely related detective genre—that ever since Dupin foiled the Minister D or Sherlock Holmes foiled the sinister Doctor Moriarty this second sight has not been the exclusive gift of the "deep cover agent."<sup>5</sup> I would suggest, however, that because the intelligence agent operates in a much larger and more tangled web he has little leisure to inject his four percent solution of cocaine and then sit back to reflect.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, because his life is in constant danger from a numerous, highly trained enemy with the most sophisticated weaponry and electronic technology, the "Sight" required of our spy hero must be of a higher order than that even of the detective extraordinaire. The secret agent must process sensation, thought, intuition and feeling-judgment with the lightning speed of a super computer, and then act without hesitation. Although the detective can sometimes afford a wrong turn in the labyrinth, for the spy such a misstep would be fatal. Theseus cannot afford to take a wrong turn.

*The Wound.* Spies have no magical protection from physical wounds (although they sometimes seem remarkably lucky in the vicinity of assassins). Nor are they always immune to betrayal and death, as befall Leamas at the sickening conclusion of le Carré's deeply ironic *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. However, fictive intelligence agents do seem to come with an invariable emotional wound. We have

already mentioned Smiley's misery over his beloved but unfaithful wife (*Tinker Tailor*). Inspector Black has for a long time suffered from profound depression, mourning the death of his own beloved wife (*Gathering*). Paul Osborne harbors the festering scar of having seen, at the age of ten, his father murdered on an otherwise peaceful Boston sidewalk. Osborne's wound later turns him into an amateur spy obsessed with finding his father's killer (*Day After*). The young American agent Drew Latham is driven by the obsession to prove that the murdered elder brother he so admired was not "turned" into a double agent by his neo-Nazi captors (*Apocalypse*). Similarly, Nick Bryson has been abandoned by his beloved wife, Elena, whose family he had rescued from the dreaded Romanian secret police of the dictator Ceaușescu (*Prometheus*). So also, Eddie Nichols has been divorced by a wife who couldn't tolerate the secrecy, the long absences and other stresses of his career. Though she continues to love him in her way, Meg has remarried an affluent businessman capable of providing the stability she needs (*Monkey's Fist*). All of these covert operatives therefore labor under an extra personal burden of pain verging on despair.

Simply put, the secret agent's "wound" makes him a more interesting because more human character. His private hurt (or weakness) renders it easier for readers to identify with him by analogy to their own hidden sorrows. If Theseus were too perfectly unflappable and untouched by human tragedy, he would fall outside the range of experience.<sup>1</sup> The common motif of the wound has yet another function, for the hero's pain and frustration often provide the extra incentive for him to escape into his work, to channel his considerable powers in the attempt to destroy the Minotaur. Moreover, in cases where the hero's loved one was lost as a result of enemy espionage, his hurt provides an additional stimulus to right the personal wrong.

Another thing that sets the spy-hero spiritually apart is the fact that, despite previous wounds received in the arena of love, he is still capable of giving himself to a woman who herself has often suffered in the same arena. This difficult and life-affirming alliance of love and trust suggests, on a broader level, the sort of human bond that often seems sadly missing from the sphere of international (if not also personal)

relations.

### The Heroine

*The Clue of Yarn.* The secret agent is far too busy for leisurely trysts at seaside resorts, so any romance that enters his life must come perforce as an on-the-job affair. Yet our Theseus almost always manages to encounter an Ariadne whose clue (or clew) of yarn will help to lead him safely through the labyrinth of international intrigue.<sup>7</sup> Graham Greene's 1939 novel, *The Confidential Agent*, provides an early instance of this archetype in the figure of Rose Cullen, the wayward rich girl who steers the nameless Spanish Loyalist hero called "D" through the convolutions of England's highways and byways, past Fascist agents trying to kill him, and finally engineers his eleventh-hour escape back to Spain. In more recent instances of the genre the heroine usually enters as an enigmatic woman with experience that also holds secret map-coordinates to the turnings in the maze. Thus Dr. Paul Osborne meets Vera Monneray, herself a physician—young, beautiful, and former mistress of a prominent French government minister. Described as a "mystery woman"—who when at home prefers sitting in her "Alice in Wonderland chair"—Vera is ideally suited both by profession and by her highly placed connections to aid Osborne in his search for neo-Nazis engaged in the grizzly business of surgically attaching the heads of their honored dead to healthy living bodies (*Day After*). This same pattern appears in Hyde's *A Gathering of Saints* through the figure of Katherine Copeland, an American spy sent to get information about Inspector Morris Black's investigation of "Queer Jack," the killer who seems to know the German Enigma code. But instead of merely seducing Black, as she had been instructed to do, she falls in love with him, saves his life during a bombing raid, helps him obtain valuable information about how the killer chooses his victims—and finally lets him in on the big secret of a treasonous conspiracy to make peace with Hitler. The variation here is that it's not Theseus who abandons Ariadne, but the other way around. After Black gets his killer, Katherine simply returns home to America without so much as saying farewell, leaving Black feeling more than ever the

lonely "odd-man-in."

*Undercover Together.* The major variant on the "mystery woman" pattern occurs when Ariadne is from the outset cast as the hero's partner, herself an intelligence agent. This official collaboration usually ripens, around midway in the story, into a quite unofficial romantic involvement founded as much on mental as physical attraction. The fact that these professional associates are sometimes temperamental opposites only enhances their ability to navigate the Minotaur's labyrinth, for their differing endowments (guided in each case by the mysterious "Sight") make for a powerfully complementary combination which assures success in the quest. We have already mentioned the professional pairing of Detective John Corey and FBI agent Kate Mayfield in *The Lion's Game*, where Corey's impulsiveness finds a perfect match in Mayfield's meticulous caution, his loud-mouthed impatience a useful corrective in her natural diplomacy. By the middle of the story these highly different personalities have fallen in love, and at the end they complement each other in marriage. A tricky variation on the professional partnership theme occurs in *The Monkey's Fist*, where Detective Eddie Nickles discovers that the woman in possession of the secret codes he seeks is a former FBI agent named Helen Grehm who, after much initial suspicion, eventually cooperates with Nickles to unmask a sinister Russian conspiracy. In the process, of course, they also fall in love.

Aside from providing a parallel with the ancient Theseus and Ariadne myth, this pairing of the hero with a beautiful woman who holds the "clue" has another less obscure function: it injects love and warmth into the spy's usually grim and solitary life. The covert operative's world may be exciting (at least in fiction), but ultimately it is a depressing place—full of habitual distrust, deception, paranoia, and constant doubt as to whether the end justifies the means. This is one reason le Carré's earlier habit of leaving his heroes either single or unhappily married, while at the same time failing to console them with an extra-curricular romance, creates such a bleak atmosphere. Although much prized by le Carré fans, this deeply ironic tone is regularly softened by his successors in our sample—perhaps partly as a conces-

sion to popular taste, but perhaps also as a yielding to the magnetic attraction of myth. Significantly, in his more recent fiction even le Carré has adopted the Ariadne archetype in the persons of two heroines intimately connected with—and in one instance actually initiating—the male hero's quest for the shocking truth (*Single & Single*, 1999; *The Constant Gardener*, 2001). In thus altering his repertoire, the author seems to be responding in a positive way to feminist issues, and at the same time joining the mythical mainstream that always provides Theseus with a loving and helpful guide.

### The Villain

*One Man's Villain* [. . .] Choosing a villain has become an awkward business in the present climate of extreme ethnic sensitivity and “political correctness.” Writers of science fiction have the luxury of neatly sidestepping this problem by creating evil outer space aliens who are literally non-human and therefore also inhuman. Unfortunately, however, the authors of spy novels are stuck with selecting their villains from among a limited number of earthlings generally accepted as unpopular.

One way to avoid offense in this matter is to distance the subject historically. Thus the Nazis of Hitler's Third Reich make ideal candidates for “heavies”; for while their smart uniforms and fanatical discipline arouse a high degree of morbid fascination, the Nazis' atrocities were so egregious that very few indeed would openly object to seeing them represented as villains of the first rank. Christopher Hyde therefore sets his *Gathering of Saints* during the Luftwaffe blitz attack on London in preparation for a Nazi invasion of England. His villains are based on real Nazi spies and moles that worked for Reinhardt Heydrich, the notorious head of German intelligence, the SD. Nor is it without interest that the story's chief German mole employs his flourishing psychiatric practice among London's rich and famous in order to gain valuable information. This also reinforces a likely tendency on the part of readers to distrust psychiatrists.

The Third Reich was hard-driven in late twentieth-century fiction, and now seems, like Rommel, to be running out of gas. Moreover, present



conflicts have more appeal to contemporary readers, especially young ones with short memories. As a result, a modern variation on the Nazi theme, the neo-Nazi movement, now strikes a more resonant discord. Foreigner-bashing “skinheads,” the rumor of old German war veterans (or their children) hoping to revive past dreams of a “super race,” the uncovering of secret reactionary sects, the high-profile right-wing politicians and talk show hosts—all these phenomena, fueling the public’s vague but tangible fears of an extreme reaction against the liberal policies of Western democracies, provide an updated version of the Nazi motif for recent spy novels. Thus Alien Folsom’s *The Day After Tomorrow* deals with a secret high-tech neo-Nazi plan to artificially create a new “blond beast” type, and ultimately a new race of “supermen.” In Ludlum’s *Apocalypse Watch* the collective Minotaur is a powerful international confederation of neo-Nazis who envision a global Fourth Reich.

Recent alarming events around the world have brought Islamic terrorists very much into the public eye—and thence into spy novels as representatives of the dreaded, inhuman Other. This sort of casting runs the risk of inadvertently stereotyping all Islamic people as terrorists. Nonetheless, it presents a tempting option for Western authors in search of contemporary villains. Such a villain is Asaad Khalil, the anthrax gasser of fictional Flight 175 and leader of a one-man vendetta to kill all those—including retired President Reagan—who were involved in the (real) U.S. air attack against Libyan president Gadhafi. Khalil’s motive is as much personal as patriotic, for the strike against Libya killed all of his immediate family (*Lion’s Game*). It must be added that, in light of the recent terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. by Islamic militants, fiction in this line pales by comparison to the stark reality.

Yet another relatively safe option for casting the role of the Minotaur is to draw upon the so-called Russian mafia—a group of formerly high-level Soviet bureaucrats, secret agents and adventurers presently employing their talent for Byzantine-style intrigue in the self-service of capitalistic profit. Members of this new group are acceptable as “heavies” both because of lingering Western suspicion of

anything Russian, and also because of their reputation for taking their newly acquired Social Darwinism to ruthless extremes: selling former Soviet war material to unstable countries, laundering accounts, liquidating opponents, and double-dealing in general. With an allegedly strong foothold among immigrants centered in Brooklyn's "Little Russia"—only a few hours' drive from Washington, D.C. and CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia—these new *mafia* types have become attractive as watchdogs in the labyrinth. William D. Pease chooses this milieu for his *Monkey's Fist*, in which detective Eddie Nickles discovers that he has been hired by a Russian-led crime syndicate to track down some lost credit cards carrying secret encryptions that would implicate the villains. Eventually, of course, Nickles manages to unmask and destroy the whole pack, which has been involved in everything from weapons deals to money laundering and murder. This same milieu provides the scene for le Carré's *Single & Single*, in which British bankers and industrialists conspire with a family of arms-for-drugs merchants hidden deep in the mountain fastness of the U.S.S.R.'s Georgian Republic.

Appropriately, in an era of cybernetic revolution and globalization, a recent ploy in selecting villains is to create a super-secret international conspiracy, comprised of treasonous players from all the major powers, who seek world domination through control of every important source of electronic information, including satellite surveillance. "Information is power" is the motto of these cyber-scoundrels who with their knowledge of everybody's movements and everybody's private financial dealings, can bribe and blackmail even the most important of business and political leaders, including presidents and prime ministers, into doing their evil will. This is the Minotaur of paranoia conjured by Ludlum in his *Prometheus Deception*.<sup>8</sup> A similar vision of global criminal enterprise—in collusion with "respectable" corporate partners, sedate banks, and even the British intelligence service itself—provides the subject of le Carré's recent novel *The Constant Gardener*. This work casts monolithic "legitimate" drug companies in the rôle of the Minotaur, which, ironically, neither Theseus nor Ariadne are strong enough to vanquish. Nor is it easy to imagine a further esca-

lation of the forces of destruction, short of a demented international conspiracy to end the world itself by inciting a thermonuclear or biological war of global proportions. However, this option has been preempted by the science fiction genre, with its outer space aliens who seek to destroy the whole human race in order to make the earth more congenial for habitation.

### The Secondary Villain

*Asses and Moles.* As with most war novels, in which the enemy does not appear for many pages or even chapters, so in many spy novels the undercover operative spends little of his time actually confronting the adversary. Most of his early work consists of preparatory snooping, following leads, planning lines of attack, and so forth. All of this activity can serve to create suspense while heightening dread of the offstage enemy. But if it goes on too long it can also result in boredom. To obviate this possibility writers regularly create one or more internal conflicts within the home intelligence service, or among its various related services. These internecine clashes between the hero and the agency come in two forms.

The first type of complication occurs when an obstructive superior, a wrongheaded and arrogant official, usually working for a rival agency, makes the hero's job more difficult and certainly more annoying. Such a one is Ted Nash, the smug "CIA Super Spook" whose "different theories" from those of Detective John Corey, plus his jealousy due to the beautiful FBI agent assigned to assist Corey, add to the general tension throughout *Lion's Game*. More ominously, Inspector Black is dismissed from the case of "Queer Jack" just as he coming close to the killer. Those responsible for sacking him are high British officials with treasonous motives for not wanting the murderer's identity known. Ready to give up the quest, Black finds himself lured back into the search by his Ariadne, FBI agent Catherine Copeland—together with none other than the young Ian Fleming.<sup>9</sup>

By far the more type of internal complication enters in the form of a double agent or "mole" working within the service itself, sending vital secrets to the enemy and tipping them off as to our hero's move-

ments. This is what George Smiley suspects is happening within the British MI 5; when he finally digs the mole out of its burrow, to everyone's astonishment the Soviet collaborator turns out to be one of the service's most experienced and respected agents, a person admired even by Smiley and to all appearances every inch the true-blue Englishman. This is of course a fictionalized recounting of the notorious Guy Burgess affair of the 1950s—with the difference that le Carré's double agent has the good sense to commit suicide rather than flee to the Soviet Union (*Tinker Tailor*). Yet even when the double agent is not the major onstage villain, his presence can give an extra zing to the tale of espionage by complicating its labyrinthine turnings. Thus, spy-hero Drew Latham's every move is known and countered by the enemy until late in the story, when he discovers that the assistant to the cooperative chief of France's Deuxième Bureau, and the latter's murderer and successor, has all the while been working for the international neo-Nazi conspiracy (*Apocalypse*).

## Trends

*Rapid "Cutting Tone."* The more recent works in the spy genre tend to be composed of a mounting number of short chapters with quick internal changes of scene—as if to facilitate easy adaptation to film with its increasingly rapid "cutting tone," creating quick shifts between brief episodes. This almost dizzying switching from one locale to another presumably obviates boredom on the part of readers with short attention spans and increasingly inured to hyper-stimulation of the senses by supersonic speed and chaotic violence. The trend has several consequences, the first of which is to reduce or eliminate anything resembling interior monologue. If characters do much thinking at all, their reflections are presented in hasty encapsulated form. Action—constant, frenzied action—has taken over from thought of any subtlety. Thus while le Carré's *Tinker Tailor* (1974) is composed primarily of the interior monologues of George Smiley or his colleagues, Robert Ludlum's *Apocalypse Watch* (1995) consists almost entirely of quoted dialogue interspersed with brief narration of action only. This tendency also weakens dialogue at points where the author must insert

short pieces of information necessary for the reader, but not required by the conversation at hand—information that could have been supplied by interior monologue or even by expanded narration. To be fair, Ludlum does employ interior monologue and memory sequences in his *The Prometheus Deception*—yet sparingly, and often in passages set apart by italics, like cartoon thought-bubbles.

*From Brain to Brawn.* Although espionage agents must always be represented as cerebral fellows with quick intuition, we have already noted their recent tendency to do less thinking and much more running around. Le Carré's hero George Smiley is a complex character portrayed in the round, including crotchets, personal anxieties, and opinions about things other than spying. He is interesting in himself, not merely because of his exciting profession (*Tinker Tailor*). Christopher Hyde follows this tradition with his detailed portrait of the introverted Inspector Black, the Jewish semi-outsider carrying deep grief at the loss of his beloved wife, and remaining loyal to his country despite mistreatment by some of its authorities (*Gathering*). Both of these writers rely heavily on interior monologue to achieve roundness of character. A similar depth of field comes from Nelson DeMille's use of a technique exceptional among the novels sampled: first-person narrative addressed directly to the reader. Oddball detective John Corey constantly elbows us with sarcastic asides in the pauses between his efforts to offend almost everybody in the cast. The novel's opening paragraph sets the tone for what follows:

You'd think that anyone who'd been shot three times and almost become an organ donor would try to avoid dangerous situations in the future. But, no, I must have this unconscious wish to take myself out of the gene pool or something.  
(*Lion's Game* 3)

By comparison to these three characters, the heroes of most of the remaining novels in our sampling are, alas, mere muscle-bound mannequins. We know very little about them aside from information directly relating to their quest—and, of course, their astonishing physical

fitness and lightning reflexes. They spend much more time preoccupied with high-tech electronics, sophisticated weapons, and other assault gear than with anything resembling introspection. The same is true, to some degree, of their Ariadnes, who seem to have graduated from the status of mystery women to that of computer hacks, more concerned with tapping into fiber-optic cables than with tapping into the implications of what they are doing.

The notable exception to this trend occurs, not surprisingly, in the recent writings of John le Carré, whose postmodern heroes, though they may do a bit more running around than they used to, still manage to be properly Carresque dense characters (*Constant Gardener*, *Single & Single*).

**More Gore.** The general result of this increasing reliance on terse dialogue and quick narration is to make our Theseus a much less introspective chap. Readers must fill in the philosophical and psychological blanks, of which there are many. Among the most disturbing of these is the hero's own attitude toward the acts of violence that he is now required to commit with increasing frequency. Folsom's spy Nick Byson, for instance, orders the cold-blooded murder of an opponent's mistress—this in order to prove that his threat to kill his adversary's *whole family* is not a bluff. Bryson's motive is to protect his own wife and her family, but his method is so radical that he knows that even his mate would not approve (*Prometheus*).

Although authors still try to defend their spy protagonists against charges of inhumanity by permitting them perfunctory denials and gestures of distaste, the fact is that the flying bullets and bombs, the splashing blood and guts, seem to increase in direct proportion to their nearness to the present. In le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963) and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1974) most of the violence occurs offstage, as in a Greek drama—a technique that enhances the sinister, threatening character of the elusive Minotaur. Even as recent a work as Hyde's *Gathering of Saints* (1996) discretely positions most of the maniacal killer's murders behind the scenes, permitting only some of the victim's bodies to be described in any detail. DeMille's *The Lion's Game* (2000) for the most part follows this same pattern, with

the noteworthy exception that the offstage killings now take on a mass scale: the terrorist gassing of over three hundred innocent occupants of an entire Boeing 747, to which are added several gruesome center-stage murders by the same fanatic. While these scenes of carnage merely parallel recent events on the world stage, together with fears that such events could touch any one of us, they also help to raise the stakes for fictional violence to a higher level. In our sample, Robert Ludlum wins the Palm de Gore,<sup>10</sup> with nearly every other chapter depicting gruesome killings in lurid detail (*Apocalypse, Prometheus*). This development in spy novels toward more frequent and more massive violence, depicted with an explicitness unheard of a generation ago, parallels, and no doubt consciously imitates, similar developments in film—and naturally enough, given the likelihood of a bestseller's being adapted for the screen.

One could say that this trend in both forms merely reflects the increasing violence of the contemporary scene. But this argument collapses when it is recalled that by far the most brutal period of recent history was in the 1940s during the carnage of World War II—although even in that bloody era the producers of war films and espionage thrillers protected audience sensibilities by depicting killings without showing any blood or guts.

Violence and the fear of violence are of course the stock in trade of several genres, including tales of murder, horror, science fiction and plain old adventure. The oldest forms of narrative, myth and epic poetry (*The Iliad, Beowulf, the Chanson de Roland*), exhibited the violence of death in battle, and no one seems to know for sure whether this sort of thrill provides a healthy cathartic or feeds a morbid preoccupation. What separates horror stories, science fiction stories, epic adventure fantasies (*Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings*) and other related genres from the spy novel is that the former are usually defended (or excused) by their very unreality, their arrant fictitiousness. The killers are godlike heroes, demigods, vampires, ghosts, zombies, monsters, extra-terrestrials, or assorted androids. The more closely related detective genre (i.e., police thriller movies) usually provides somewhat more realistic thrills through its depiction of "real" murderers, but the most

frightening of these plots tends to involve serial killers who are so eccentric (i.e. insane) as to be after all not very realistic, or vengeful killers with personal motives for attacking people usually totally unlike ourselves. Even the Tom Clancy war novel usually distances itself to some degree by placing its action in the hypothetical future or the safely survived past. By contrast, the spy novel lifts the threshold of paranoia to the fictional limit by insisting on the present “reality” of its action. This heightening of the violence level in fiction (and film) raises the question as to whether we are not becoming “Romanized” that is to say, so inured to the sight of actual carnage on television and virtual butchery in novel and film that we have acquired a connoisseur’s taste for blood. Thomas Harris’ sensationally popular character Hannibal “the Cannibal” Lecter, with his elegant recipes for sautéed human brains, suggests an answer in the affirmative.<sup>11</sup>

### Implications

*Minotaur in the Mirror.* Without exception, the novels I have discussed are conservative in implication—yet not so much by supporting the national power structure, which often reveals itself to be but a mirror image of its unscrupulous adversary. Rather they imply or frankly advocate a reinstatement of the traditional values of civility, loyalty, trust and gentlemanly plain dealing, together with the almost extinct ideal of honor. Much of this implicit thrust derives from the hero’s own strong sense of personal and public honor, an instinct that puts him at odds with the often cynical and double-dealing authorities on both sides of the spy game.

Nevertheless, with time and painful experience the looking-glass aspect of espionage, the necessity for deception and murder on both sides, tends to make the hero cynical as well. The lapse between the agent’s early idealism and middle-aged disillusionment is well summed up in Detective Corey’s reflection on his youthful partner: “Kate Mayfield was brave, loyal, and resourceful, and unlike myself, she was not yet cynical or world-weary. She was in fact a patriot, and I can’t say the same for myself. I may have been one once, but too much has happened to me and to the country in my lifetime. Yet I do my job”



(*Lion's Game* 923).

"Yet I do my job." This willingness to carry on, despite the dangers, despite the grave doubts, is what le Carré terms the espionage agent's "second vow." His first vow is to fight the "good war," his second to continue fighting despite knowing that it may in fact be a "looking glass war"—a phrase the serves as the apposite title for a 1965 le Carré spy novel. Thus when Detective Eddie Nickles at last confronts the principal agents of the Beast (a Russian-American hybrid), he accuses them of having almost the same "mind set" as people in the government. After this insult he continues:

But you guys! Jesus Christ, I mean, I've seen some hard cases in my day, but, damn, I've never seen so much double-dealing. Hell, I'll bet, right now, if your life depended on it [. . .] not one of you could really say who's on whose side. Now, you people want to go on sticking your knives in each other's back, be my guest. Maybe one day you'll just wipe each other out and the rest of us will be a little better off for it. In the meantime, however, I'm not about to let you and your little war games, or whatever, screw up my life and the lives of people I care about. (*Monkey's Fist* 430)

The author is here making a distinction of degree but not of kind between "our side" and "theirs," Theseus and the Beast. It is a very slight, an almost indistinct distinction. In the last analysis, his phrase "my life and the lives of people I care about" defines a highly restricted circle of concern. Nationalism and civic-mindedness tend to run a bit thin in the more recent espionage fiction.

The notable exception to this trend is Tom Clancy, whose forays into the spy genre remain thoroughly moralistic in tone. The hero of Clancy's *Patriot Games* (1987) is CIA analyst Jack Ryan, who possesses a profound sense that his espionage work is helping in a small but important way to preserve civilized and democratic values. This seems always to be the rule when the villains are terrorists, and the victims mostly innocent non-professionals. DeMille's *Lion's Game*

follows the same pattern in drawing a clear and unhesitating distinction between "them" and "us" when the terrorists are willing to kill anybody, including children, just to "make a statement."

*Two Bulls or One?* Spy stories tend to fall into two quite different narrative modes: romance or irony.<sup>12</sup> In the romance mode the hero remains heroic, his powers almost superhuman, while good and evil are clearly distinguished one from another. The ironic mode, on the contrary, features "anti-heroes" who are disillusioned if not downright cynical, for here the comforting good/evil dialectic of romance yields to the depressing "twin evils" of a fallen world. This is the tone adopted by the grim Graham Greene, who has had much influence on the English spy novel with such works as *The Confidential Agent*, *The Human Factor*, and *The Honorary Consul*. John le Carré echoes this same world-weary mood while adding his own distinct note of cynicism. Interestingly, both of these novelists had direct experience working in British intelligence services, and so it would seem that the closer one gets to actual spying the more difficult it becomes to romanticize the profession of the "intelligencer," as he was called in Shakespeare's day.

We must not forget that the original Minotaur was half human, half bull—and also Ariadne's half-brother. Roberto Calasso's rhapsodic evocation of Greek mythology, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*,<sup>13</sup> clearly suggests that Theseus and the Minotaur actually represent the same archetypal beast—as, in their complementary ways, do Ariadne, her mother, and her sister:

Then another thought occurred to Ariadne: if she [. . .] had done nothing more than repeat the passion of her mother, Pasiphaë [for a bull], if she herself was Pasiphaë, then Theseus was the bull. But Theseus had killed the bull, her half-brother, and killed him with her help. So had she been helping Theseus to kill himself? Or were the only people in the story to get killed themselves: Pasiphaë, who hung herself, and her sister, Phaedra, who would hang herself some time later. While the bulls and their victors just seem to

swap places, over and over, as if for them the process of killing and being killed was as simple an alteration as undressing and getting dressed again.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the tendency of some modern authors to employ this Theseus-Minotaur double-image, other creators in the genre are inclined to lighten the bleak mood. Among those sampled, the Americans seem more attracted to the mode of romance, implicitly or explicitly retaining the old “good-guy/bad-guy” formula with its appeal to national chauvinism and simple moral distinctions. The most prolific among these, Robert Ludlum, tends to retain these uncomplicated stereotypes of the hero and the monster. It is probable that this highly polarized romance version of the spy story reflects the American (and George Bushian) compulsion to moralize one’s international adventures and to demonize one’s opponents, leaving readers happily untroubled by gnawing doubts and scruples.

By contrast, the British and Canadian practitioners sampled (le Carré and Hyde) tend to remain highly wary of making any essential distinction between Theseus and the Minotaur, portraying both as more or less beastly. Here the hero, having penetrated the labyrinth, discovers that the adversary is his own Shadow. These two authors also curtail or entirely eliminate the role of Ariadne—perhaps to spare her undue grief, but more likely to imply that there is no saving clue of yarn leading out of the labyrinth of human intrigue, nor any form of love between the sexes that will compensate for the pains of living in a fallen world. The reduction or elimination of the Ariadne role in the more ironic versions of the spy quest illustrates the process of demythologizing (or “mythological decomposition”) that occurs when a story moves away from the mode of the heroic romance and toward that of irony.

On the contrary, when the central character has no doubts as to the morality of his quest, when good and evil are clearly distinguished, the quest seems to require the presence of a female companion with her clue of yarn leading out of the labyrinth—and also her life-affirming love. Perhaps this is why the Ariadne figure makes her belated appear-

ance in le Carré's more recent novels, notably *The Night Manager* (1994), *The Constant Gardener* (1996), and *Single & Single* (1999). For these works are animated less by the author's former tight-lipped despondency than by a new anger and urgency to unmask post-Cold War corporate and political corruption. This political commitment perhaps explains le Carré's return to a more "canonical" form of the myth, in which the civilizing female spirit is required to provide the saving clue.

Hence, two quite different modern versions of Theseus exist side by side. The first we might term the conservative model, in which our hero fights to protect national and cultural values assumed to be still operational at a deep level, and essentially superior to those of the enemy. Here Theseus remains the hero of romance, attached to his Ariadne. The second, darker version forces our hero to discover that the values of the fatherland and those of the enemy are in fact depressingly similar, that the espionage game reflects (or refracts) mendacity, betrayal and murder both ways (or "all around"). In this version Theseus becomes the lonely "anti-hero" of ironic narrative. Readers may pay their money and take their choice.

It might seem faintly ridiculous to discuss such things as myth, mode and implication in connection with works generally regarded at best as mere "entertainments" and at worst as pot-boilers. Are not these books simply palliatives for idling away an hour in a lonely hotel room or on a long flight?<sup>14</sup> After all, one is not always in the mood for *Moby Dick* or *Buddenbrooks*, much less *The Island of the Day Before*. However, simply to dismiss popular works such as spy novels and related fictions on the ground that they are not "serious" literature is to commit at least two embarrassing blunders. The first lies in assuming that some literature is "escapist" while other literature is not—whereas *all* literary fantasy is essentially escapist, offering as it does a virtual world into which we may enter periodically, much as we go into the dream state at night. And although Einstein's dreams and those of the village idiot may not have the same character, they are equally symbolic of the spiritual condition of their hosts. Moreover, one cannot consider most popular fiction to be merely "tales told by an idiot" because these tales

are usually written by highly intelligent people, and appeal to literate souls in a field vastly wider than that of so-called serious literature. Indeed, I have noticed that many of my intellectual friends are either avowed or furtive addicts of popular fiction. This being so, it seems the wiser course to treat these fantasies with the respect, and caution, owing to anything that absorbs so much time in so many minds.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Those who may think my sampling a trifle small, and perhaps therefore less than fully representative, are not necessarily wrong. I can only plead the accidental way in which I happened on this interesting subject, and the necessity for brevity in such essays. I hope that tougher souls will read absolutely everything in the genre and write definitive works that will verify, modify or, if necessary, demolish my findings.

<sup>2</sup> Theseus was the legendary founder of ancient Athens, which according to myth had been a tributary state to the island kingdom of Crete. King Minos of Crete required Athens to pay its regular tribute in the form of seven youths and seven maidens, who were then sacrificed to a fearsome bull called the Minotaur that Minos kept in a labyrinth (Mino = Minos, tauros = bull). Incensed, Theseus volunteered to accompany the next group of sacrificial victims, entered the labyrinth and slew the Minotaur. In this feat he was assisted by Minos' daughter Ariadne, who gave him a ball of yarn by means of which he found his way into the dark turnings of the labyrinth and out again. Theseus then carried Ariadne away but abandoned her on the island of Dia, perhaps at the command of the gods. Ariadne was saved from despair by the god Dionysus, who made her his wife and caused Zeus to grant her immortality. Theseus went on to perform many other heroic (and some less than heroic) exploits. After his death, he was worshipped as a hero in Athens. See Oskar Seyffert, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature* (New York, Grammercy Books, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Used ironically here, the name of the elaborate and idyllic pleasure palace in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan."

<sup>4</sup> The English writer Doyle, creator of that master of deductive

thinking, Sherlock Holmes, follows the lead of the American Poe and his French detective, Dupin, master of “ratiocination.” These detectives, like Christie’s Poirot, are of course highly aristocratic, super-refined types. James Bond combines refined gentleman with Eastwood-style tough-guy; Sean Connery arguably played the role a bit “rougher” than does Pierce Brosnan.

<sup>5</sup> Dupin figures out that the Minister D “hid” a letter by leaving it in an open letter rack, where the police never thought to look (as it was “too obvious”), in Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”; Dr. Moriarty is the master-criminal and nemesis of Sherlock Holmes in several of Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories.

<sup>6</sup> Sherlock Holmes, when unable to solve a particularly puzzling crime, used to inject himself with a four percent solution of cocaine and then wait for the drug-inspired answer. In modern Britain and America this practice would make *him* a criminal.

<sup>7</sup> “Clue,” in the sense of hint or indication, is synonymous with “clew,” meaning ball of yarn, and derives from Ariadne having provided Theseus with his “clue” into the labyrinth and out again (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the globalized drugs-for-arms and money laundering scene is the milieu of John le Carré’s 1993 novel *The Night Manager*—with the exception that here the primary villain is not Russian but British.

<sup>9</sup> An actual intelligence agent during World War II, and later the famous creator of fictional super-spy James Bond.

<sup>10</sup> A feeble play on the Cannes Film Festival’s coveted award, the *Palme d’Or* (The Golden Palm).

<sup>11</sup> For the few who may not have read Thomas Harris’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) or its sequel *Hannibal* (1999), nor seen their highly popular film adaptations, it should be noted that the character Hannibal Lecter is neither a spy nor an enemy agent, merely a reclusive and fastidious scholar with a taste for human flesh. Harris works in the horror genre.

<sup>12</sup> I am here using the modal definitions of romance and irony formulated by the late Canadian critic Northrop Frye in his now-classic

*Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton UP, 1957). See “Third Essay: Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths.”

<sup>13</sup> Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Vintage, 1994) 18, ellipses mine.

<sup>14</sup> Even otherwise enthusiastic press reviews of these novels typically condescend to them. Here are a few quotes from jacket blurbs: “a great thriller” (*Tinker Tailor*), “[De Mille is a] true master of the testosterone thriller” (*Lion’s Game*), “escapist fiction” (*Apocalypse*), “a pop hit,” “slickly paced” (*Prometheus*), and, the unkindest cut of all, “quintessential beach reading” (*Monkey’s Fist*).

