John Le Carré: Spies and Society

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0. Introduction

John Le Carré is essentially a genre novelist. His earliest books, Call for the Dead (1961) and A Murder of Quality (1962), are little more than novellas, stylistically and thematically crude, and with little to recommend them to those who are not students or afficianados of the spy thriller. However, if one reads Le Carré's novels in chronological order, it is possible to observe the development of an individual style and a technical expertise which have enabled him to extend the range of his chosen genre. With the trilogy of best-selling 'Smiley' novels, Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy (1974), The Honourable Schoolboy (1977), and Smiley's People (1980), Le Carré brings to the spy story a thematic complexity usually associated with more conventional literature. He uses the three related novels, which run to very nearly 1200 pages, to outline and analyse what we may call the cultural myth underlying British society: those structures of active concern and latent belief which express society's attitudes and beliefs about itself, its social and moral values, its motivations, its overall worth and limitations.

Tinker, Tailor Soldier Spy, The Honourable Schoolboy and Smiley's People (1) remain firmly within the genre of spy fiction, with all the conventions, the sustained pace and invention necessary for success. All three have relatively conventional, though complex, narrative structures which fulfil the expectations of the genre reader. At the same time, they make use of the enclosed world of espionage to comment on and reflect the real world. Principles, motives and attitudes are expressed in terms of the novels' social setting, Britain in the 1960s and 70s but their

(1) (Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy (TTSS), The Honourable Schoolboy (THS) Smiley's People (SP). All quotations are taken from the Pan paperback editions.)
practical application and meaning are demonstrated in terms of the
Circus, Le Carré’s name from the British Secret Service, and its activities.
Thus the Circus becomes a microcosm of British society through which Le
Carré is able to express that society’s cultural myth.

1. Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy

Reduced to its barest essentials, Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy tells how
George Smiley unmasks a long-established Soviet spy at the highest level
of the Circus; but even such a bald summary raises the questions, crucial
to any culture’s myth of itself, of where individual loyalties lie and why.
The book begins and ends in an English prep school, a location clearly
intended to bring with it associations of the public school system and the
old school tie upon which, tradition would have it, much of Britain’s past
greatness was founded. From the first, however, it is clear that the pre­
sent realities of such schools do not match up to their traditional image.
The previous proprietor absconded with a receptionist from a neighbour­
ing hotel, and the present headmaster, his son, makes use of ‘one of the
shiftier agencies’ to employ Jim Prideaux, ex-spy and ‘poor white of the
teaching community’; without interview because Thursgood has already
learned that in this milieu ‘some things are best locked away’ (TTSS, p.9).
Nothing, indeed, that we learn of Thursgood’s suggests that it is capable
of imparting the sense of moral values, and national and communal
loyalties traditionally associated with British public schools and those
they have educated. This division between present reality and the image
inherited from the past of how things should be, which is not necessarily
how they were, underlies the main strand of the plot, the story of Bill
Haydon’s treachery.

Smiley and Haydon belong to the same generation, educated at Oxford
or Cambridge during the 1930s and there recruited to the Circus. To
Guillam, some twenty years younger, it is a generation which has
assumed an almost legendary dimension, ‘exclusive and in Haydon’s case
blue-blooded which had lived a dozen leisured lives to his own hasty one
(TTSS, p.79). Haydon himself is generally held to be that generation’s
most brilliant star. Artist, aesthete and spy, good-looking, academically
brilliant, physically strong and adventurous, he has left his mark on the
activities of the Circus throughout the world. Only in his predatory
bisexuality does Le Carré suggest a flaw in Haydon’s heroic status, point­
ing to his ability to serve two political as well as two sexual impulses.
Much of this image of Haydon is, of course, a distillation of the true cir­
cumstances of that generation which, in the 1930s, evolved a range of
new artistic and political theories with which to face the radically altered
world in the aftermath of the First World War and the Great Depres­
sion; circumstances which did indeed result in numerous spy scandals in the
years after 1945, such as those involving Burgess, Maclean, Philby and
Blunt.
Everyone in the Circus lives, or feels that they live, in the shadow of Haydon's tremendous abilities and achievements, and Le Carré's purpose in building this heroic image is clear. Although a traitor of the first order, Haydon is essentially of England, and a pillar of the enclosed spying community: Connie Sachs has a photograph of herself, Prideaux and Haydon at the Circus's training school, 'the men in cricket gear..the grounds stretching out behind them, mown and sunlit and the sight screens glistening' (TTSS, P.101). When his status as a double agent is revealed, those affected by his treachery feel betrayed not just by the man himself, but by a collection of interconnected ideas and images which relate to the value and purpose of their society which he has always seemed to represent: that is, by a cultural myth. Guillam's reaction when he first becomes aware of Haydon's treachery is worth quoting at some length.

*His butchered agents in Morocco, his exile to Brixton, the daily frustration of his efforts as daily he grew older and youth slipped through his fingers; the drabness that was closing round him; the truncation of his power to love, enjoy and laugh; the constant erosion of the plain, heroic standards he wished to live by; the checks and stops he imposed on himself in the name of tacit dedication; he could fling them all in Haydon's sneering face. Haydon, once his confessor; Haydon, always good for a laugh, a chat and a cup of burnt coffee; Haydon, a model on which he built his life.*

*More, far more. Now that he saw, he knew. Haydon was more than his model, he was his inspiration, the torch-bearer of a certain kind of antiquated romanticism, a notion of English calling which, for the very reason that it was vague and understated and elusive had made sense of Guillam's life till now. In that moment, Guillam felt not merely betrayed; but orphaned.* (TTSS, P.299).

But the issue is not as clear cut as it might seem, for, as the first paragraph in particular of Guillam's reaction shows, he has felt a lack or uncertainty of purpose in his life for some time prior to Haydon's unmasking; and this feeling is apparently widespread in British society. When Lacan, the civil servant responsible for liaison with the Circus, is talking with Smiley about the relationship between the Secret Service and central government, he says «Difficult to know what one's aims are, that's the trouble, specially if you're British.» (TTSS, P.65). Roy Bland, another top member of the Circus, expresses the same dilemma more aggressively: «It's the name of the game these days: you scratch my conscience, I'll drive your Jag, right?...That's just looking out the bloody window. That's just England now, man.» (TTSS, P.136). Connie Sachs
offers a reason for this malaise which, again, centres on the idea that images and ideas inherited from the past are rendered invalid by present realities: «Poor loves. Trained to Empire, trained to rule the waves. All gone. All taken away. Bye-bye world.» (TTSS, p.102).

Haydon himself presents his allegiance to the Soviet cause as a response to the lack of purpose and the other social, cultural and moral problems facing Britain. He implies that he, at least, has had the courage to seek a solution and take action rather than simply live with the problem. As far as it goes, this may be true, but again, the issue is not clear cut. Listening to Haydon’s exposition of American greed and British irrelevance in world affairs, Smiley finds that he might have agreed with much of it in other circumstances, but «it was the tone, not the music which alienated him» (TTSS, p.306).

Any denunciation of Haydon in traditional moral terms is irrelevant because the very nature of espionage denies the possibility of living according to such standards. Bribery, theft, blackmail and sexual exploitation are commonplace, and even Smiley’s exposure of Haydon, which is clearly presented as «good», involves theft and breaking and entering (TTSS, p.150 & p.286). Consequently, no moral denunciation of Haydon could avoid including Smiley, Guillam, and almost all the other characters. Similarly, although Haydon’s arrogance allows him to judge not just on his own behalf but also on behalf of the whole nation, such a denial of the democratic principle is, to some extent, inherent in the nature of spying. Haydon, of course, denies moral standards and the democratic principle: his acts attack the basis of all personal, as well as professional and political, relationships. He is responsible for the betrayal, shooting and torture of Jim Prideaux, his life-long friend, colleague, and possibly one-time homosexual lover. Haydon himself seems uneasy about this aspect of his conduct, but justifies it on grounds of necessity (TTSS, p.306).

From an ethical rather than a practical viewpoint, Haydon’s stance is more seriously undermined by inconsistencies in his own view of himself. Smiley rejects the simple idea that Haydon needed «the symmetry of an historical and economic solution» or that he «wanted to join an elitist vanguard and lead the masses out of darkness» because they do not fit with the character of the man (TTSS, P.315). Smiley’s only certainty is that «Bill had loved it... Standing at the middle of a secret stage, playing world against world, hero and playwright in one (TTSS, p.316). And this is the key, for whatever superficial motives we offer for Haydon’s actions, and whatever he himself claims, they remain in essence dedicated to self-glorification rather than the greater social good. His eccentricity, his brilliance in many fields, his extreme individualism are not merely cover. They are his true personality: formed by and reflecting the standards of the West which he professes to despise. In this context, because
he has never lived by the standards of the cause he espouses, Haydon’s treachery becomes both the furthest reach of his glorification of the individual, opposing his individual will to the will of a whole nation, and an act of self-disgust: a gesture towards a more disciplined and less solipsistic life which he himself has not been able to live.

This duality in Haydon’s self-aggrandizing rather than material greed is reflected in the analogy he draws between his own position and the hero of the Ionesco play who keeps silent while everyone around him speaks incessantly. Such inverted exhibitionism suggests an egocentric self-sufficiency which would appear to deny the possibility of sincere involvement in any common cause, let alone the cause for which Haydon is working. But the fact that such a play needs a conscious audience and that Haydon expects people to write about him (TTSS, p.312), suggests that his exhibitionism, like his sexuality, has its conventional side, and thus depends on exposure or self-revelation.

Haydon’s is not the only solution to the cultural problems facing Britain. At the opposite end of the political and cultural spectrum, Jim Prideaux sees England as the «Best place in the whole damn world», balanced between America «full of greedy fools fouling up their inheritance» and «China-Russia, he drew no distinction: boiler suits, prison camps and a damn long march to nowhere» (TTSS, p.17). Although this view involves no such drastic loss or abnegation of personality, it is, in its way, as individual as Haydon’s, and it denies the present as impossibly as Haydon’s ideas deny the past. What Prideaux does is to reavow his faith, in an aggressively individual way, in a cultural myth which, as the two bullet holes in his shoulder and the school around him testify, is already betrayed and invalid. Although he is able to give this reavowal physical shape when he revenges his betrayal by killing Haydon, such a solution is at best partial and personal. It can have no general social validity, nor does it offer anything for the future.

Between these two extremes and faced with the same cultural and political dilemmas, is Smiley, betrayed in the public domain by Haydon and privately by his continually unfaithful wife. The close connection between the two forms of betrayal is emphasised by Haydon’s affair with Ann Smiley at the instigation of his Russian controller. Smiley himself suffers from the gap between the myth of British power to which he and Haydon were educated, and the reality of «a poor island with scarcely a voice that would carry across the water». At the moment when he discovers Haydon’s treachery, this becomes a more specific conflict between humanitarian ideals which tell him that «nothing is worth the destruction of another human being», and the realities of the institutions it is his duty to protect: institutions represented by «The Minister’s lolling mendacity, Lacon’s tight-lipped moral complacency, the bludgeoning greed of Percy Alleine: such men invalidated any contract: why should anyone be loyal
to them ?» (TTSS, p.297). Smiley has no ready answer to Britain’s problems, but through the use of the Circus and its activities as a microcosm of the whole nation, Le Carré presents Smiley’s motives and actions throughout the trilogy as the search for some kind of answer; and in the pattern they describe, Le Carré presents his view of the current shape of Britain’s cultural myth.

Called out of a boring and unsatisfactory retirement because his belief, expressed to Lacon a year previously, that there was a traitor in the Circus now seems justified, Smiley’s motives are something of a mystery, even to himself. Lacon attempts a kind of emotional blackmail «You’ll take the job..? It’s your generation after all. Your legacy.» (TTSS, p.69) - but it is not only a sense of duty which makes Smiley act. Certainly, loyalty to the Circus as a betrayed institution (with the figure of Jim Prideaux as symbol of that betrayal) rather than as a group of individuals known to him - does play its part. So, too, does a more personal loyalty to the memory of Control, the Circus’s previous Chief and Smiley’s mentor, who also believed that the Circus was being betrayed but whose credibility and position were destroyed by Haydon before he could find conclusive proof. There is also the more mundane motive that work gives him a purpose, a cause, which he cannot find in leisure and retirement. And behind all this, as his academic interests imply, is a general, unformulated desire for truth; to understand the true nature of and the relationship between events in which he himself was either deeply or tangentially involved: «reading, comparing, annotating, cross-referring, with an intensity which, had he been his own observer, would surely have recalled for him the last days of Control» (TTSS, p.189). As he establishes that the secret source on which the Circus’s reputation is based is controlled by the Russians, Le Carré compares Smiley to a scientist, and it is the discovery of the abstract principle, rather than the human facts of the situation, which gives him satisfaction: «at the heart of the plot lay a device so simple that it left him genuinely elated by its symmetry» (TTSS, p.191). With the human implications of his discovery, he is a good deal less comfortable, but, whether asking to salvage the personnel of the Circus’s now useless East European networks, or paying off Haydon’s girlfriend (TTSS, p.300 & p.308), he persists, going through the motions, perhaps out of a sense of duty, but also out of a life-time’s habit.

With this uncertain mixture of motives, reflecting both personal and social lack of confidence, Smiley’s role in Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy is essentially destructive, exposing the unreliability of sources of information, individuals and institutions in which the political and bureaucratic establishment has placed a good deal of complacent confidence. Only in The Honourable Schoolboy does Smiley find himself able «to act and not merely to react» (THS, p.66), to conclude his destructive analysis and reconstruct the Circus in a form appropriate to changed internal and external circumstances.
2. The Honourable Schoolboy:

When Smiley takes over as caretaker Chief of the Circus, he is faced not only with the facts of a betrayed service without reliable intelligence networks, but also with a number of consequent problems. Nobody likes their weakness exposed and Smiley has to suffer ridicule and opposition from the Whitehall bureaucrats; the moreso since the events which the exposure of Haydon sets in train give him a sense of purpose foreign to the prevailing cynical atmosphere - «What was there anywhere, in beastly Whitehall or, Lord help us, in beastly England, that could command [such dedication] any more?» (THS, p.54). Also, more practically, he has to face a total lack of co-operation from such traditional allies as the American C.I.A., or «Cousins». The mythical dimension of this situation is emphasised early in the novel by the adoption in Circus jargon of the term «the fall» to refer to Haydon’s unmasking (THS, p.59), and it is similarly significant that Smiley’s basis for the movement from reaction to action should be «in the first instance philosophical, in the second theoretical, and only in the last instance...human» (THS, p.64).

Smiley’s philosophical basis is an attempt to divorce the Circus’s, and thus by extension Britain’s, activities from their traditional cultural and social associations such as those represented by Connie Sach’s photograph or Guillam’s response to Haydon’s treachery. These associations, Smiley suggests, have complicated the attitude of the Circus and its personnel to itself: «The task of an intelligence service, Smiley announced firmly, was not to play chase games but to deliver intelligence to its customers» (THS, p.64). Such a reasoned, academic response, reducing the Circus from an institution to a business, is successful in so far as it allows an informative and profitable analysis of the past, as represented by the Circus’s files (THS, p.67), but when applied to future arrangements and activities it is confronted with the realities of the British situation. The foremost of these, of course, is money, or the lack of it. When Smiley wants to scrap and replace the Circus’s various domestic outstations, Lacon’s explanation of the financial position forces him to live with them- unsafe as they appear to be after Haydon (THS, pp.63-64).

This and the other problems facing Smiley in his attempt to re-establish the Circus are given representative expression in the characters present at the meeting at which he asks for rights, permissions and money to conduct operations in Hong Kong and south-east Asia (THS, pp.176-199). Lacon, the civil servant, refuses to commit himself, even to acknowledge the existence of a problem. Wilbraham of the Colonial Office is a representative of the old myth and the old school wants to advise the governor of Hong Kong, but refuses to countenance American involvement. Enderby, though subdued during the meeting, is intensely pro-American and later suggests that the Cousins handle the entire operation. And behind these various factions is the sense of bureaucratic intrigue and
jostling for advantage, expressed in Guillam's intermittent awareness that certain characters, notably Enderby and Martindale, are reserving their true position.

The «Dolphin case» through which Smiley hopes to revive the Circus's reputation centres on the interception of a Soviet agent who is about to escape from communist China, where he holds a position of political and military importance, to join his millionaire brother in Hong Kong. Consequently, Hong Kong and south-east Asia provide the setting for a substantial part of the novel, and the political and cultural significance of this is clear. Hong Kong is one of the last outposts of the British Empire, but it also has close connections with the much more contemporary problems of communist China and, in the early 1970s when the events of the novel take place, with the confrontation between communism and American capitalism in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. If the Circus, and thus Britain, is to have any validity outside Whitehall, it must come to terms with both the legacy of its past, and contemporary issues on this global scale.

Eventually, the Soviet agent is intercepted and, to judge from we learn at the end of the novel and in Smiley's People, the Circus is subsequently revived, but the operation does not go at all as Smiley intends, nor is the Circus revives in the way he envisages. The reasons for this all involve some form of betrayal and they are all closely related to the problems facing the Circus. The novel begins with an account of the Circus's withdrawal from Hong Kong and the countries of the Far East, but the significance of this only becomes apparent later. Faced with the practical difficulties of running an agent operation in this area with insufficient resources, Smiley is forced into reliance on the Americans. There is an arrangement by which the C.I.A. will keep out of British areas such as Hong Kong, but the Americans to ease their own internal political conflicts threaten to break it, giving a time limit for sole British involvement and putting pressure on both Smiley and the case. In the same way, when he comes to choose an agent, Smiley is hindered by the fact that most were blown by Haydon, and there is neither the time nor the resources to train anyone new. The choice settles on Jerry Westerby, and it is Westerby's disobedience of orders and his interference in the crucial stages of the operation which opens the way for the final betrayal, in which an Anglo-American conspiracy made up of Whitehall, represented by Lacon and Enderby, the Circus itself, in the person of Sam Collins, and the C.I.A, deprives Smiley of the object of the operation, the credit, and his position as Chief.

The story of Jerry Westerby demonstrates the problems of purpose and motivation with which British society has to contend in the face of the contemporary world. When chosen for the operation and interviewed by Smiley, Westerby presents himself as a straightforward man of action. Smiley's concern is to make sure that Westerby has «the will» to do wha
ever is necessary, but his approach is somewhat abstract, academic, and
digressive, revolving around «the chance to pay» and «dedicating our-
selves». Perhaps intentionally on Smiley's part, this provokes an embara-
rassed, but direct, response - «Sport. For Heaven's sake. You point me
and I'll march. Okay?» (THS, pp.115-116). This same attitude character-
ised his response to news of Haydon's treachery (THS, p.459). The
problem seems to reside in the fact that, although less able to analyse and
articulate it, Westerby, like Smiley, is motivated by the past; which, in
practical terms as he is eventually forced to admit to himself, means guilt.

He had never seriously doubted, in his vague way, that
his country was in a state of irreversible decline, nor that his
own class was to blame for the mess. «We made Bill», ran
his argument, «so it's right that we should carry the brunt of
his betrayal.» Pay in fact. Pay. What old George was on
about. (THS, p.459)

In the course of the novel, his sense of taking upon himself part of the
collective responsibility for the past is overridden by his own individual
needs. These needs are focussed on Lizzie Worthington, but the nature of
the attraction, as Le Carré makes clear, is not straightforward. She is a
beautiful woman and Westerby is sexually attracted to her; yet her beauty
is marred by the scars on her chin, and it is apparent that in this and other
ways, she has suffered by her involvement in the underworld of south-east
Asia. Thus, it is partly pity he feels for her :«He ached for her, warts and
all. She was his kind of loser and he loved her». (THS, p.460). The inse-
curity of her life, reflected and expressed in sexual promiscuity, is some-
thing he is familiar with himself. More significantly, however, she
becomes the focus for his sense of personal and professional guilt. After
his first contact with her, Le Carré makes the point that a sense of post-
operational guilt is normal in an agent, but we are also told that «Remem-
bering Elizabeth Worthington's caged stare at Tiu, he reckoned he had
known that look and that dependence, in one guise or another, for the
bulk of his waking life» (THS, p.311). There is something of the suffering
cased by the failure of his various marriages and relationships in this,
and also of the suffering inflicted by himself and others engaged in his
profession. This idea is strengthened when Westerby learns that the
Circus, as represented by Sam Collins, has been responsible for some of
her past suffering, and still has the capacity to blackmail her.

Because of the Circus's reduced circumstances, Westerby is acting
alone-making occasional contact with old Craw or the Cousins-and
throughout the novel there are frequent contrasts between his isolation
and the vastness of the various environments surrounding him. Setting
out to blackmail Frost in Hong Kong, he is conscious of the impenetrabi-
licity of the East to a European: even the rooftops are a separate civilisation
(THS, p.125), and he knows that «in the East a roundeye could live all his

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life in the same block and never the smallest notion of the secret tic-tac on the doorstep» (THS, p.127). Later, in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, he sees the true scale of the human and military consequences of the ideological confrontation in the region. And then, at the end of his scheduled part in the operation, he is brought into contact with the full extent of American power and British powerlessness; implicit throughout in the Circus's reliance on American communications, the contrast is made explicit in the vast American airbase on Thai soil. Masters, Westerby's embittered contact, refers to Westerby's attempt «to win it all back for us single-handed», and to Britain's position as «chairman, president and oldest member» of «the club of second class powers» (THS, pp.445-446). It is this American dominance which tips the scale, for, aware of his own, his organisation's and his country's powerlessness to influence the general situation; and aware that with the Americans in control the humanitarian standards represented by Smiley no longer apply, Westerby's loyalty and sense of duty, previously directed towards the Circus, again as represented by Smiley, shift to Lizzie Worthington, the one individual he believes he can help (THS, p.460).

Westerby's personal intervention in the later stages of the operation, which results in his death and does nothing to help the girl, provides the opportunity for the Cousins to take over the final interception of Nelson Ko and take him off to America, rather than England, for interrogation. It also allows the British part of the conspiracy to oust Smiley as the Circus's Chief, in which position he is replaced by the pro-American Enderby. Although deprived of his position and the credit for the operation, Smiley himself is philosophic, almost resigned about such underhand dealings. He sees conspiracy breeding conspiracy, and writes to his wife: «These people terrify me but I am one of them. If they stab me in the back, then at least that is the judgement of my peers» (THS, p.543). Although Smiley himself identifies with the people who betray him, there are a number of important differences; and it is in these differences that we see the shape Le Carré gives to Britain's current cultural myth.

The Honourable Schoolboy is written from the point of view of a defence of Smiley and his actions in relation to the «Dolphin case». Throughout the book, Le Carré, as it were, answers Smiley's critics, explaining how and why he acted as he did. These explanations stress both his academic understanding of the psychological and social pressures operating on the various individuals concerned, and his practical brilliance in handling the technical aspects of the case. He is presented as a reasonable man, prepared, as with the death of Frost, to accept the moral implications of his actions without being deflected from practical and operational necessities; a man who owes his success and his position to his dedication and his individual abilities, but who values his, and his organisation's, independence more than the benefits which might accrue

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from surrendering it to a richer and more powerful organisation such as the C.I.A. However, what happens to Smiley demonstrates that dedication, individualism, ability and independence are not sufficient to guarantee respect or support in modern Britain, are, indeed, suspect to some degree. It was, after all, on these qualities or the legend of them that Haydon's reputation was based. In Lacon, Enderby and Collins, any academic appreciation they have is kept separate from their work; the will to power and to survive replaces dedication; and independence is merged, to varying degrees, in the larger, institutionalised interest groups they represent. The logical consequence of this is reflected in Enderby's appointment as the Circus's Chief: British national interest merges with that of the largest power group, the Americans.

Encapsulated here, the overall shape Le Carré gives to Britain's current cultural myth is pessimist: as Britain's independent interests are swallowed up in those of America, so the independent, reasonable individual loses his power to act and influence events in the face of institutional power and influence and its self-interested representatives. This view, not original in itself, is stated less apocalyptically and, perhaps surprisingly in view of the genre, more directly in relation to contemporary society than in Nineteen Eighty-Four to take the most obvious example. Smiley's individuality and independence do not derive from swashbuckling or wild western heroism, but from the maintenance of his own philosophical and ethical standards - if necessary in the face of institutional and bureaucratic pressure. In Smiley's People, there is a greater separation of function, though not of interest, between himself and the Circus than in the preceding volumes; and with this functional independence, continually played off against the prohibitions of the Circus and Whitehall, Smiley's role as archetype of the reasonable man becomes more prominent. The extent to which, in this third volume of the trilogy, he is able to transform philosophical independence into independent action reflects the sphere of action and influence which remains open to the individual uncommitted to a particular institution or interest group.

3. Smiley's People:

Smiley is called out of retirement by Lacon and Enderby to investigate the death of one of the Circus's ex-agents, Vladimir, mysteriously murdered on Hampstead Heath. The underlying reason for Smiley's recall is revealed by Lacon after Smiley has inspected the body. Having committed themselves to institutional power, Lacon and Enderby are bound to accept the restrictions it now imposes on their freedom of action; and the death of Vladimir takes them into territory recently proscribed by the new Steering Committee. The ironic consequence of this is that they need the independence represented by Smiley which they themselves helped to undermine in The Honourable Schoolboy. Lacon uses the same kind of emotional blackmail he applied in Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy, attempt-
ting to make Smiley act by exploiting his loyalty to the Circus and to his generation. As then, Smiley is unconvinced «Duty to what?...Loyalty to whom?» (SP, p.63) but agrees to do what is asked of him; and, as then, his motives are difficult to assess.

One of the unifying forces in the trilogy as a whole is the figure of Karla, the Russian Secret Service Chief who was responsible for placing and directing the activities of both Bill Haydon and Nelson Ko. More personally, from Smiley’s point of view, it was Karla whom he failed to persuade to defect in India in the 1950s, and Karla who subsequently prompted Haydon to have an affair with Smiley’s wife. In The Honourable Schoolboy, Smiley’s attitude towards Karla, expressed in the fact that he hangs Karla’s photograph on his office wall, is criticized and ridiculed, particularly by Lacon and Roddy Martindale, as obsessive; although he is at least partly vindicated by the discovery that Nelson Ko is Karla’s «mole» in Peking. In Smiley’s People, Smiley’s target is Karla himself, and he eventually forces Karla to defect by threatening to expose to the Soviet authorities the abuse of his official position which has enabled him to place his mentally disturbed daughter in a Swiss asylum.

Enderby appears to believe that in this quest Smiley is motivated by a desire for revenge : «So what’s your name, George? Sherlock Holmes dogging his poor old Moriarty? Captain Ahab chasing his big white whale?» (SP, p.234) a view indirectly supported by Lauder Strickland when he refers to Smiley’s «extra involvement» with Haydon (SP, p.54). Certainly, Smiley has reason to hate Karla, and is prepared to exploit Karla’s «excessive love» for his daughter to force the defection (SP, p.315), but nothing in his demeanour and nothing he says suggests that revenge is his motive. He is conscious that what he is doing is connected with Bill Haydon’s treachery and his wife’s infidelity, but when explaining to her the reason for his trip abroad and mentally making the connection, his tone and his mood are embarrassed rather than angry or determined. In The Honourable Schoolboy, Westerby remembers Smiley quoting Goethe at him-«In the beginning was the deed» (THS p.130 & p.456)-and throughout Smiley’s People there is a sense in which Smiley seems to be seeking some abstract truth or meaning in action itself. When Enderby persists in questioning Smiley’s motives, asking whether he is «travelling on business or for pleasure», Smiley replies «I was never conscious of pleasure... Or perhaps I mean : of the distinction» (SP, P.248). This disinterestedness — he can, after all, receive neither public recognition nor career advancement for his services — seems to stem partly from his mastery of the techniques of his trade, upon which, as in The Honourable Schoolboy, considerable emphasis is placed, and also from the academic side of his character. At the same time, the circumstances of his recall lead Smiley to realise the extent and nature of the individuality and independence which would not allow him to succeed within institutions.
He had forborne, hoping others would forbear, and they had not. He had toiled in back rooms while shallower men held the stage. They held it still. Even five years ago he would never have admitted to such sentiments. But today, peering calmly into his own heart, Smiley knew that he was unled, and perhaps unleadable; that the only restraints upon him were those of his own reason, and his own humanity. As with his marriage, so with his sense of public service. I invested my life in institutions - he thought without rancour - and all I am left with is myself (SP, p. 138).

Thus there is a sense of completion and self-justification about his actions and their ultimate aim, which, while centred on the self, is not the same as revenge; which, indeed, is far enough from revenge to raise the possibility of him relenting once he discovers the emotional basis of the situation which has opened the way for the blackmailing of Karla (SP, p. 326).

Smiley's achievement derives from the past, from a life-time's experience in the Secret Service. From the beginning, Lacon stresses that the Circus's interest in the dead Vladimir is historical (SP, p. 45), and both Toby Esterhase and Connie Sachs see Smiley's attempt to trace the murder back to Karla as an obsession with recreating or correcting the past (SP, pp. 152-153 & p. 186). Similarly, Enderby warns Smiley that if things go wrong he will present «the whole catastrophe» as «a ludicrous piece of private enterprise by a senile spy» (SP, p. 247), but, at the same time, Enderby realizes that Smiley's «arithemetic», his understanding of the complex relationships, connections and pressures of the case, is better than his own, even though he is the Circus's Chief (SP, pp. 241-242). Enderby, through his willingness to co-operate with the Americans, can maintain the Circus's credibility at home and internationally (SP, 45), but neither he nor his institution has the capacity to investigate a case so deeply rooted in the past, even if governmental guidelines allowed it. This is not so much a conflict as a demonstration of the respective spheres of action open to institutions and the men bound to them on one hand, and the independent individual on the other.

Karla's defection is clearly of practical present and future value to the Circus, but the constant reference to and interplay with the past orientate the novel towards Smiley, his character and abilities, and thus, cumulatively, emphasise the defection as the justification and completion of his life's work. However, the optimism inherent in his success is undermined or, at least, kept within strict bounds, by the ironies implicit in the nature of his achievement. In the first place, as far as Smiley is concerned, it is something of a Pyrrhic victory in so far as the damage to his own life has already been done, and the defection brings the culprit to justice rather than prevents the crime. Secondly, both the nature of the institution in
the service of which Smiley is acting and the unofficial nature of his actions prohibit public recognition. Consequently, the credit for what he does will be appropriated by the institution and recognition of his role confined to a few individuals such as Guillam and Esterhase who are familiar with his weaknesses as well as his strengths. And thirdly, there is guilt, stemming from the fact that Smiley feels that the moral as well as the tactical or professional relationship between himself and Karla has been overturned; that what he has done in exploiting Karla's emotional weakness is, at least in humanitarian terms, comparable with Karla's exploitation of the weakness in Smiley's own marriage which led to his wife's affair with Haydon. «On Karla has descended the curse of Smiley's compassion: on Smiley the curse of Karla's fanaticism» (SP, p.332). It is perhaps a mixture of all these factors which places Smiley's own qualification on his achievement in his response to Guillam's «George, you won»—«Did I?» said Smiley. «Yes. Yes, well I suppose I did.» (SP, p.335).

These ironies hedging Smiley's achievement have an important function within Le Carré's generally pessimistic view of Britain's cultural myth in that they outline the limited grounds for optimism he allows regarding the independent individual's potential for action within society. Once permitted to act — and this is important because, despite the advantages Smiley's independence and long experience give him over the Circus, everything he does in Smiley's People is consequent upon the Circus's initial need for him — the individual can exploit his independence and experience to remedy institutional or individual misjudgement and achieve something of value to institutions and to society as a whole. But such achievements are only possible within a framework of disinterestedness: the individual must both accept responsibility for failure and resign all credit for success despite the fact that what he achieves may not be of direct benefit to him. The structures of belief presented here are almost completely opposed to those exposed as invalid in Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy where Haydon's individuality was a symbol of the Circus itself and his success stemmed from his ability to manipulate, even restructure, the institution to suit himself.

4. Conclusion

Thus, throughout the trilogy, Le Carré uses the social and political background, integral to any successful essay in the genre of spy fiction, and its interplay with the central narrative, to depict and demonstrate a radical change in the values and beliefs which constitute Britain's cultural myth. Le Carré presents this change in terms of reaction to and reflection of changes in the international and domestic situation in the years since 1945, and as a reduction of the individual's potential to influence or alter significantly the course of international or domestic events. That there are no more heroes is perhaps something of a commonplace in the post-
war British novel, a view, however variously expressed and qualified, to be found in Orwell, Burgess, Fowles, Farrell, even Anthony Powell, though exactly why, and what the individual can still accomplish are questions on which there is less unanimity. Where Le Carré seems exceptional is in combining a broad cultural overview with the far from negligible demands of a specific genre, and thus, quite possibly, assuring his analysis a wider readership than that of many who might, in traditional critical terms, be regarded as more distinguished practitioners of the art.

Reference