

Geoffrey Household's *Watcher in the Shadows* and *Dance of the Dwarfs*: A Response to Robert Lance Snyder*

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Robert Lance Snyder's recent article on Geoffrey Household in *Connotations* deserves praise on two counts. Firstly, it helps rescue Household from almost total critical neglect; and, secondly, it opens up helpful new avenues for interpreting his fiction. The discussion which follows is intended as a constructive extension of the analysis presented in Snyder's essay together with suggestions of its limitations.

One of Snyder's main arguments is that Household revises the generic conventions of the Edwardian thriller by removing characters' national features because he regards the latter as anachronistic. Thus, Household narrows down the action to a battle of wits between the narrator and his antagonist. As this battle develops, it gradually becomes evident that the narrator and opponent are in some way mirror images of each other. This doubling is signalled through exchanges of dress, hints of physical resemblance, and other details which suggest such a close relation between the two characters that the action of Household's narratives can be read as a psychodrama quite different from conventional thrillers.

Snyder's argument risks simplifying the action of Household's fiction in such a way that its political resonances and circumstantial detail tend to be lost in the emphasis on doubling. His reading of Household's thrillers as tales of detection similarly understates the generic variety of his fiction.¹ Household produced works ranging

*Reference: Robert Lance Snyder, "'Occult Sympathy': Geoffrey Household's *Watcher in the Shadows* and *Dance of the Dwarfs*," *Connotations* 22.2 (2012/2013): 301-17.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debsnyder0222.htm>>.

from horror stories to science fiction and even shifts genre temporarily within individual works. Snyder compares Household's doubling to classics like James Hogg's *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, but the Household's narrowing down of the action connects his novels with a different subset of thrillers, where the conspiracies of super-criminals have to be thwarted by the protagonist. Whether Denis Nayland Smith is pitted against Fu Manchu or Bulldog Drummond against Carl Peterson, the pattern stays of the protagonist engaging in a battle of wits against his opponent. Partly this process involves detection—the uncovering of the conspiracy—and partly strategy in anticipating and thwarting the master-criminal's plot. In Sax Rohmer's fiction, of course, the action is heavily coloured with racial threat as Nayland Smith battles to protect civilization as we know it, but in all these cases the evil genius possesses an unnerving ability to change appearance at will and manoeuvre his way through all levels of society.² Characteristically in these narratives protagonist and antagonist form an elite whose intellects match each other in reach, but it is crucial for the drama of these novels that the opposition between these characters be maintained throughout.

The popularity of the criminal mastermind in fiction between the wars may have been a factor in Household turning to thrillers in the 1930s. However, a direct influence which Snyder rightly stresses was that of John Buchan. The latter's evocation of suspense through the immediate drama of his protagonists' attempts to outwit their adversaries clearly feeds into Household's fiction, as does Buchan's use of reversals and his detailed attention to setting. What distinguishes his thrillers from Household's is that Buchan's most famous serial hero, Richard Hannay, never works in isolation from his friends in British intelligence and has important connections with the USA and South Africa. For all his versatility, Hannay remains a soldier, and for that reason we never lose our consciousness of national and political issues during the novels describing Hannay's exploits. Buchan's endings regularly signal the reaffirmation of institutional order through the removal of threats to the nation. In that respect, the politics of Bu-

chan's narratives contrast strikingly with those of Household, who described himself as a "romantic anarchist."³

Snyder suggests that Household tends to lose this broader institutional dimension by concentrating his action more and more closely on his protagonists' psyche, but it does not follow that the political and social issues are lost as a result. More importantly, we should note the framing devices and other strategies which Household follows to render his narratives ambiguous. *Rogue Male* (1939), for instance, carries an accompanying letter where he declares: "I write this from a pleasant inn where I am accustoming myself to a new avatar" (181). The suggestion of a serial re-invention of the self would be totally alien in Buchan, as would the suggestion in the letter that the narrator wrongly chose the countryside as a setting for pursuit which would have been more powerfully described in a city. The effect is as if the speaker had stepped out of his role and was approaching the position of the author himself.

Snyder focuses specifically on this novel's concluding scene for its evoked identification between the narrator and his pursuer, but by so doing fails to comment on the introverted, self-reflexive nature of the narrative. As frequently happens in Household, the narrator repeatedly stresses his process of recollection, describing his account as a confession: "I create a second self, a man of the past by whom the man of the present may be measured" (8). As early as this preamble we can see how the narrator has become his own subject. The narrative presents an extended exercise in self-examination, where the narrator looks out for signs of weakness and self-deception. And this is not an isolated case in Household. His narrators frequently incorporate comments on their own methods, thereby inducing in the reader an alert attention to representational technique. At one point in *Rogue Male*, for instance, he stresses the time lapse between the events and his description: "when I write that I did this because of that, it is true. At the time of the action, however, it was not always true" (61). Such reflective moments are rare in Buchan, who repeatedly attempts to maximize the immediacy of events.

Partly because he has discussed the novel elsewhere, Snyder uses *Rogue Male* as a springboard into his discussion of two post-war novels, but in fact this novel already demonstrates Household's method of selective exclusion.⁴ The narrator is a lone adventurer who has travelled to an unnamed country in Europe to kill its dictator. A reader in 1939 would need no further information to pick up that contemporary resonance. By 1941, in his film adaptation as *Man Hunt*, Fritz Lang had explicitly made the target Hitler, as indeed he is named in Household's 1982 sequel *Rogue Justice*. In the novel, the narrator's plan misfires, he is arrested and then flees the country. Through a reversal which was to become one of Household's hallmarks, the hunter becomes the hunted, and the novel demonstrates the threatening reach of the European dictator through this pursuit.

Here we have one of the main features which distinguishes Household's novel from Buchan's. In the epistolary foreword to *The Thirty-Nine Steps* Buchan announces his intention to imitate the method of American "shockers," what we would now call thrillers, which are based on the rapid pace of events.⁵ Accordingly, Richard Hannay opens that novel with a brief back story on his business activities in Africa and recent arrival in London. Having established that he is an enterprising and seasoned traveller, the action begins. In *Rogue Male*, the narrator's consciousness supplies the ground of the story, and the action centres on the persistent consequences of his original attempt at assassination. This does not mean, however, that *Rogue Male* is thin on specifics, only that Household selects his details according to the immediate necessities of his narrator's local situation. The latter flees back to London secretly stowed away on a cargo boat and is then followed around the London Underground, until he kills one of his pursuers. This estranges him from the authorities: "I was an outlaw in my own country," he admits (41). In *The Thirty-Nine Steps* Richard Hannay also becomes a fugitive, wrongly accused of a murder by the conspirators, but we never lose the background conviction that his actions are to protect the nation or that he will be ultimately vindicated.

Rogue Male, by contrast, opens more obliquely with a description not of events themselves, but of the reactions of the narrator's opponents: "I cannot blame them." The reader is thus drawn into a judgemental relation with the narrator even before we have the data to pass such judgements. Similarly, unlike Buchan, the end point is always uncertain. The narrator puts together his "kit" (63) and flees to Dorset, where he finally confronts his pursuer, one Major Quive-Smith, whose identity is bogus and who masquerades as a gentleman farmer. The latter's purpose is to make the narrator sign a confession that he had indeed tried to kill the "great man" (137). This presents a certain temptation to the narrator, who has from the very beginning admitted a confessional impulse in his account. When the narrator finally kills his pursuer, he takes on the latter's identity and leaves England. The novel ends inconclusively with the narrator temporarily in Tangier, at the time of publication still within the International Zone and therefore outside any nation.

The most dramatic section of *Rogue Male* is that where the narrator is being pursued round the Dorset countryside, and it is the physical detail of this terrain which Snyder's emphasis on doubling understates. The landscape is encoded through avenues of attack and escape, and the travel writer Robert Macfarlane has even argued that the narrator becomes a "hybrid version of the landscape itself" since both place and the narrator are conveyed to the reader through rhetorical oppositions like that between "cover" and "open" ("Rereading").⁶ The grounded nature of Household's narratives can never be forgotten without over-simplifying their action.

As Snyder has pointed out, World War II marked a crucial transition point for Household and an end to his *Wanderjahre*—he had lived variously in Romania, Spain and America. During the war he served with British military intelligence, experience which fed into his 1960 novel *Watcher in the Shadows*. Here Charles Dennim, an Austrian former intelligence officer, is shocked out of his suburban peace when a letter bomb explodes at his door. Information gradually emerges that there have been a series of killings—probably from revenge—of

officials from the Buchenwald and Ravensbrück concentration camps, where Dennim had worked while within the Austrian resistance. In other words, the action has a clear historical dimension. It seems as if Dennim is being wrongly targeted, because he was active in an anti-Nazi movement; at least, that is what he tells the reader. Just as we have once again a Household narrator struggling with uncertainty, so the reader is left wondering about the reliability of the information he supplies. Throughout the novel he (and the reader too) can only work from what a character calls "intelligent conjecture" (140). Once again the action centres on flight, this time to the Buckinghamshire countryside.

Here again a preoccupation with doubling diverts us from the physical specifics of pursuit. In *The Three Hostages* (1924) and other novels Buchan evokes the landscape as an emblem of peaceful cultural inheritance, but one which is constantly under threat. The landscape in *Watcher in the Shadows* lacks this directly national significance because Dennim's relation to place is more oblique. He is revealed to be British by adoption and, even though he knows the countryside so well that one character mistakes him for a game-keeper, he reads the terrain strategically, mapping out possible routes of attack and avenues of flight. Thus, the features of the landscape are not simply picturesque. A wood, for instance, could offer the narrator refuge, or might even be a hiding-place for his opponent. As in *Rogue Male*, the countryside is described in close detail, and it is that detail which is used to evoke the drama. This tight focus on a protagonist using his survival skills to avoid pursuit was to become central to David Morrell's 1972 debut novel *First Blood*, where a decorated Vietnam veteran becomes a fugitive from a local sheriff. As happens in Household's fiction, the action results from a transposition of scenes, here of the traumas of Vietnam on to the American landscape. Morrell has acknowledged how skilfully Household managed the claustrophobia of his action by constantly evoking the concrete physical details of his protagonist's situation.⁷

Because Household uses the narrative first person, the pursuit of Dennim seems at times paranoid, ambiguous at the very least. Dennim evokes his enemy melodramatically as his “dedicated executioner” (45), or more generally as a featureless “dark gentleman” (80), uncannily shadowing his movements around the landscape. For Snyder this figure is yet another double, and yet Household historicizes the terrain by having Dennim rent a cottage near a disused aerodrome. In short, there is no escaping the past, and Dennim’s painstaking mapping out of the area reflects his attempts to bring his situation under control. As Snyder has noted, these attempts have a rhetorical dimension because Dennim draws on the analogy of the hunt, whether by humans or animals. His chosen analogy in *Watcher in the Shadows* is with “German Intelligence chess” (60). Chess has been a traditional metaphor of strategy for many years, but Household adds the complication that the player cannot see his opponent, can only infer moves.

So far it could sound as if the novel’s action is speculative to the point of abstraction, but then Household introduces a whole series of what Snyder calls “character and gender relationships unmistakably associated with a bygone time” (307): a retired admiral, a vicar who is an expert naturalist, a former general, and so the list could continue. In the second half of the novel a whole gallery of comic rural stereotypes passes before us, and consequently the suspense is temporarily lost, another characteristic lost by an emphasis on doubling. It is as if the novel temporarily changes genres. Dennim now figures the action as a private theatre where he is the sole spectator. The scenic comedy of this section pulls against the drama of the impending confrontation with his opponent, who reveals himself as the Vicomte de Saint Sabas. The last episodes in the novel contrast anachronistically with its modern setting when Dennim and the Vicomte engage in a duel, first on horseback and then on foot. Though Snyder notes the aristocratic throwback in these events, he understates the theatricality of the Vicomte’s final confession that he is responsible for the killings. The

latter's ceremonial style, reminiscent of Alexandre Dumas, brings to a peak the unresolved disparity between style and subject.

Whereas *Watcher in the Shadows* evokes a story of revenge for earlier wrongs, the 1972 TV adaptation transposes setting and subject. In *Deadly Harvest* the protagonist is a defector from the Communist bloc living out a cover identity in California as a wine cultivator.⁸ The suspense from his subjective point of view in the novel is lost in the film when the camera closes up on a bomb fixed under his truck, which explodes when a hitch-hiker tries to drive it away. The latter's girl companion questions the protagonist about the threat he imagines being posed to him, which she tries to dismiss as ancient history. However, there is no doubt of the protagonist's history, only that the agency supplying him with the cover is no longer interested in his situation. So, although we actually witness a gun battle between the protagonist and his would-be assassin, the film totally undercuts its drama through the laid-back questions of the girl and the repeated use of the song *Blowin' in the Wind*, which could imply that the whole subject lacks substance.

When Snyder turns to *Dance of the Dwarfs* (1968), his concern with doubling becomes more awkward because the terms of reference have shifted dramatically. This time Household uses the found manuscript convention, framing his narrative as the record of a solitary naturalist living on a field station in the wilds of Colombia. Owen Dawnay initially lives passively on his settlement and then, under the cumulative impact of native tales of pygmies living in the forest, begins to search not exactly for a primordial version of himself, as Snyder suggests, but rather for a primitive race he can appropriate. What had served as a metaphor unifying the action of the earlier novels—the hunt—now becomes actualized through Dawnay's need for survival, but in the wilds the hunter-hunted relation can reverse unnervingly. While he constantly dreams of discovering a new species, "Homo Dawnayensis," his sightings remain fleeting and ambiguous. It is never certain that he is seeing a human being and not an animal. Characteristically, his journal records this as a caution: "What you

think your eye is recording has more relation to your beliefs than to facts" (136). At some points he seems to glimpse a pygmy, and then he is gone; at other points he sees a "mustelid" (188), a weasel-like creature. As in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, however, the forest retains its mysteries. Near the opening of his journal Dawnay notes how the natives show no capacity for mapping out the terrain and, as the novel progresses, he himself falls prey to a process of disorientation which undermines his attempts to explore the wilderness. The explicit framing of Dawnay's journal distances the reader from his narrative and carries satirical implications for his colonial attitude.

Dance of the Dwarfs projects the narrator's gradual spiral into self-obsession. The lure of the "primitive" motivates his sexual relation with two native girls, who are repeatedly described as animalistic.⁹ Dawnay blatantly uses Chucha (and a successor he does not bother to name) as a means of indulging his fantasies in the name of some elusive truth which eludes him right to the end. His last broken sentence ("I lack imagi") sums up the absence at the heart of his narrative, at once of a clear visual image and of self-knowledge. In this novel, Snyder's model of doubling works least well because the narrator lacks an identifiable opponent and because he appears to be indulging in an extended fantasy of evolutionary regression. While the novel presents many signs of danger, it could hardly be classed as a thriller. On the contrary, the action has a disconcertingly hybrid aspect. We are told in the introductory frame that Dawnay's death has been attributed to Colombian freedom fighters, and indeed several meetings take place between himself and revolutionaries from Cuba and elsewhere. Thus, we have on one level a quasi-scientific narrative reminiscent of Wells and Conrad, on the other passing references to the politics of the 1960s like Mao's Cultural Revolution.

What Snyder understates is the hybrid nature of Household's narratives, where characteristically setting pulls against subject. In *Watcher in the Shadows* the problematic legacy of the Nazi concentration camps is superimposed on a timeless rural landscape in the English home counties. In *Dance of the Dwarfs* ancient and modern are starkly juxta-

posed, as if Dawnay is trying to flee his own present. Household's 1985 novel *Arrows of Desire* even more startlingly disorients the reader in place and time by evoking a future where Britain has become a minor enclave in the Euro-African Federation. "Federal" names including Tito, Pasha, and Pretorius reflect a new regime where British identity has either been lost completely or is seen as a throw-back to an out-dated nationalism. The primitive wilderness which Dawnay tentatively explores in *Dance of the Dwarfs* has now become an estranged way of viewing mid-1980s Britain. Such reversals, the use of framing devices, the hybridity noted above, and meta-reference within the narratives are all features of Household's practice which reflect his variety of experimentation and which in turn suggest the difficulty of fitting his works into a single genre, whether that of thriller or the tale of detection.

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NOTES

¹Snyder makes a similar argument in his essay "Eric Ambler's Revisionist Thrillers," collected in his monograph *The Art of Indirection in British Espionage Fiction*. The six novelists discussed there are Eric Ambler, Graham Greene, Len Deighton, John le Carré, Stella Rimington, and Charles Cumming.

²This pattern of opposition also figures in John Buchan's fiction, in the Anarchist intellectual Andrew Lumley in *The Power House* (1916) and Medina the hypnotist in *The Three Hostages* (1924).

³Mike Ripley discusses this aspect of Household, but also finds a certain nostalgia for pre-World War I Europe in his work.

⁴See Snyder, "Confession, Class, and Conscience in Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male*." Here he argues that the novel has more in common with the tale of detection than the old-style thriller and even anticipates some aspects of Postmodernism.

⁵In the epistolary foreword to *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, to his friend the publisher Thomas Nelson, Buchan writes: "You and I have long cherished an affection for that elementary type of tale which the Americans call the 'dime novel' and which we know as the 'shocker'—the romance where the incidents defy the probabilities" (3). The statement helpfully highlights shifts in generic labels.

⁶Macfarlane has co-written an extended homage to Household's novel in *Holloway* (2013), an account of exploring the Dorset countryside.

⁷See David Morrell, "Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male* (1939)"; and also "David Morrell on Geoffrey Household." Morrell was recommended *Rogue Male* during his postgraduate studies at Penn State University. Among other novels showing Household's influence we could note *The Spy Who Came for Christmas* (2008), which describes the efforts of an intelligence agent to shake off his pursuers. The novel minimizes its back story in order to build up the moment-by-moment drama of this hunt.

⁸*Deadly Harvest* was made by CBS, directed by Michael O'Herlihy, starring Richard Boone as the protagonist.

⁹The narrator refers to his "mating" (146) as part of his nature watching and records his sexual experiences as if they were actions cutting across species: "So much for the intrusion into my bed of unity with my fellow animals!" (194).

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