

“The Jungles of International Bureaucracy”:  
Criminality and Detection  
in Eric Ambler’s *The Siege of the Villa Lipp*\*

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Early in *The Dark Frontier* (1936), the first of Eric Ambler’s eighteen novels, a director of armaments manufacturer Cator & Bliss tries to recruit Professor Henry J. Barstow, an acclaimed physicist, as a highly paid technical adviser to his company’s program in what he euphemizes as “applied atomic energy” (20). When the scientist voices moral reservations, citing his public declaration a year earlier that recent developments in nuclear research “might prove to be mixed blessings” (11), the corporation’s representative attempts to assuage them by defending Cator & Bliss’s flourishing trade in munitions. Pluming himself on taking a “Nietzschean view” of the world (16), Barstow’s interlocutor dismissively remarks: “Personally I believe questions of ethics are never anything but questions of points of view” (22-23).

Over the span of forty-five years as a writer who transformed a popular genre, Ambler relentlessly examined the issue of where such relativism leads. In his celebrated novels of the 1930s and 1940s, like many other leftist authors of that era, he was inclined to indict fictitious conglomerates for endorsing casuistry of this kind while trafficking in weapons, prostitution, drugs, and black-market goods. Initially Ambler was impelled in this direction by a recognition that the antecedent productions of Erskine Childers, John Buchan, Dornford Yates, William Le Queux, and E. Phillips Oppenheim defied credibility by presenting improbable figures who epitomized a reductive “Us” / “Them” binary (see Cawelti and Rosenberg 38-45; Stafford 503-

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debsnyder02023.htm>>.

04). In his 1985 autobiography he thus explains his perception that at the time “the thriller had nowhere to go but up”:

It was the villains who bothered me most. Power-crazed or coldly sane, master criminals or old-fashioned professional devils, I no longer believed a word of them. Nor did I believe in their passions for evil and plots against civilization. As for their world conspiracies, they appeared to me no more substantial than toy balloons, over-inflated and squeaky to the touch, with sad old characters rattling about inside like dried peas. The hero did not seem to matter much. He was often only a fugitive, a hare to the villain's hounds, prepared in the end to turn pluckily and face his pursuers. He could be a tweedy fellow with steel-grey eyes and gun pads on both shoulders or a moneyed dandy with a taste for adventure. He could also be a xenophobic ex-officer with a nasty anti-Semitic streak. None of that really mattered. All he [...] needed to function as hero was abysmal stupidity combined with superhuman resourcefulness and unbreakable knuckle bones. (*Here Lies* 120-21)

Beginning with such post-war narratives of political intrigue as *Judgment on Deltchev* (1951), however, Ambler's focus shifted away from the ascendancy of hegemonic monopolies to the subtler, more pervasive influence of internationalism and bureaucratization. The new threat to ethical practice, in other words, was a global system that annulled individual agency and promoted the Orwellian manipulation of meaning while embracing a seemingly unquestioned doctrine of expediency. At the same time he continued to characterize this emergent world architecture by one of his favorite tropes. The metaphor surfaces most memorably in *Journey into Fear* (1940) when its protagonist, a ballistics engineer employed by Cator & Bliss who “had never handled a revolver in his life before” (130), is suddenly thrust into circumstances that bring home to him the fact of danger's lurking everywhere, “waiting [...] to remind you—in case you had forgotten—that civilisation was a word and that you still lived in the *jungle*” (70; my emphasis).

This idea of an underlying Darwinism also dominates *The Siege of the Villa Lipp* (1977), Ambler's seventeenth novel, which explores not the outdated premise of “master criminals or old-fashioned professional devils” as villains but rather a latter-day phenomenon catego-

alized by sociologists within its pages as the “Able Criminal” (4). Before I discuss this neglected text,<sup>1</sup> we should note that its first-person narrator, pseudonymically Paul Firman, is a variant of the eponymous racketeer in *A Coffin for Dimitrios* (1939). Of the latter pimp, thief, extortionist, and murderer whom Eurasian Credit Trust eventually appoints as one of its directors, the frame storyteller asserts:

But it was useless to try to explain him in terms of Good and Evil. They were no more than baroque abstractions. Good Business and Bad Business were the elements of the new theology. Dimitrios was not evil. He was [as] logical and consistent [...] in the European jungle as the poison gas called Lewisite and the shattered bodies of children killed in the bombardment of an open town. (252-53)

Nearly four decades later the avatar of Dimitrios espouses a similar “new theology.” For Firman there likewise obtains no longer an absolute distinction between “Good and Evil”; what matters instead in the post-World War II cultural milieu is only the pragmatics of “Good Business” versus “Bad Business.” Though no less subject to an earlier era’s stigma of criminality, this secularist orthodoxy is driven by a widely accepted mandate for capitalistic profit, no matter whether transactions are licit or illicit.

White-collar crime, particularly as it involves the covert sheltering of vast financial sums, is Ambler’s specific target in his next-to-last novel. In order to explore this refinement of larceny, he structures *Siege* around a heavily dialogical contest between two entrenched adversaries. One is Paul Firman, who in his mid-fifties directs a shadowy organization known as the Institute for International Investment and Trust Counselling, headquartered in Brussels, that sponsors seminars in tax avoidance—not evasion, he stresses—under its innocuously named subsidiary Symposia SA. Owning a 20% stake in this venture, which reportedly is backed by kingpin Mathew Williamson, Firman finds to his discomfiture that several years earlier in Zürich he was photographed while attending the funeral of Johann Kramer, a Swiss banker whom Firman, masquerading as one Reinhardt Oberholzer, had suborned for privileged information about

anonymously numbered accounts. Taking advantage of that inadvertent lapse in concealment, Frits Bühler Krom, a 62-year-old Dutchman and Professor of Sociology at a German university, becomes determined to track down "Oberholzer" as a case study in what he conceives as a "new and peculiar breed" in the annals of criminology (4). Supported by younger American colleague Dr. George Kingham Connell and British counterpart Dr. Geraldine Hope Henson, both of whom have aligned themselves with Krom's revisionist theory about the "Able Criminal," he threatens exposure unless Firman agrees to a four-day stint of interrogation at Villa Lipp on the French Riviera. The narratological puzzle posed by Ambler's intricate text is that of knowing which, if either, of these main characters' accounts to believe.

Because Firman is both the novel's controlling voice and organizing consciousness, we tend to credit his version of events. Only in the final chapter is it revealed that the protagonist has relied upon an "amanuensis" and "literary mentor," fictively Ambler himself, to prepare his manuscript for publication (231).<sup>2</sup> Even so, the opening exposition contains several rhetorical clues that Firman protests too much, not unlike the compulsively confessional ironist in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), and therefore is not entirely reliable. Cornered by the "new criminologists" at the Villa Lipp, for example, and not wanting to be branded a "consistently sly, treacherous, ruthless and rapacious, vindictive, devious, sadistic and generally vile" sociopath, he proclaims: "I do not, of course, expect justice; that would be too much; but I believe that I am entitled to a fair trial before the only court I recognize, the only court whose judgements I now value; that is, the court of public opinion." This demagogic appeal, however, loses some of its persuasive weight when Firman promises evidence "sans whitewash that[,] far from being the villain of the piece[,] I am [Krom's] principal victim" (7). Shortly thereafter, invoking the terminology of juridical proceedings rather than that of fictional representations, he roundly declares: "I am not the defendant. I am the plaintiff" (10). Firman's pronouncement that he will offer testimony "sans whitewash" is undercut a few

chapters later, however, when again echoing Dostoevsky's Under-ground Man he announces:

My account will be full, reasonably accurate[,] and free from Krom's distortions. It will not, of course, be free of *my* distortions. I happen to be one of those who believe that the ability to tell the whole truth about anything at all is so rare that anyone who claims it, especially if he does so with hand on heart, should be regarded with the deepest suspicion.

I can only attempt to be truthful. (55-56)

In light of such equivocation, Ambler's audience is obliged to reserve its verdict about the narrator's veracity, however admirable his acknowledgment of subjective bias in self-reporting might seem to be.

Other elements of Firman's quasi-legalistic defense, even though he assumes the role of aggrieved plaintiff, raise questions about his probity. For one thing, as the pressures of scrutiny begin to mount during the Villa Lipp interviews, he is fond of resorting to various *ad hominem* ways of invalidating his chief accuser. These include Firman's recurrent caricature of Krom as a bumbling social scientist who—prone to academic pomposity, displays of prognathous front teeth, a susceptibility to inebriation, and cowardice in the face of physical danger—comes off as an oafish clown.<sup>3</sup> Second, in response to the three sociologists' cross-examination of him about certain disclosure files or "papers," which Firman admits he doctored for their consumption, the protagonist is consistently cagey in his replies. Finally, in order to extenuate his involvement with the suspect Institute for International Investment and Trust Counselling, the narrator weaves an elaborate tale of two "Darwin[s] of criminology" (33), Carlo Lech and Mathew Williamson, who as his silent partners qualify more than he for Krom's investigation.

The Professor's competing extrapolation of Firman/Oberholzer's career compounds our uncertainty about whose affidavit, given the novel's selective filtering, is the more credible. Particularly damning is Krom's hard-wrung admission that, in order to secure a face-to-face meeting with Firman at the Villa Lipp, he relied essentially on blackmail (see 21, 52, 173-75), the same kind of opportunistic exploitation

for which he has arraigned his case study. Eager to prove that the notion of "Master Criminal" was a "beguiling figment of nineteenth-century fictional imaginations who so often fell prey to amateur detectives" (5), Krom fastens on Firman as his premier suspect and rejects any possibility of Lech's or Williamson's being behind what he denounces as an organized campaign of "international parasitism" (97). Entranced by an *idée fixe*, Krom cannot conceive of any bureaucratic complexity in the underworld's operative structure. As a consequence, his conviction that Paul Firman, acting solely on his own initiative, is a heretofore undiscovered specimen of the twentieth century's "Able Criminal" proves to be little more than a redaction of the late-Victorian hypothesis of "Master Criminal."

Also noteworthy about the forensic standoff between the two men is the readiness of each to accuse the other of mendacity while parsing their own terminology. Thus, objecting to the Professor's "casual use of the word 'criminal,'" Firman invokes a standard definition approved by "most modern lexicographers"—"one who commits a serious act generally considered injurious to the public welfare and usually punishable by law"—before spinning it to his own advantage: "Krom seemed to believe that anyone possessing the imagination and business [...] skills needed to evolve a new way of investing time and money in order to make a profit was automatically a criminal" (21). Only a dozen pages later, however, while reporting his initial interview with the sociologist to Mathew Williamson in London, the narrator candidly admits that he engaged in "double-talk."

I asked [Krom] to define crime. I asked him if he didn't think that it was largely a fiction created by politicians posing as legislators and [...] pretending that their motives are free from political pollution. Didn't he agree that ninety-five percent of so-called crime is committed by governments against, and at the expense of, those citizens in whose names they pretend to govern? (33)

For his part the Professor is equally prone to semantic gamesmanship. Condemning Firman as the mastermind of a "multimillion-dollar extortion racket" (97), as already noted, Krom is blind to his own use

of blackmail in tracking down his quarry. This capacity for self-deception prompts his opponent at one point to wonder whether, "without the burden of that overweight superego he carries around," the academician might "not have become one of our less scrupulous competitors" (130). Failing to grasp the implications of either Friedrich Nietzsche's or Herbert Marcuse's writings, Frits Bühler Krom concludes only that Paul Firman's description of his role in the "Oberholzer" caper, which Krom insists on hypostatizing as the "Symposia Conspiracy," is "nothing but a pack of lies" (173; 141).

Ambler's embedded stories of both Carlo Lech and Mathew Williamson suggest the shallowness of Professor Krom's theory regarding modern criminality. A cunning Italian lawyer during World War II and subsequently Firman's *patrono*, Lech allegedly took the young sergeant, then serving with British Field Security Police in 1943, under his wing and divulged what he anticipated would be a lucrative scheme of private banking for servicemen, primarily U.S. quartermasters, in need of safe havens for their profiteering windfalls. On the basis of an informal but honored compact, if we can believe Firman's narrative, both Lech and he as "Oberholzer" benefited enormously from their enterprise until the late 1950s, at which time new market forces intervened to challenge the thriving partnership now known as "Agence Euro-Fiduciare." Especially important in this background sketch is the two men's personal relationship. Twice his protégé's age upon their first meeting one another, Lech regards the protagonist as "the kind of son I would have liked to have, one with whom, and at whose side, I could do business" (67).<sup>4</sup> For his part the Argentina-born and dual-nationality Firman, who has no fond memories of his British father's shipping him off at age eight to boarding schools in England, is effectively a deracinated orphan receptive to the guidance of a surrogate mentor. Thus, when Carlo dies five years prior to the novel's opening, his understudy finds himself appointed Lech's joint trustee for a privately owned Caribbean island, the sale of which will benefit primarily an American grandson, by way of daughter Maria and her cellist husband, named Mario. What this interpolated tale

projects, we can infer, is an allegory of adoption and custodianship, an encoding of both the *relative* legitimacy of post-war financial chicanery as well as a sentimental commitment to the idea of family. This paradigm, however, is juxtaposed with an altogether different template of that which succeeded and supplanted it. The new order of "gangster-ridden monopoly capitalism" is epitomized by Mathew Williamson, "a half-caste Melanesian sorcerer" who also goes by the surname of Tuakana (206; 26).

In sharp contrast to the depiction of Carlo Lech and his "old buccaneering ways" (159), the narrator's portrait of "sexually double-gaited" trickster Williamson makes clear his generational difference (35). Almost twenty years younger than Paul Firman, this graduate of the London School of Economics, who later attended Stanford Law School, was born on Placid Island<sup>5</sup> in the Pacific and, while being educated by Methodist missionaries in Fiji during the war that left him parentless, acquired a reputation for terrorizing classmates with pagan spells. Incongruously, given this haphazard start in life, the young Williamson then came under the sway of Robert Baden-Powell, whose Boy Scout Movement's creed of self-sufficiency spoke deeply to his need for "[t]ribalism, [...] with lots of stern rituals and the chance to exercise a natural talent for leadership" (29). By his mid-thirties, having already become the majority shareholder of Symposia SA and therefore Firman's superior after Lech's death, this latter-day entrepreneur—with the help of Frank Yamatoku, "a Japanese-American whiz kid from California who [had] made a killing in the porn trade there before Mat found him" (31)—devotes himself to a scheme for turning Placid Island, without the knowledge of Chief Tebuke and its indigenous population, into an internationally competitive outpost for money-laundering. Cleverly disguising his real ambitions, Williamson/Tuakana poses as an advocate for the territory's post-World War II claims against the Anglo-Anzac Phosphate Company that had stripped its natural resources. Like Lech and Firman, Mathew Williamson falls somewhere between a criminal and a businessman, but the ethos he typifies is far different from that of his



wartime precursors.<sup>6</sup> Thus this dispassionate opportunist “does not have to be in the least angry with a man before deciding that he must be destroyed” (87).

Implicit in the narrator’s account of this post-war figure’s connivance is a sketch of the consummate bureaucrat. Unlike Carlo Lech, who despite his wiliness honors a code of personal fidelity, Mathew Williamson compartmentalizes his allegiances in accordance with how, at any given moment, they benefit him. When Paul Firman is compromised by intrusive Professor Krom, therefore, the hybrid creature known as Williamson/Tuakana is more than ready to sacrifice former colleagues for his own self-protection under the ruse of “plausible deniability.”<sup>7</sup> While posing publicly as “patron saint of Placid Island” (166), in Firman’s mocking description, who at the United Nations is advocating postcolonial independence for “the most prosperous sovereign state in the entire South Pacific” (34), Mathew Williamson arranges through intermediaries for the Villa Lipp to come under murderous rocket siege on Bastille Day, 14 July, by hired killers before he has another group of thugs viciously execute Yves Boularis, a once-trusted Tunisian expert in electronic surveillance who failed to ensnare Firman within the compound. During the siege Williamson also dissociates himself from Frank Yamatoku, whom he had charged with orchestrating the attack. The protagonist narrowly escapes these dangers, along with assistant Melanie Wicky-Frey, but in the process he learns a valuable lesson about the lengths to which bureaucratic duplicity will go in order to safeguard its strategic interests.

Professor Krom’s inability to credit Paul Firman’s representations of either Carlo Lech or Mathew Williamson/Tuakana stems from more than naïveté. For one thing, as a sociologist whose pet theory is that white-collar criminals are anarchists who lack “faith in established patterns of order” (23), he is eager to validate his hypothesis and thereby regain a lost standing within the academic community (see 33, 131). Ironically declaring that this new breed of those who trespass the law “will not have taken to [...] heart the works of the ineffable Mar-

cuse" (23), author of *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Krom cannot conceive of the possibility that *systems* rather than *individuals* generate anti-social behavior. The academician also credulously believes that his own research efforts are exhaustive. Pursuant to his "most careful inquiries," Carlo Lech was nothing other than "a highly respectable [...] corporation lawyer," and Mathew Williamson, according to an article titled "The Able Criminal: Notes for a Case Study" that Krom contributes to *The New Sociologist* two months after the Villa Lipp's siege, simply a benevolent businessman who became Chief Minister on Placid Island after it won independence (76; 224). Finally, although paradoxically given their differences, Professor Krom subscribes to the same paradigm as Paul Firman when the latter asserts early in the novel: "If sociologists like Krom must paste labels on men and women in order to classify them, I would say that Mat is, as I am, an adventurer; that is, in the old pejorative sense of the term, a healthy and intelligent person who could labour usefully in the vineyard, but who prefers instead to live by his wits" (34). Without admitting as much, Professor Krom concedes the point in terms of how he construes culpable agency. Only when the Villa Lipp is under lethal assault does there come a moment in which the first-person narrator explicitly sets forth Ambler's theme:

For a few minutes they [Professors Krom, Connell, and Henson] seemed to have stopped wondering how much truth there was in me, and to be asking themselves a question that their books had always said was irrelevant. Was there or wasn't there honour among thieves?

Could criminal relationships be like those to be found in trade and industry? [...] Or was the "standard" criminal relationship one of convenience and collusion only, like a contract between politicians, cancellable without warning by either party the moment it became in any way embarrassing? (179)

These questions form the crux of *Siege*. Behind all the verbal jousting between Paul Firman and the team of criminologists interrogating him is the issue of whether expediency governs the world of legitimate commerce as well as that of deviant criminality. If one sphere is simply an analogue of the other in terms of its ethics, the presumptive

distinction that separates the realm of societal order from the forces of predatory misrule collapses.

In order to explore this issue in a 1970s context, Ambler uses a staging device that he borrowed from classical detective fiction and first employed in *Epitaph for a Spy* (1938)—namely, a sealed or otherwise isolated environment, like the country manor houses of Arthur Conan Doyle, in which the drama of detection can unfold through a process of deductive ratiocination. In *Epitaph* this confined setting is the Hotel de la Réserve in St. Gatien where Josef Vadassy, a young teacher of languages and man without a country threatened with deportation from France, desperately tries to ascertain through a series of interviews which of ten other guests snapped surveillance images of seaside artillery installations at nearby Toulon. He fails in this mission imposed on him by the Sûreté Générale, however, because all the clues are equivocal. Early in his career Ambler thus derails the epistemological assumptions of an antecedent genre (see Snyder 231-33, 236). In *Siege*, of course, the leased Villa Lipp functions similarly as a circumscribed arena in which is played out the dialogical sparring between Paul Firman and his accusers, but in Ambler's seventeenth novel unlike his third the putative or logocentric "truth" of things is finally indeterminate. According to commentator Peter Lewis, *Siege* inducts us "into a contemporary equivalent of Lewis Carroll's looking-glass world where, conveniently, words can mean whatever you want them to mean" (196). By foregrounding the hollowness of rhetoricity and the endless play of *différance* in his main subjects' exchanges, Ambler's text figures as "a deconstructionist critic's delight" (Wolfe 203), all the while declining to make doctrinaire statements about "the divorce in modern capitalist society between the socially admired qualities of individual initiative and imaginative enterprise, on the one hand, and the moral values that should but do not control them, on the other" (Lewis 198). With few exceptions, moreover, Ambler's *personae* are linguistically self-invented simulacra. Mathew Williamson/Tuakana, for example, is said to be an expert mimic adept in ventriloquizing other people's voices and speech patterns. *Siege* con-

sequently presents no Jamesian development of character, choosing instead to dramatize the factitiousness of such constructs in "the jungles of international bureaucracy" (23).

Late in the novel, after proclaiming Professor Krom a "phony" (224), Paul Firman denounces his adversary as follows: "His is a monochrome world of good-and-evil, innocence-and-guilt, truth-and-falsehood. If such a world exists, and perhaps it does exist in the privacy of some minds, then he is welcome to it" (225-26). This riposte, one might argue, is the last defense of an embattled relativist, yet Firman recognizes—whether or not one endorses his viewpoint—that "Truth games are dangerous" in a culture dominated by dissimulation and dissemblance (156). Ambler leaves it entirely up to us as readers to decide at the end whose "clouds of verbiage" in the protagonist's debate with Krom are the metaphorical equivalent of "octopus ink" (235; cf. 74). At the same time, however, he includes a detail about his text's provenance that provides some direction in interpreting the narrative as a whole.

I am referring to the fact, as noted earlier in this essay, that Firman discloses in *Siege's* concluding chapter that he has relied upon an "amanuensis," "literary mentor," and "business intermediary" to "prepare this account of the 'siege of the Villa Lipp' for publication" (231). The fictive entity, it seems plausible, is Ambler himself as author of *The Intercom Conspiracy* (1969), in which he suddenly "moved from the single narrative voice" of his earlier novels to "collections of views," as in *Siege*, that "cast doubt on the truth of the main narrator" (Panek 153). As I have argued elsewhere, *Conspiracy* can be construed as "a uniquely decentered and metafictional work within his corpus" because, though it "lacks the degree of historiographic self-consciousness evident in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), it nevertheless investigates in comparably intensive fashion the permeable border usually accepted as separating fiction and reality" (251-52). A further parallel can be drawn between Ambler's fourteenth and seventeenth productions. In telling a convoluted story of how Colonels Brand and

Jost, disillusioned directors of two small nations' intelligence networks, extort a huge sum from NATO superpowers by arranging for the dissemination of top-secret technical bulletins in a propagandistic newsletter,<sup>8</sup> *Conspiracy* emphasizes how textuality usurps and scripts our perceptions of the world. It thus is no accident that within the novel Charles Latimer Lewison, an author of detective stories who fancies that he can untangle the labyrinthine scheme, is eventually murdered and buried under wet cement at a construction site, thereby literalizing "Roland Barthes's concept of the demise of the author in postmodernity" (Snyder 257). Neither Paul Firman nor Professor Krom suffers this fate in *Siege*, but their rhetorical skirmishing, coupled with Carlo Lech's and Mathew Williamson/Tuakana's prevarications, occludes our access to the truth of things. In both of these texts, therefore, Ambler compels us to wrestle with complementary dimensions of our discursive orientation, particularly as they pertain to pivotal issues of ethical practice and responsibility.

Given this thematic emphasis in both *Conspiracy* and *Siege*, it is fitting that the latter ends with a battle of two books. The first of these is Krom's *Der kompetente Kriminelle*, which identifies "Oberholzer" as the sole con-man behind Symposia SA. "Produc[ing] a whole crop of articles on the subject in the international news magazines and business journals" (224), the tome makes no mention of Mathew Williamson, Placid Island, Frank Yamatoku, Yves Boularis, or the siege of the Villa Lipp. Because of this exposé's negative impact on his tax-avoidance seminars, Paul Firman is motivated to set the public record straight by drafting a professedly "true" account while sequestered on aptly named Out Island, former retreat of Carlo Lech, in the Caribbean. This is the text vetted by the narrator's "literary mentor" and "business intermediary," but the publisher's conditions for its release stipulate the obtaining of legally binding waivers of prosecution for libel. Professor Krom's consent is contingent on Firman's including as a postscript or appendix his twelve-page commentary thereon. In this supplement Krom refutes his opponent's "self-serving effusion" by citing the claim of newly installed Chief Minister of Placid Island, Mr.

Tuakana, that several years ago Paul Firman became mentally imbalanced as a result of his son's death by suicide (235; see 245). Whether this circumstantial information is accurate or not, considering its source and purveyor, is uncertain. The allegation becomes no less disconcerting because on the novel's last page Ambler's protagonist seems to confirm it. That with which readers are finally left, then, is an endlessly whorled narrative wherein both textual and oral representations proliferate to undermine our expectation of a clearly defined resolution.

In his seminal study titled *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller*, Michael Denning distinguishes between "magical" and "existential" thrillers. The first category features "a clear contest between Good and Evil," whereas the second "play[s] on a dialectic of good and evil overdetermined by moral dilemmas" (34). If we acknowledge this distinction in terms of *Siege's* departure from the traditional genre whence it arose, Ambler like Graham Greene privileges "issues of innocence and experience, of identity and point of view" (63), because he recognizes how their dramatization interpellates his audience in the hermeneutical problem of perspective. At the same time he addresses in two of his later novels how we are besieged by the gathering forces of bureaucratization, with its concomitant impulse toward relativism, in terms of how we make sense of our world.

None of this is to imply that Ambler lends himself to conventional classification. His surprising shift in architectonics beginning with *Conspiracy* and expanded in *Siege* no doubt contributed to why fellow author C. P. Snow, reviewing the 1977 novel under its British title of *Send No More Roses*, was hard-pressed to categorize the text:

Along with John le Carré, [Ambler] is recognised, and rightly so, as this country's master of—what? It is difficult to define precisely what kind of books these two write. They are certainly not detective stories. They are scarcely thrillers, or not in the Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler sense. Though suspense plays a part, as it does in almost all the classical straight novels, sensation rarely does. The Ambler books are [...] a good deal more than mildly intellectual entertainment.

Although Snow clearly found it easier to define his contemporary's seventeenth production in terms of what it was not rather than of what it was, he perceptively went on to observe that *Siege*, "like all the best of Ambler, induces a sense [...] of Man Alone" pursued by enemies "even when he isn't certain who they are." Corroborating Paul Firman's admission that he is "still on the run" after his escape from the Villa Lipp (233), the same critic proposed that the anti-hero's "inner drama" constitutes his narrative's core interest: "He and Krom each know some of the truth," remarked Snow. "No one knows all[,] and no one ever will."

In setting out to transform the pulp fiction of his day and challenge the established literature of detection, Eric Ambler elevated the thriller to a new level of philosophical subtlety.<sup>9</sup> Heralding this depth in the novelist's early work, Ralph Harper, who was among the first to devote scholarly attention to Ambler's chosen *métier*, linked it to major tenets of existentialism, including the "boundary situations" of "Man Alone" (51). To this thematic dimension *Siege*, like *Conspiracy* eight years before it, experimentally added a high degree of narrational complexity, tasking us to reexamine nothing less than the very idea of fictionality itself. For these and other reasons Ambler deserves to be regarded as more than a "spy novelist," the usual tag by which publicists as well as otherwise informed critics try to pigeonhole him. Transcending such reductive labeling, he is a writer who continues to speak to our troubled time.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Within the generally modest body of scholarship on Ambler's fiction, only Peter Lewis (186-98) and Peter Wolfe (197-207) discuss *The Siege of the Villa Lipp* at any length. Ronald J. Ambrosetti's 1994 book for Twayne's English Authors Series inexplicably fails to consider any of Ambler's last four novels.

<sup>2</sup>"I had sought him out," Ambler has Firman say in this bit of authorial persiflage, "because I liked something he had written and deduced from it that he was

a person who would be unlikely to strike high-minded or other tedious attitudes" (231). It is tempting to speculate, for reasons clarified later in this essay, that the "something he had written" may refer to *The Intercom Conspiracy*.

<sup>3</sup>Diane Bjorklund points out that "sociologists [...] get no respect from novelists" because of the former group's reputed penchant for disciplinary jargon and failure to "understand human life in any meaningful way." Claiming that some eighty novels, including Ambler's *Siege*, over the last century pillory sociologists, she cites among others Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975), and John Gardner's *Mickelsson's Ghosts* (1982).

<sup>4</sup>Carlo Lech, we are told, did have a son, "a handsome, clever[,] but rather vain boy, who later disappointed him profoundly by going into the Church" (68). Even in this small plot detail business and morality, or ethics, part company.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Lewis observes, on the basis of a passage in the novel itself (see 34), that the fictitious Placid Island closely "resembles what was known as Pleasant Island until 1968 when it became Nauru, the world's smallest independent republic" located in Micronesia (195).

<sup>6</sup>Supporting this point, Ambler has Firman comment that "Carlo Lech and I always told one another the truth. To do so was part of our mutual respect. With Mat Williamson, mutual respect is based on insights of a different order. When a question is asked there, you consider, first, not what the exactly truthful answer would be, but what the questioner wishes to hear from you. No, I'm not surprised by his betraying me [...] . When you deal with Mat, there's always a chance that he may *try* to deceive or betray you" (180). This observation confirms a shift in ethics that accompanied the rise of bureaucratization after World War II.

<sup>7</sup>I am referring, of course, to the famous phrase of evasion that surfaced in President Richard M. Nixon's surreptitiously taped conversations with advisers John Ehrlichman and John Haldeman during the Watergate scandal before his impeachment-forced resignation on 9 August 1974. By noting the connection, I am suggesting that *Siege* reflects such an essentially bureaucratic mindset. The novel alludes to Watergate when its protagonist says of Carlo Lech's activities in 1945: "Thirty years were to go by before the Watergate investigation brought the word 'laundering' into metaphorical association with the word 'money'" (82).

<sup>8</sup>It bears mention that Colonels Brand and Jost's one-time campaign of "[c]alculated indiscretion" (*Conspiracy* 127) is not comparable to the career-long deceptions of Carlo Lech, Paul Firman, and Mathew Williamson/Tuakana. For the most part the former are treated sympathetically as rogues disenchanted with the "secrecy fetish" of post-World War II espionage (*Conspiracy* 33), whereas the latter, despite generational differences among them, have embraced extralegal adaptations of practices associated with corporate bureaucracy.

<sup>9</sup>"Ambler's great achievement," writes Simon Caterson, "was to bring realistic detail, political awareness[,] and philosophical substance to the thriller, without forgoing suspense or reducing narrative velocity" (87).



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