

Apropos of Geoffrey Household's *Watcher in the Shadows* and *Dance of the Dwarfs*: An Answer to David Seed*

ROBERT LANCE SNYDER

I am grateful to David Seed, a critic whose wide-ranging scholarship I respect, for his comments on my article titled "'Occult Sympathy': Geoffrey Household's *Watcher in the Shadows* and *Dance of the Dwarfs*." Given the importance that we both attach to Household's *Rogue Male* (1939) as a bellwether of the novelist's later fiction, I also appreciate Professor Seed's thoroughness in consulting an earlier essay of mine on that text as well as a broader discussion in my book *The Art of Indirection in British Espionage Fiction*. Having reflected on his remarks, I shall try here to clarify some divergent ways in which he and I assess the literary legacy of early-twentieth-century adventure fiction as crafted principally by John Buchan. Note that in this context I exclude the xenophobic fantasies of Sax Rohmer regarding "master criminal" Dr. Fu Manchu, which Seed regards as representative of the Edwardian thriller (336-37).¹ I do so because I cannot find any evidence that Rohmer influenced Household's practice as a writer.

Let me begin by indicating Seed's major reservations about my argument. They are, first, that my emphasis on doubling "risks simplifying the action of Household's fiction in such a way that its political resonances and circumstantial detail tend to be lost"; and, second, that my approach to "Household's thrillers as tales of detection similarly understates the generic variety of his fiction" (336). I

*References: Robert Lance Snyder, "'Occult Sympathy': Geoffrey Household's *Watcher in the Shadows* and *Dance of the Dwarfs*," *Connotations* 22.2 (2012/13): 301-17; David Seed, "Geoffrey Household's *Watcher in the Shadows* and *Dance of the Dwarfs*: A Response to Robert Lance Snyder," *Connotations* 23.2 (2013/14): 336-46.

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

take it to be a sign of his concerns that the verb “understates” is deployed three times later in Seed’s critique.

No one would deny, I think, the common-sense premise that particularity of circumstantial detail in a novel is tied closely to the sociocultural issues it explores. Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), as Seed agrees, offers a classic example. Having made his colonialist “pile” as a mining engineer in South Africa, thirty-seven-year-old Richard Hannay, a Scot who has lived overseas since age six, returns to the “Old Country” where after three months in London he finds himself “the best bored man in the United Kingdom” (7). When Franklin P. Scudder, an American newspaper correspondent who has learned of a pending assassination that will precipitate World War I, then seeks sanctuary at Hannay’s flat and confides his alarming tale, later described as “‘all pure Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle’” (33), Buchan’s hero is grateful for the distraction from his ennui. Upon Scudder’s murder Hannay, subsequently assisted by the victim’s decrypted notes, resolves to “play the game in his place” by foiling a German cabal known as the Black Stone (20). Such particularity, even in so brief a synopsis, is enough to indicate the geopolitical tensions that Buchan is addressing on the eve of war. What are we to make, however, of the fact that it takes two non-English amateur sleuths to expose “a big subterranean movement” (10) via a battle of wits when Britannia’s security apparatus seems largely oblivious to the imminent outbreak of international hostilities? Seed correctly notes that Hannay “never works in isolation from his friends in British intelligence and has important connections with the USA and South Africa” (337), yet these institutional resources are of little use to him in countering the Black Stone’s “fell designs on the world’s peace” (Buchan 101).² Ultimately the protagonist is thrust into the position of what Ralph Harper, writing the first study of the thriller as a uniquely twentieth-century permutation of the adventure tale and detective story, conceives as that of the isolated existentialist hero.

When it comes to *Rogue Male*, the text to which Seed next turns his attention, I frankly am not sure of what constitutes his main point. On

the one hand, he apparently wants to emphasize how different Household's third novel is from Buchan's fiction by its use of framing devices to cultivate ambiguity and by the narrative's purported reflexivity. On the other hand, observing that in *Rogue Male* unlike *The Thirty-Nine Steps* "the narrator's consciousness supplies the ground of the story," Seed acknowledges that the central persona, later named Raymond Ingelram in *Rogue Justice* (1982), is a "lone adventurer" who, like fugitive Richard Hannay, although Seed does not admit the parallel, must rely on his unaided powers of discernment and ingenuity in order to survive (339). My respondent accurately notes that the outcome of Ingelram's one-on-one contest with pseudonymous Major Quive-Smith in *Rogue Male* is far more uncertain than Hannay's flight from his pursuers in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, but where does that leave us? Seed does not say, but I would maintain that the operative paradigm in both novels is that of "Man Alone" as elaborated in Harper's analysis of the genre.

Such a stripping away of the conventional props in civilized life fascinated Buchan and Household. Both novelists thus present us with protagonists who, confronted with life-threatening challenges by adversaries intent on hunting them down, must revert to the elemental and instinctual. After fleeing in disguise from London to the Scottish countryside, Hannay is obliged to take cover deep in the moorland heather to elude aerial reconnaissance by "those devilish Germans" (72).³ Similarly, like Buchan's hero a suspected "outlaw in [his] own country," the protagonist of *Rogue Male* resorts to burrowing into an abandoned rabbit warren on a sandstone bank in Dorset, from which redoubt after eleven days of siege he finally manages to kill Quive-Smith (41). That same pattern of atavistic reversion is replicated in *Watcher in the Shadows* and *Dance of the Dwarfs*, respectively, when Charles Dennim engages in a savage duel with Vicomte de Saint Sabas, and when Dr. Owen Dawnay becomes intrigued by primordial denizens of the Colombian forests. Although I agree with Professor Seed that in the former novel an element of theatricality surfaces in St. Sabas's final confession to Dennim (342), I am at

something of a loss to understand how his point relates to my alleged slighting of the narrative's political resonances. The brief response he then devotes to my discussion of *Dance of the Dwarfs*, which Seed himself concurs can be read as a "fantasy of evolutionary regression" (344), left me puzzled about this charge's pertinence.

Nowhere, finally, does my essay on Household's fiction of the 1960s claim, or even suggest, that a dynamic of doubling elides the representation of contemporaneous historical circumstances, any more than it does in such precursive texts as *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Rogue Male*. In all of these fictional narratives we find, lurking behind their various temporal frameworks, a psychodrama that is always already implicit. Bringing that dimension to the fore, I think, helps us to appreciate the subtlety of many novels often marginalized as typifying a "literature of suspense and intrigue."

Seed's second criticism of my article is limited to a concluding paragraph in which he asserts that I understate "the hybrid nature of Household's narratives, where characteristically setting pulls against subject" (344), resulting in "the difficulty of fitting his works into a single genre, whether that of thriller or the tale of detection" (345). I find this judgment surprising in that, far from attempting to reduce Household's novels to one antecedent model, my essay discusses the presence of romance in *Watcher in the Shadows* and recognizes the confessional cast of *Dance of the Dwarfs* in conjunction with the "frisson of terror associated with the Gothic *Schauerroman*" (315).⁴ More importantly, however, I do not assume that either the "thriller" or the "tale of detection" is a discrete, hermetically sealed genre. In this respect I agree with Julian Symons and David Glover. Emphasizing the murky taxonomy of popular literary forms, Symons argued in 1972 that "the detective story, along with the police story, the spy story, and the thriller, makes up part of the hybrid creature we call sensational literature" (4). Three decades later Glover observed that "the thriller differs from the detective story [...] not in any disinclination to resort to deductive methods in solving crimes" (137) but rather

by its “diffuseness”—“an extraordinary promiscuity of reference that produces an over-abundance of possibilities” (139).

To his credit Seed elsewhere endorses these opinions. In an impressive chapter on “Crime and the Spy Genre” that he contributed to an anthology in 2010, Seed began as follows: “Spy fiction shares many of the characteristics of detective fiction. It prioritizes investigation; its sphere of action seems to be beyond the law; its characters use aliases and invented identities; typically it progresses from apparently disparate fragments of information towards a more complete account of action” (233). The main difference, he goes on to remark, is that espionage-centered narratives incorporate the elements of clandestinity and political deception. Seed’s overview, furthermore, is wholly consistent with what he wrote at the start of another piece seven years earlier for *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (“Spy Fiction”). Perhaps, then, he and I are fundamentally in agreement about the eclecticism of Geoffrey Household’s corpus of work.

University of West Georgia
Carrollton, GA

NOTES

¹My article on Eric Ambler’s *The Siege of the Villa Lipp* (1977), also published in *Connotations*, indicates how obsolescent was the construct of a “master criminal” in fiction after the end of World War II and certainly during the 1960s when *Watcher in the Shadows* and *Dance of the Dwarfs* appeared. The James Bond novels of Ian Fleming, of course, are an exception in their portrayal of such transnational super-villains as Dr. No, Goldfinger, and Sir Hugo Drax. The strong influence of H. C. McNeile (“Sapper”) on Fleming’s productions undoubtedly explains this anachronistic feature.

²“Here was I,” states Hannay, “a very ordinary fellow, with no particular brains, and yet I was convinced that somehow I was needed to help this business through—that without me it would all go to blazes. I told myself it was all sheer silly conceit, that four or five of the cleverest people living, with all the might of the British Empire at their back, had the job in hand. Yet I couldn’t be convinced.

It seemed as if a voice kept speaking in my ear, telling me to be up and doing, or I would never sleep again" (86).

³The fact that the German "aeroplane," explicitly associated with pre-war espionage in the United Kingdom, is based at a hidden "aerodrome" near the seaside retreat in Scotland of the Black Stone's leader, "an old man with a young voice who could hood his eyes like a hawk" (17), undoubtedly hints at British apprehensions about its disadvantage in air versus naval power going into World War I (17). Once this "circumstantial detail" has been noted, however, the primary and more intriguing conflict between individualized adversaries compels attention, especially in terms of their manifest doubling.

⁴Another essay that I have published demonstrates how Household adapts the structural devices of romance and picaresque adventure in fiction to organize his 1958 autobiography titled *Against the Wind*. His practice in this regard attests to the assimilative nature of his craftsmanship, and it was in that capacity that Household preferred to be regarded. "To be a craftsman," he writes, "is to offer your own interpretation of life and its events in an accepted form, and so to handle a familiar medium that it will carry and transmit your own taste, your own faults and your own splendours" (*Against the Wind* 199).

WORKS CITED

- Buchan, John. *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. 1915. Ed. Christopher Harvie. New York: OUP, 1993.
- Glover, David. "The Thriller." *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Ed. Martin Priestman. Cambridge: CUP, 2003. 135-53.
- Harper, Ralph. *The World of the Thriller*. Cleveland, OH: P of Case Western Reserve U, 1969.
- Household, Geoffrey. *Against the Wind*. Boston: Little, 1958.
- . *Dance of the Dwarfs*. Boston: Little, 1968.
- . *Rogue Justice*. 1982. New York: Penguin, 1984.
- . *Rogue Male*. 1939. New York: New York Review of Books, 2007.
- . *Watcher in the Shadows*. Boston: Little, 1960.
- Seed, David. "Crime and the Spy Genre." *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Ed. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 233-44.
- . "Spy Fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Ed. Martin Priestman. Cambridge: CUP, 2003. 115-34.
- Snyder, Robert Lance. *The Art of Indirection in British Espionage Fiction: A Critical Study of Six Novelists*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.
- . "Confession, Class, and Conscience in Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male*." *CLUES: A Journal of Detection* 27.2 (2009): 85-94.
- . "'The Jungles of International Bureaucracy': Criminality and Detection in Eric Ambler's *The Siege of the Villa Lipp*." *Connotations: A Journal for Critical*

Debate 20.2-3 (2010/2011): 272-88. <<http://www.connotations.uni-tuebingen.de/snyder02023.htm>>.

———. “Romancing the Adventure: Geoffrey Household’s *Against the Wind* as Picaresque Autobiography.” *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 35.3 (2013): 239-49.

Symons, Julian. *Mortal Consequences: A History—From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*. New York: Harper, 1972.