

Cause for Alarm

Eric Ambler and the political thriller

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In an interview in 1975, Eric Ambler explained his decision to start writing thrillers in 1935 with a threefold personal failure:

(quote) “What happened was simply having failed at playwriting, having failed as a songwriter, failed as an engineer. I looked around for something I could change and decided it was the thriller-spy story. I would do something different. The detective story genre has been worked over and worked over, but no one had looked at the thriller. It was still a dirty word. So I decided to intellectualise it, insofar as I was able. It wasn’t very far, but it was sufficient.” (end quote)

There is a hint of coquetry in this frank recognition of failure, but it shows also a desire and a certainty to excel in a professional field, any professional field. And Ambler’s choice was not a random one. In the thirties, popular fiction became politicized. Dashiell Hammett had worked over crime fiction, and Graham Greene blurred the lines between genres with his entertainment novels, at one time writing The Power and the Glory during the morning and Confidential Agent in the afternoon. Cultural nourishment for middlebrows acquired a political edge. Wyndham Lewis savaged the crime-fiction fad and held it responsible for the deterioration of good manners, and worse. In Left Wings Over Europe, he alleges that Contemporary Europe has “gone Crime Club”, that continental politics has become like a “shilling shocker”, before toying himself with that most prolific of gangsters, Adolf Hitler. But as Ambler states, in 1935, at the time of his decision, the thriller lagged behind the crime novel.

Like fish and chips, the thriller can claim to be a great British invention. As a genre it started in the second half of the 19th century, when Britain’s status as the dominant world power was challenged. Armchair generals reacted with novels about foreign threats and patriotic counter-activities. The first spy novel with literary qualities is Erskine Childers The Riddle of the Sands (1903), a fascinating tale

followed by the even more fascinating life of its author. Interestingly enough, even a writer of the status of Joseph Conrad was affected by the genre and used, in 1907 in his novel The Secret Agent, the story of an informer as a metaphor for the moral breakdown of contemporary society.

Similar to fish and chip shops, the history of thrillers sometimes throws up quite unsavoury elements. In the twenties and early thirties, to misuse the simile for a last time, the fish had begun to smell from the head downwards. E. Philipps Oppenheim churned out dozens of novels, in which society had to be saved from various sinister-looking anarchists, communists, or just foreigners; Herman Cyril McNeile alias Sapper, with his eponymous hero Hugh Bulldog Drummond, secured the dubious privilege of having introduced a vigilante group in black shirts into English literature. Even John Buchan's Richard-Hannay-novels consisted mostly of turgid prose and conservative messages. There was one glowing exception: Somerset Maugham's Ashenden, but its seven tales deliberately debunk spy stories by highly personalised ironic portraits.

Eric Ambler started his assault on the bastions with a parody. His first book, The Dark Frontier, presents an eminent, bookish nuclear physicist who turns into the invincible hero known from innumerable spy stories. Exhausted by his work, Professor Barstow takes some days off. By chance, he meets the representative of an arms manufacturer who tells him an incredible story about a small country in Eastern Europe where one of Barstow's leading colleagues is in the process of developing a new and very dangerous explosive. The professor, having rejected a proposal to act as expert for the arms company, reads, again by chance, a spy story in which a steely-eyed secret agent stops the destruction of the world; as the professor drives on, he loses control over his car and is knocked unconscious in the accident. Some hours later he travels to the East European country where he mutates into an unflappable action hero with the same name as the protagonist of the spy story; he succeeds in destroying the formula for the terrible new weapon and in securing world peace. Contrary to his predecessors, however, the professor/agent doesn't help in preserving the political status quo, but supports a revolutionary movement which has no ambition whatsoever with regard to armaments and destructive weapons.

Ambler tries to sustain a kind of shifting perspective, so that other figures around the professor and, indeed, the readers can't be quite sure, if professor and agent are the same person or not; he even attempts some pseudo-scientific

explanations involving Jungian split personalities. But the device is not very convincing; and for most of the second part of the novel, Ambler has to play it straight and to spin a yarn, which is suspiciously similar to a traditional spy story.

The book is cleverly written, well-paced, and presents two subject-matters unheard of in temporary thrillers: an authoritarian state overthrown by a liberation movement; and the development of an atomic bomb, described four years before the first nuclear fission in a German laboratory. Later in life, Ambler was very modest about his achievement. (quote) “It didn’t need special foresight. Thanks to my scientific training as an engineer and from reading some technical journals, I knew of the early works by Rutherford, Cockcroft and Chadwick and understood some of their implications.” (end quote) Nevertheless, his prognostic fantasy is impressive. But there are other weaknesses in his first novel. The construction aches in all its joints, the story of the unlikely action hero has to rely on implausible details, and some of the writing is too near to the object of its parody. On the whole, Dark Frontier is not more than a promise.

True to this promise, in the next three years Ambler wrote and published five more thrillers, which broke new ground and fostered, albeit in the long run, a shift in thriller-writing. They have one predominant theme: the loss of innocence. Meaning the loss of political as well as personal innocence. In this aim they follow two different paths and pursue two equally pressing matters of the thirties: Fascist menace and antifascist stance on the one hand, and the plight of refugees on the other.

The first of these novels, Uncommon Danger, undertakes a serious attempt at modernizing the thriller. It does exactly what it says on its front page: It confronts a journalist with an uncommon danger, and a politically uncommon danger at that. A multinational oil company tries to secure its lucrative contracts with the Rumanian government, by undermining good relations with the Soviet Union and fostering right-wing extremists. British Journalist Kenton involuntarily comes into possession of sensitive Soviet documents, with the oil company’s henchmen in hot pursuit. Kenton knew all along about the power of Big Business and its unsavoury dealings: (quote) “It was difficult, Kenton had found, to spend any length of time in the arena of foreign politics without perceiving that political ideologies had very little to do with the ebb and flow of international relations. It was the power of Business, not the deliberations of statesmen, that shaped the destinies of nations. The Foreign Ministers of the great powers might make the actual declarations of their Government policies;

but it was the Big Business men, the bankers and their dependents, the arms manufacturers, the oil companies, the big industrialists, who determined what those policies should be. Big Business asked the questions that it wanted to ask when and how it suited it. Big Business also provided the answers” (end quote, *Uncommon Danger*, 77)

So far, he confined himself to supposedly British neutrality and non-commitment. Now, confronted with violent threats by thugs on duty for the oil company, he has to choose sides.

It is an ideological choice as much as a structural one. Ambler, still in direct competition with his rivals, slips back into a conventional action thriller, in which the journalist, in reluctant partnership with a Soviet agent, escapes incarceration and certain death at the hands of his enemies, is involved in a high-speed car chase and a shoot-out. The uncommon danger results in a common solution.

The real breakthrough, I think, is achieved with Ambler’s third novel, *Epitaph for a Spy*. At first glance, it is a much more modest venture. After all the travels and turbulences in Central and Eastern Europe of the first two novels, the main action of the third novel is confined to a small hotel in a small bathing resort in the South of France. Its hero takes another step down the social ladder and into the realm of political reality. The main protagonists in the first two novels are innocents abroad, pressed into actions they are not made for. Notwithstanding all their breathtaking adventures, there is always a slight suspicion that they could, in the last instance, rely on their British passport and a not unsympathetic clerk at a British embassy abroad. In the third novel, the main protagonist represents the very essence of his age of anxiety. Joseph Vadassy has been caught up in the turmoil in the Balkans after World War One, he has no valid passport, is, as a stateless person, only just tolerated in France, and works as a lowly paid language teacher in a crammer, at any time threatened with unemployment, even deportation. (quote) “What happened to an insignificant teacher of languages without national status was of no interest to anyone. No consul would intervene on his behalf; no Parliament, no Congress, no Chamber of Deputies would inquire into his fate. Officially he did not exist; he was an abstraction, a ghost.” (end quote, Lewis 46) During a short holiday-break in a small village on the South coast of France, Vadassy is arrested as a supposed spy on behalf of Fascist Italy. Despite his innocence, he is pressed into service by a French secret agent. For Vadassy, the main threat to his existence comes from the organs of the state of which he craves to be a

citizen. Lawlessness is no longer the prerogative of Fascist Central Europe, but washes over into Western European democracies as well. Vadassy's bungling attempts to expose the real spy amongst the guests of the hotel are deeply flawed, and they confront him with the unreliability of perception. Nobody is what he seems to be. Everybody wears masks and plays roles. All-encompassing suspicion and mistrust are asked for, but are unreliable too. The search for the real spy is confused by a second chase. Vadassy realizes that a suspicious guest is in truth a German antifascist resistance fighter who is, for his part, hounded by German agents. In the end, the French secret service gets its man, Vadassy may get a new French passport, but the Germans get their man as well.

The title Epitaph for a Spy has several ironic connotations: the traditional spy is dead and buried, be it the evil traitor or the patriotic amateur spy. In a time when arms manufacturers prepare for war, one person spies just for the money, and the other one is forced to act as counter-agent. Amorality is par for the course. The French secret agent is prepared to expose Vadassy, who is not up to this job, to unknown dangers, and in doing so he brings his method into line with his totalitarian enemies.

Ambler's fourth novel, Cause for Alarm, re-visits the second one, with slightly changed emphasis. Its protagonist is Marlow, an engineer, who starts work for a British arms manufacturer in Italy. Soon, he is involved in corruption, and then in a spy plot. His innocence is tainted from the beginning. As soon as he takes on his new job in Fascist Italy, his hands become dirty. But there is dirt and there is dirt. After some initial reluctance, Marlow has no problems in bribing Italian officials to win a contract for his company. Selling technical secrets, however, is another matter. Marlow's refusal stems not from political or patriotic duty; loyalty seems to be, at first, only connected with his company. It is, once again, a slightly dubious Soviet agent who explains to him the political background: By a subterfuge, Marlow would help to weaken the iron axis between Berlin and Rome. Marlow agrees, similar to Kenton, out of stubbornness when under threat and a vague sense of British individualism and gamesmanship.

At this point, the novel turns into a chase. This, again, is a convention of thrillers, but Ambler gives it a special urgency, encapsulating the condition of a European age of refugees and exiles. Frontiers, an obsession of the thirties, are explored, tested and crossed in several dimensions. There is a slightly upbeat end, as

Marlow escapes to England and newspaper reports suggest in his wake an unexpected coolness between the two partners of the axis. But such optimism is quickly deflated. His British employer assures Marlow jovially: “There was never, I felt, any real cause for alarm.” This cynicism is right insofar as there wasn’t any real danger for international arms sales. The title of the book, and the book itself, aspires to warn against such cynicism. There is cause for alarm. But even Marlow can’t find an immediate political response. He quits his work with the arms manufacturer to take on a quieter job in an engineering work, hoping to get back to the apolitical professionalism of his beginnings and to restore a sort of innocence.

Ambler’s fifth novel, A Coffin for Dimitrios, shatters all such hope. It is the most ambitious and the most compelling of Ambler’s pre-war works. The novel charts the progress of crime novelist Charles Latimer to track down the career of real-life criminal Dimitrios Makropoulos. Dimitrios’ crimes, on the other hand, give a panorama of European history after World War One: robbery and murder during the Greek-Turkish-war in 1922; attempted assassination of the Bulgarian prime minister in 1923; spy activities in Yugoslavia in 1926; drug and white-slave trafficking in Paris from 1928 to 1931; support of terrorist activities in Bulgaria as director of a bank with business interests in the Balkans.

Dimitrios is himself a refugee; in 1922 he escapes genocide in Smyrna as Turkish troops advance and kill 120’000 Greeks and Armenians. But he uses the chaos to rob and murder a Jewish moneylender and con his accomplice who is hanged instead of him. Thus starts a career, which ventures rapidly into politics and big business. Indeed, it is one of the subjects of the novel to compare crime with business. A former accomplice of Dimitrios states: (quote) “The difference between Dimitrios and the more respectable type of successful businessman is only a difference of method – legal method or illegal method. Both are in their respective ways equally ruthless.” (end quote, Coffin, 204) This comparison has been succinctly put by Bertolt Brecht in his aphorism: What is a bank raid compared to the foundation of a bank, and what is a picklock compared to a share in a bank? At first, Latimer rejects such easy comparison. Then, after some insights into the career of Dimitrios, he succumbs to it: (quote) “But it was useless to try to explain him (Dimitrios) 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 logical and consistent: 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. The logic of Michelangelo's David, Beethoven's quartets and Einstein's physics had been replaced by that of the Stock Exchange Year Book and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*." (end quote, 252f.)

Some critics question these allegedly Marxist assumptions by Ambler. Ambler himself did not deny his left-leaning sympathies and some knowledge of Marxist theories, but he found them slightly out of date and too rigid. His view of a parallel between crime and business and the driving force of arms manufacturer in preparing for war, was, historically speaking a widely held position, almost common-sensical. But Ambler's novels show a growing differentiation in their arguments. Uncommon Danger asserts a direct connection between Big Business, Capitalism and Fascism. Cause for Alarm shows a deeper understanding. True, the Fascist state helps and protects Big Business, but Fascism develops its own power of subjugation, way beyond economic reason and rationale.

And Ambler presents a second explanation, slightly at odds with the economic one. It is connected with a specific metaphor: Fascism as a return to the primeval swamp of mankind. Starting with Uncommon Danger, the metaphor surfaces in every book. Kenton challenges his torturer: (quote) "It's not just a struggle between Fascism and Communism, or between any other -ism. It's between the free human spirit and the stupid, fumbling, brutish forces of the primeval swamp." (end quote, *Danger*, 75). In Epitaph, Vadassy sees (quote) "mankind fighting to save itself from the primeval ooze that welled from its own subconscious being." (end quote, *Cunningham* 75) And in the sixth novel, Journey into Fear, its protagonist observes (quote) "the insanity of the sub-conscious mind running naked, of the throw back, of the mind which could discover the majesty of God in thunder and lightning, the roar of bombing planes, or the firing of a five hundred pound shell; the awe-inspired insanity of the primaeval swamp." (end quote, *Journey*, 133f.) There are two significant dimensions to this interpretation: One, on an individual level, means the utterance of an untamed unconscious, the second, on a social and historical level, stresses the return to a former state of mankind. This is similar to reflections by Sigmund Freud, developed as a result of the shock of World War One and his disappointment with the civilizing power of culture.

Bertolt Brecht expanded his flippant remarks on bank raids and bank shares in his Threepenny-Novel and in the unfinished novel The Business Deals of Herr Julius

Caesar. It is this model with which we have to compare A Coffin for Dimitrios. The book in its details and as a whole is richer than the explanations uttered by its characters. Every stage of Dimitrios' career is told by different voices, filtered through different persons: a former employer, an official file, an abused lover, a cheated accomplice and sworn enemy.

In this structure, the novel asks questions about truth, memory, historiography and about writing in general. In his search for Dimitrios, Charles Latimer is confronted with questions concerning his own involvement. His motives are deeply ambivalent. There is a sociological interest: to see Dimitrios as a sign of the times they share. But the fascination goes deeper. The author wants to become an investigator. Fiction is sufficient no longer; the crime writer is looking for the thrill of reality. In this he gets more than he has reckoned with. In a showdown, Dimitrios shoots his erstwhile accomplice Peters, but by a stroke of luck, Latimer is able to disarm him. He gives his pistol to the dying Peters and leaves the room. Latimer sanctions the subsequent shooting of Dimitrios by Peters, but refuses outright responsibility for it.

In the end, he is the only one who knows the whole story. But he can't and he won't do anything with it. On the journey home, he tries to think of a cosy, traditional crime novel, with cricket matches on the village green and tea parties at the vicarage, to satisfy his publisher: (quote) "Two more days to go! He ought to get some sort of a plot worked out in that time. The train ran into a tunnel." (end quote, Coffin, 304). End of the novel. One single case has been solved, nothing more, nothing less. Blindly, Europe heads towards war.

Indeed, A Coffin for Dimitrios was published in August 1939, when the non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin destroyed some progressive hopes and any hope for peace. Ambler's following, his sixth thriller signalled the changed situation in its title, Journey into Fear. It is another subtle re-working of earlier motives. As in Cause for Alarm, it presents a military engineer with some unexpected consequences of his work. More moderate in its aims than A Coffin for Dimitrios, the novel can concentrate on minor figures and is psychologically richer than anything before in Ambler's work.

Journey into Fear was published in July 1940, just as France capitulated and the Battle of Britain began. During the war, Ambler served as an artilleryman, and from 1942 onwards, he worked for an Army Film Unit, writing scripts and producing

films. After the war he stayed in film business; only in 1949, he started writing books again. His seventh novel, Judgment on Delchev, published in 1951, returned to the first one and dealt with a post-war country in Eastern Europe, this time in the thrall of a communist take-over and show trials. The primeval swamp returns in a supposedly liberated society. But to deal with this seismic shift would stretch the time, which is covered by our conference, and it would overstretch your patience.

Thank you