

## Six: The Universal Cover

If the world's meaning is not *given* but *made*, then it is hardly surprising that “strong” realism should find itself in difficulties in a period of social upheaval and turmoil. For if the world is a text to be interpreted by stories, then the realist programme of apparently eschewing interpretation must be predicated on ideological consensus. It will appear to succeed only when writers and readers already share values and norms which lead them to read the world in much the same way, when the world is “always already interpreted” along the same broad lines for all parties. Meaning will appear to be a property of the world because the power and stability of the social and moral codes by which the world is generally interpreted make them “second nature,” and the realist novelist can appear to “show” and not “tell” because the world “shown” is already a well-established and comparatively stable system of seemingly transparent signs.

Powell's realist project, as we have seen, ran aground because the system of signs that would have enabled it became radically unstable in the 1960s and 70s. Pattern refused to emerge from a “realistic” depiction of events, and therefore had to be conjured up in the form of mythic structures under which events were forcibly subsumed. In the 1980s, the documentary realism of Beryl Bainbridge's *English Journey* ran into a similar kind of trouble. It was not that the events Bainbridge witnessed were all “meaningless” — the crowds of people clutching banknotes and credit cards at the shopping mall clearly “meant” that they were sufficiently affluent to have considerable discretionary income — but that the meaning apparently announced by this slice of

“reality” was not obviously congruent with the “realistic” story about the north of England that the newspapers and the government statistics were all telling — that the region was in the grip of the worst Depression since the 1930s. “Reality” presented Bainbridge with two different faces, and the conventions of documentary realism to which she was confined by her television contract were powerless to resolve the two faces into one. It was as if reality had developed a multiple personality disorder, and under its pressure Bainbridge’s “realism” modulated into a highly figurative representation. The world that refused to “make sense” was fragmented in her text into a multiplicity of “representative” characters displaying the inscrutability of the eccentric, the disturbed, the insane.

Faced with a society in which the breakdown of stable codes renders appearances either illegible or misleading, the traditional novelist has a choice. Instead of struggling vainly against this predicament, as Powell and Bainbridge did, or evading it at the cost of creating something close to allegory, as John Mortimer did, the novelist can choose to foreground the problem and, without embracing a radical postmodernism, nevertheless make interpretation a central theme. This is part of the explanation for the growing popularity of the spy novel in the last twenty-five years, for in the world of espionage and counter-espionage all appearances are potentially deceptive. Every aspect of a seemingly solid bourgeois reality may turn out to be part of that fiction known as the “cover story,” the cloak that conceals the dagger. In Graham Greene’s *The Human Factor*, nothing can be taken at face value, not even a minor detail such as the military title of Secret Service officer Brigadier Tomlinson: “Nobody knew to what regiment he had formerly belonged, if such a regiment indeed existed, for all military titles in this building were a little suspect. Ranks might just be part of the universal cover.”<sup>100</sup>

The spy novel in this respect is rather like the detective novel writ large. In the traditional English mystery novel, a yet-to-be-solved crime — usually murder — serves for a brief time to cast suspicion on everyone and everything in the community in which the crime has been committed. Every “fact” must be regarded as a potential “fiction,” a lie told by the murderer to escape detection; equally, every fact is charged with potential hidden meaning, for even the most ostensibly insignificant detail must be regarded as a possible clue to the murderer’s identity. To solve the mystery, the detective must be an expert reader, teasing out the hidden significance of the apparently trivial clues and using this knowledge to distinguish truth from falsehood. The function of the detective novel is ultimately to assure its readers that the phenomenal world does indeed make sense: the murder creates the fictional space in which the reader’s subliminal doubts about the intelligibility and trustworthiness of appearances are licensed to walk the earth awhile, and the act of detection that brings the hidden truth to light serves to exorcise those doubts. The fact that the detective story developed in the nineteenth century, in what is regarded as the very heyday of what I have been calling “strong” realism, is perhaps an indication that anxieties concerning realism’s implicit ideology are much older than postmodernism.<sup>101</sup>

The spy novel, as it emerges from the hands of John Le Carré, Len Deighton and Graham Greene, develops and amplifies the detective story’s problematic. Treason rather than simple murder is the crime that calls into question the legibility of the world of appearances. A matter of national security, it threatens a much larger community than the village in which so many classic English detective stories unfold.

Anthony Burgess. *Homage to Quert Yuiop*. London: Hutchinson, 1986.

Of Greene: “Let me say at once that *The Human Factor* is as fine a novel as he has ever written — concise, ironic, acutely observant of contemporary life, funny, shocking, above all compassionate” (26). “I shall be unhappy if *The Human Factor* is mentioned in the same breath as Mr. Le Carré’s best-selling deadweights” (27)

Of Deighton: SSGB is “one of Len Deighton’s best (506), and Burgess is impressed by Deighton’s realism: “his passion for researching his backgrounds gives his work a remarkable factual authority” (504).