Authors of Truth
Writers, Liars, and Spies in Our Man In Havana

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“It takes two to keep something real”
- Mr. Wormold in Graham Greene’s Our Man In Havana, 103 -
Graham Greene’s celebrated parody of the spy-genre *Our Man In Havana* opens with a comparison between two characters that are completely unknown to the reader: “‘That nigger’ going down the street,’ said Dr. Hasselbacher standing in the Wonder Bar ‘he reminds me of you, Mr. Wormold’” (7). At first, the reader has no way of evaluating the truthfulness of the similarities Dr. Hasselbacher supposedly sees between Mr. Wormold and the “nigger”: these are two characters that have not yet been described except by the comparison in question. Dr. Hasselbacher’s words assert themselves in the mind of the reader as a statement that – however disorienting it may be as an introduction – cannot be immediately disproved or denied.

The accuracy of Dr. Hasselbacher’s comparison is first called into question when the two characters are described in more detail by the narrator: the “nigger” is revealed to be a blind beggar with a limp, while Wormold is revealed to be the clean-cut owner of a Havana vacuum-cleaner shop. However, as the novel’s opening speaker, Dr. Hasselbacher initially details for the reader what the reader cannot perceive otherwise; he offers the only representation of Wormold and the “nigger” available at that juncture. The reader cannot evaluate Dr. Hasselbacher’s comparison as either true or false without first accepting it as a possible representation of both Wormold and the “nigger.” Because the comparison cannot be immediately disproved, it becomes a foil that will re-surface again and again as a potentially true description of these characters’ real natures and qualities. Only after accepting Dr. Hasselbacher’s comparison can one read further and determine its relationship to the characters and to the novel’s reality.

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1 Although the racist and colonialist aspects of *Our Man In Havana* are difficult to ignore and deserve serious consideration, the present study is more concerned with the epistemology presented by the novel. The use of the word “nigger” in this study is exclusively compelled by the fact that the word is used within the novel to designate the character in question. Unfortunately, an analysis of this blatantly racist comparison cannot be avoided in order to achieve the purposes of this study.
Reality, for the sake of this study, is that which is perceivable in the material world, whether that material world is the world of the reader or the world of the characters within the novel (“fictional reality”). Truth, on the other hand, is temporarily defined as the early semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce defines it – “the agreement of the representation with its object” (20). This definition will be complicated by the epistemic distortions (the re-conceptualizations of the philosophies by which we all perceive, acquire, and communicate knowledge) presented by *Our Man In Havana*’s narrative. These distortions are already present within Dr. Hasselbacher’s comparison, and expand from there to destabilize the truthfulness of language as a form of representation as well.

Because it is a parody of the spy-genre – a genre in which truth and knowledge are so valued – *Our Man In Havana* hyperbolically complicates the tensions between language and reality, truth and lie. The novel presents its reader with the concealed realities of an exaggerated and hyperbolized world of intrigue in which the truthfulness of language is often undeterminable. By confusing fiction with reality and by destabilizing the truth-value of language, the novel reduces the race for secret information to a laughable exercise in mistaking fiction for reality and language for truth.

*The Spy Genre’s Suspension of Disbelief*

The narrative structure of *Our Man In Havana*, exemplified by Dr. Hasselbacher’s opening comparison, complicates the assumption that language is, in the absence of reality, a trust-worthy representation of the real. Ostensibly, the language of any novel communicates to its recipient something that could not be conceived otherwise. Peirce, in “An Essay on the Limits of Religious Thought,” argues that one can “reason
upon that which [one] could not conceive of,” and takes into consideration the event in
which someone told him “he could imagine two persons interchanging identities” (15).
When presented with this situation, Peirce argues that one “should proceed to reason on
the pretended imagination and show that it was inconceivable” (15). Although Peirce
concludes by showing “the pretended imagination … was inconceivable,” he nonetheless
entertains the possibility as he reasons it into inconceivability. Reality and imagined
reality are simultaneously conjured until one of the two truths is proven to be a lie. Much
in the same way, the reader entertains the fictional reality of the novel alongside Dr.
Hasselbacher’s comparison until it is otherwise disproved.

The reader of the fictional novel is expected to enjoy a ‘suspension of disbelief’
and, at least for the duration of the novel, to overcome the gap between the real and the
fictional, entertaining both as synchronic and simultaneous (as opposed to diachronic and
separate) truths. However, the boundaries of inconceivability within a fiction – within a
world conjured by language – are relativized to the extreme that is applicable to that
fiction’s genre. A reader is not necessarily compelled, like Peirce, to consider a reality
beyond that which the novel purports to contain: every truth contained by the novel is
relative to the reality of its own fiction. Bruce Merry – who studies fictional spies and
compares them to real spies – asserts that in spy thrillers, “the initial ‘suspension of
disbelief’ required of the reader is one of the largest in all literary genres” (47). While
entering the fictional spy world of Our Man In Havana, the reader is asked to enjoy this
‘suspension of disbelief,’ but also to consider the threat such a ‘suspension’ poses to
language as a representational system.²

² Particularly in writing the novels he labeled “Entertainments” – including Our Man In Havana – Graham
Greene was aware of the escapist potentials of fiction. In his introduction to the XX edition of Our Man In

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Our Man In Havana poses this threat, in part, because it is a hyperbole of the structures of truth and fiction common to the spy genre. Allan Hepburn, in his study of the genre Intrigue: Espionage and Culture, states that these narratives “blur meaningful details with meaningless details. Interpretation requires vigilant separation of truth from lies” (Hepburn, xvi). A conventional spy novel is not successful unless, beneath all the deceptions it presents, there is a truth to be perceived and decoded by the reader. The process of deciphering is at the core of a power-struggle – between the subjective and the objective, fiction and truth, writer and reader – over the knowledge the narrative contains. The conventional spy-novel narrator exerts power over the reader by concealing the truth until the final resolution and uncovering of the narrative. The spy novel locates its reader in a process of evaluation in which multiple but mutually exclusive truths are synchronically sustained until the moment when only one truth emerges and the plot is realigned in diachronic order. In that moment, the reader’s powers of interpretation confirm the narrative’s plausibility. The narrator in Our Man In Havana, however, uses language to generate truth where it should not be, and thus re-assumes an assertive position of power over the reader and sustains synchronic truths throughout the novel.

Havana, Christopher Hitchens emphasizes that Greene defined his novels “entertainments” “as if to slyly warn his audience that an element of the ludic and the flippant would sometimes be permitted him and should be forgiven by his readers” (ix). However, as spy-genre analyst Allan Hepburn notes, “spy novels promote themselves as codebooks, or at least coded books, offering political possibilities based loosely on political probabilities” (50). Spy novels are fictions that gain their entertainment power by representing in codified terms a possible reality, by offering their readers a potential truth. Greene’s “Entertainments” are certainly no exception to the genre: in the same introduction to Our Man In Havana, Hitchens further notes “Greene seemed to have an almost spooky prescience when it came to the suppurating political slums on the periphery of America’s Cold War Empire” (xiv). Greene, in fact, conjures his fictional Havana as an espionage hub at the crux of a controversy over weapons of mass destruction. The book was published in 1958, just four years before the Cuban Missile Crisis turned this “Entertainment” into a full-fledged prediction. While demanding a considerable ‘suspension of disbelief’ from its audience, spy novels (and, arguably, Greene’s “Entertainments” in particular) carefully balance their fictionality with their historicity. Indeed, it is because of this very balance between reality and fiction that the demand for the reader’s ‘suspension of disbelief’ is so great.
Dr. Hasselbacher’s comparison between the “nigger going down the street” and Wormold is in many ways a microcosm of this novel’s pertinence to and distortion of the spy genre (and its elements of duplicity, self-knowledge, perceptions, and trust). The comparison replicates the central twist of the novel, which is – unlike with most spy novels – not a plot twist but an epistemic twist. *Our Man In Havana* does not present one version of an event in order to reveal that the true version was altogether different (as in a novel with a plot twist); instead, it allows obvious lies and fictions to emerge as unexpectedly true, causing an epistemic disruption in its reader. Rather than unveil the true allegiances of a mole, the narrative unveils its own malleability to the imaginations of the characters it contains. When Wormold (who is recruited to be a spy part way through the novel) writes a fictional report for the Secret Service or lies about sending an invented agent on a mission, he is surprised to discover that his report is true – the newspapers announce that his fictional man was killed in a car accident. This kind of epistemic disruption is at the core of *Our Man In Havana*’s satire: Dr. Hasselbacher’s comparison asserts itself as a possible representation of Wormold as far as the reader is concerned, and, by the same narratological mechanism, Wormold’s fictional report also becomes an objective reality as far as the narrative is concerned.3

*Our Man In Havana*’s narrative exaggerates the permeability of the boundary between language as a representation of reality and reality itself. Given the hyperbolized permeability of this boundary, even the subjective imagination of Greene’s characters – if

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3 *Our Man In Havana* is nonetheless a structured and coherent novel that is *not* in all actuality malleable to the characters within it. However, a universal re-evaluation of what can be known through language is inherent in the sheer possibility of the narrative’s epistemic disruption. If language can exemplify a disruption in the epistemic laws of a fictional reality, it can also disrupt the epistemic laws of reality beyond the limits of the fictive text. Ultimately, the double-truth presented by Dr. Hasselbacher involves the reader as well as the author, distorting perceptions of what the boundaries of fictional reality might be, and placing reality within the malleability of a world of information conjured exclusively by language.
articulated in language – can change the objective perspective of reality. This novel not only constructs doubt with regard to its own characters and their perceptions but it also constructs doubt about the definability of its own fictional reality in relation to the reader’s. It disturbs its own narratological consistency and frustrates any attempt to assert logical bivalency (to cleanly distinguish reality from fiction, or the true from the false). Within this narrative, lies cannot be dismissed as deceitful representations; all language potentially generates a fictional reality for both the reader and the characters in the novel. The novel makes use of the ‘suspension of disbelief’ common to the spy genre to push against any and all mastery or control over fiction and over the truthfulness of language.

Dr. Hasselbacher’s Comparison within the Spy Genre

Dr. Hasselbacher’s comparison claims to truthfully represent Wormold and the “nigger” by describing the one in terms of the other; it exemplifies the kind of linguistic and epistemic practice that the novel ultimately pushes against. The words Dr. Hasselbacher uses are signifiers without a signified (a reality) that is perceivable to the reader, and yet the reader accepts them as representations of these two characters. The comparison temporarily generates for the reader a truth that is in opposition with the reality contained by the novel (much like the double-truth Peirce dealt with in denying the interchange of identities). The languages of fiction and reality, in other words, are synchronically true within this comparison, even though they may contradict each other.

However, this double-truth is actualized for more than just the reader: in an effort to discredit the comparison, Wormold “instinctively” (Greene, 7) checks himself in a
mirror in order to confirm that there is no physical similarity between his own image and the beggar’s. His desire to deny Dr Hasselbacher’s comment is immediate and instinctual, but it suggests an underlying doubt within Wormold – the comparison is not entirely outside the realm of his imagination. Wormold’s need to gather proof before arguing against the comparison reveals his insecurity in the accuracy of his own subjective perception of reality, especially when he is confronted by language that contradicts it. If the comparison could be true for Wormold, it could also be true for the reader: both are recipients of language, and both are confronted by a double-truth.

Dr. Hasselbacher replies to Wormold’s objections with two cryptic confirmations of his similarity to the beggar: first, “[the beggar]’s got two ideas in his head,” and second “he’s reliable, you can depend on him” (Greene, 8). These two confirmations are potentially mutually exclusive: having two ideas at once could connote a lack of reliability. Although these qualities have nothing to do with Wormold’s or the beggar’s physical realities and are not, at first glance, viable qualities to have at the same time, they are nonetheless potential truths with regard to interpretation. The double-truth sustained by the divide between language and reality is verbally re-constructed where it had been previously denied. Although potentially contradictory, these synchronic truths re-present themselves as difficult to dismiss. Within this system of constant re-presentation of reality, the double-truths are true because they are derived from reality just as much as they are true because they are imaginable. The “two thoughts” mentioned by Dr. Hasselbacher proliferate meaning within this interpretive space: the quality of having “two thoughts” in your head is an indication of simple-mindedness just as much as it is one of duplicity or the ability to contain – as this comparison demands of its reader
– two contradicting truths at the same time. Language, despite being depended upon to communicate a truthful representation of reality, generates the interpretive space for several mutually exclusive – but equally potential – truths.

Although Wormold negates the comparison with the evidence that he looks nothing like the beggar, Dr. Hasselbacher reaffirms the interpretive space for its accuracy by describing the two qualities he believes they have in common. The reality contained by the novel finds itself in competition with the language its characters use to represent it. The reader, like Wormold and Dr. Hasselbacher, holds both in mind, generating multiple truths within the space of a single narrative. The reader, like these characters, must take into consideration – and subsequently make a judgment upon the truthfulness of – the multiple representations offered by the opening passages of the novel.

**The Power Struggle Over Reality: Wormold and “Negation”**

Sigmund Freud’s “Negation” considers, on a psychoanalytic register, analogous implications to those of *Our Man In Havana* – the implications of a subjectivity that can never deny (determine as objectively false) the associations that it makes in its own unconscious. As *Our Man In Havana* wrestles with the impossibility of controlling the truth-value of one’s own language, Freud’s 1925 essay provides an analysis of the mechanism by which anything that is verbally articulated – whether acknowledged as such or not – *is* a representation of reality. According to Freud, if a patient says that the woman in a dream is *not* his mother, “we emend this to: ‘So it *is* his mother’” (235). Freud explains his method: “in our interpretation, we take the liberty of disregarding the
interpretation and of picking out the subject-matter alone of the association” (235).

Within this Freudian framework, when Wormold claims his invented agents are *not* real, the narrative, like Freud’s analyst, takes “the liberty of disregarding the interpretation,” and values the fiction as a reality.

The theory of “Negation” further complicates the distinction between reality and fiction by interpreting the act of negation as generating a synchronic narrative time. Both reality and fiction exist simultaneously, weaving their own narratives within the negating analysand’s mind, and both have been accepted, either by the conscious or by the unconscious, as true. However, the truth is only accepted if it is simultaneously denied. In Freud’s words, “the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is negated” (235). The analysand therefore continues to simultaneously sustain and support both narratives; it is only the analyst who can determine that the negated statement is true.

Freud’s theory schematizes the process of distinguishing between truth and lie as a relationship between the speaking analysand and the interpreting analyst. In this relationship, the patient articulates both the truth and the denied truth, despite being able to only recognize the latter consciously. Within this structure, the narrative of *Our Man In Havana* would be the most obvious analyst to Wormold’s words, determining what will be incorporated into the reality of the novel and what will remain mere fiction. Freud’s “Negation” thus offers a complex power dynamic between the imagining subject (the authors of fiction that are Greene, Wormold, and Dr. Hasselbacher) and the reality-determining listener (the narrative and the reader). While denying Dr. Hasselbacher’s comparison, Wormold is unable to determine his own subjectivity, and is instead
determined by his companion’s interpretative gesture. The permeability of the boundary between truth and lie is less a question of the false representationality of language, and more of a question of the individual’s inability to recognize and accept his or her own unconscious thoughts. Freud’s “Negation” offers an alternative approach to determining truth from fiction that is based upon an inter-human power-struggle: the subjective perspective cannot determine truth because truth must be determined through objective interpretation. Freud’s work therefore denies the subject the ability to discriminate fiction from reality given that “we never discover a ‘no’ in the unconscious” (Freud 1925, 239).

While asserting that the subject can never make this crucial discrimination, Freud acknowledges that the analyst and the analysand are not the only forces at play in dividing fiction from reality. The denied statement is generated in light of the fact that the analysand finds the need to repress a thought because it is socially unacceptable. Society, therefore, is a significant force at play in the generation of fiction, lies, and denials. Even within *Our Man In Havana* there are external forces – such as the Secret Service, the media, and money – that instigate the production of lies and simultaneously use their ability to divide fiction from reality in order to garner political power. These social forces, alongside the novel’s narrative, characters, and reader, disturb the precepts of bivalent logic even while they attempt to assert control over the novel’s epistemic distortions.

*False Transpositions of Reality: How We Started Stuttering*

*Our Man In Havana*’s epistemic twist calls into question two critical assumptions at play in determining a boundary between reality and fiction, between truth and lie: that
the distinction is logically bivalent and that it is knowable. In order to define whether a statement is true or false, one must assume that it cannot be both, but one must also assume that there is a truth to be known, and that knowing is both significant and powerful: it has an effect on reality. Friedrich Nietzsche’s 1873 essay, “On Truth And Lies In the Nonmoral Sense” takes issue with precisely these universal human assumptions. Opening with the myth that “Once upon a time … there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing” (Nietzsche, 79), Nietzsche elaborates on the existential failures proposed by the metaphorizing and generalizing nature of language.

For Nietzsche, language is based on the erroneous use of words as concepts, for each word has to “fit countless more or less similar cases – which means, purely and simply, cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal” (83). He argues that language is a system of verisimilitudes, of signs that approximate reality, but do not represent it. In that they never represent reality, these signs – and by extension language – are not truthful. If, as Peirce reasons, “Falsehood … claims to be a representation / It is an imperfect copy of truth / \therefore \ Verisimilitude is falsehood” (21), then all language is empirically false. Language is based on an incessant distortion of reality for the sake of the preservation of sociability (the same force acknowledged by Freud as a cause for repression and denial) and a false human sense of “knowing.”

As such, the producer of language (i.e. everyone who speaks) is always a liar – a masquerading describer of reality. Importantly for Nietzsche, however, what is unsavory to humanity is not “deception itself, but rather the unpleasant, hated consequences of certain sorts of deception” (81). The use of language is not condemned, but its use for personal advantage is. Any speaker generates a lie and a fiction of knowledge by the
sheer use of language, and yet is never accused of lying. However, while it is human to lie, it is inhuman to lie harmfully; a deceptive liar is quickly excluded from a society that claims to uphold the value of truth. Nietzsche’s essay thus offers an existential perspective that places *Our Man In Havana* at the crux of mankind’s arbitrary power-struggle over knowledge and information.

Nietzsche and Freud both articulate a concern with every individual’s excessive faith in the accuracy and truancy of language. Whether it is the patient who hides behind the significance of a denial or a society that presumes to extract and represent knowledge through language, these two writers are concerned that humans replace reality with the fiction of words. J. Hillis Miller, in his reading of Nietzsche’s essay, warns us, “this permanent displacement [from reality to language] does not stay safely in its place … It displaces itself everywhere. It pervades the whole system and makes it unmappable, so that nothing within it remains where it ought to be, in its proper place. Everything moves, wobbles, or stammers” (Miller, 50). *Our Man In Havana* “stammers” between narrative realities and narrative fictions, and thus makes Freud’s and Nietzsche’s cautionary analysis of language’s immutable truth (i.e. that it lies) part of its satirical bite.

*A Subjective Epistemology: Dr. Hasselbacher’s Philosophy of Knowledge*

Although the roles of analysand and analyst may not be clear within *Our Man In Havana* by virtue of the ubiquity of speakers within the text, the character of Dr. Hasselbacher – a sort of Shakespearean fool who speaks in absurdities and yet reveals
undeniable truths – acts as a central facilitator of the novel’s stammering; he encourages
displacement and duplicity where he can. Besides making the ominous opening
comparison, Dr. Hasselbacher also convinces Wormold to lie in his reports to the Secret
Service. He himself lives by the advice he gives Wormold: “You should dream more, Mr.
Wormold. Reality in our century is not something to be faced” (6). Despite his centrality
to themes of duplicity within the novel, Dr. Hasselbacher remains consistent to himself,
playing upon a self-centered epistemology that favors his own dreams – his own
imagination – over any confrontation with reality. He is the analysand that has removed
the analyst by subsuming everything around him into his own imagination. Dr.
Hasselbacher’s most extended delineation of his exclusively subjective epistemology is in
reply to an American tourist that questions him about a lottery victory he is celebrating
before the lottery has announced the winner:

‘I have won [those dollars] as certainly as you exist, my almost unseen friend.
You would not exist if I didn’t believe you existed, nor would those dollars. I
believe, therefore you are.’
‘What do you mean I wouldn’t exist?’
‘You exist only in my thoughts, my friend. If I left this room …’
‘You are nuts.’
‘Prove you exist then.’
‘What do you mean, prove? Of course I exist. I’ve got a first-class business in
real-estate; a wife and a couple of kids in Miami; I flew here this morning by
Delta; I’m drinking this Scotch, aren’t I?’ The voice hinted of tears.
‘Poor fellow,’ Dr. Hasselbacher said, ‘you deserve a more imaginative creator
than I have been. Why didn’t I do better for you than Miami and real estate?
Something of imagination. A name to be remembered.’ (Greene, 34)

Dr. Hasselbacher’s epistemology disrupts bivalency by equating belief with reality: “I
believe, therefore you are.” He internalizes René Descartes’ famous statement “I think,
therefore I am,” in order to assert his own existence and ability to believe as a
precondition for objective reality. By modifying that crucial Cartesian conclusion, Dr.
Hasselbacher radically transforms reality into a matter of faith in one’s own ability to imagine reality. He fails to note, however, that his mantra is derived from the Cartesian mantra that he distorts. Dr. Hasselbacher ironically theorizes his own presumed existence into a dependence upon Descartes’ imagination. Nonetheless, Dr. Hasselbacher believes, therefore he is, and reality exists insofar as he believes in it. He does not divide fiction from reality – it is all fiction, but fiction that exists only because the individual that perceives it believes in it. The man from Miami is an “almost unseen friend” because he is perceivable to Dr. Hasselbacher, and Dr. Hasselbacher does not trust his perceptions: he only trusts his beliefs. By recognizing that this man is his invention, the man begins to dissolve into the malleability of fiction.

As Christopher Hitchens writes in his introduction to the XX edition of Our Man In Havana, “The American is like all the other Americans in the novel: banal and bourgeois and self-pitying. (He doesn’t even consider claiming the words ‘I think’ as proof of his existence: the real-estate business comes first)” (xiii). The American fails to persuade Dr. Hasselbacher because he is dependant upon the listener’s recognition and belief in his identity. Because of his inability to contest Dr. Hasselbacher on his own terms, the American only perpetuates his own fictionality. He attempts to describe his possessions as proof that he exists, but, while asserting what others can perceive about him, the American never once asserts his own subjective perceptions, his own thought. Dr. Hasselbacher’s perception of reality places extreme importance in the ability of the individual to believe. The world is constructed around Dr. Hasselbacher’s ability to believe and to imagine. Dr. Hasselbacher knows that he exists, and, consequently, believes that the world exists as a reality malleable to his beliefs.
There is no use in communicating or arguing with Dr. Hasselbacher, for any interaction with him is purely unilateral. He is the quintessential Freudian patient who does not accept anything he does not believe, for everything else is negated and unacceptably false. Ironically, this of course means that he is always reaffirming the reality of the external world (even as he characterizes it as subjectively produced). He denies reality as simply a creation of his own imagination just as the analysand denies statements as a mere association. In both cases, an objection is formulated against non-subjective reality: Dr. Hasselbacher believes everything he sees is a product of himself just as the analysand believes the negation that is being made is true.

_The Powers at Play Beyond the Individual_

In response to objections to “Negation” such as Dr. Hasselbacher’s (which privilege subjective belief over the objective reality), Freud theorizes that the relationship between subjective imagination and the outside world can be understood as a process of “reality-testing.” “Reality-testing” is a crucial aspect of the judgment that takes place when the ego must choose whether or not to “introject [an object of its desire] into itself” (Freud 1961, 237). In other words, before acknowledging the object of the unconscious’ desire, the ego must judge whether the object is real and therefore attainable. Consequently, through “reality-testing,” the ego determines whether or not

… something which is in the ego as a presentation can be rediscovered in perception (reality) as well. It is, we see, once more a question of _external_ and _internal_. What is unreal, merely a presentation and subjective, is only internal; what is real is also there _outside_. (Freud 1961, 237)
Through the reality-testing theory, Freud asserts that, in determining what is real, an individual must perceive a correspondence between what is internally desired (presented) and what is externally available. If the unconscious desire is not externally satisfied – either because the object is purely imagined or because desire for it is unacceptable by societal standards – it is repressed. Wilfried Van Eecke, analyzing Freud’s “Negation” in his book *Denial, Negation, and the Forces of the Negative*, explains that by structuring consciousness in this manner Freud “provides consciousness with a form of distance from the truth it is invited to discover or, formulated differently, he provides consciousness with the opportunity to deny what it sees” (9). The association of a woman in a dream with one’s mother is therefore denied because its truth is socially unacceptable. While the analysand believes he or she is asserting subjective reality through denial, he or she is actually accepting objective reality as a determinant force: objective reality is what causes the repression because it is what makes the mother’s presence in a dream unacceptable. She is therefore considered false by the analysand, when in fact the analyst can recognize her presence in the dream as true. Dr. Hasselbacher is therefore subjected to the reality he attempts to deny. His subjective reality must recognize the existence of an objective reality in constructing itself in opposition to that reality. His denial is a failed escape, an ironic confirmation of reality, and a double-truth.

Consequently, although Dr. Hasselbacher’s epistemological perspective is effective for asserting reality and power on the individual level, Freud and *Our Man In Havana*’s world of international intrigue – of the politics of knowledge – place pressure on the individual’s perspective through a larger system of determining reality. Nonetheless, Dr. Hasselbacher’s persuasive self-centered epistemology presents a
problematic and stutter-starting force that puts the subjective in tension with the objective, the imagination in tension with the external world.

The politics of knowledge (engendered by the possessors of secret information and their privilege to hide or distribute it) that are so central to spy novels rise out of this tension between the individual and the objective determination of knowledge. It is the spy that provides the information but the greater powers that make the information historically significant; it is the patient that offers an explanation but the analyst that determines its truthfulness. Similarly, the Secret Service will determine that the fictional reports filed by Wormold are true, and the information they contain is real.4

Subsequently, the narrative will make the reports true, re-presenting them to Wormold – and, through language, to the reader also – as unequivocally (however unacceptably) real. The fact that the narrative itself, the central pillar to a reader’s determination of reality within the fictional world of the novel, disrupts bivalent logic enables it to generate parody and humor as much as it troubles the politics and power-dynamics of who determines the boundaries of truth and lie, knowledge and reality.

During his interactions with the Secret Service representative Hawthorne, Wormold eventually realizes “what the criminal class knows so well, the impossibility of explaining anything to a man with power” (Greene, 66). Men with power have the ability to determine reality, to choose which facts are of real importance and which are not. The

4 According to Peirce, the Secret Service’s and the analyst’s understanding of reality and truth as determined exclusively by popular agreement would define them as extreme proponents of “the realistic theory,” which Peirce describes as “a highly practical and common-sense position. Wherever universal agreement prevails, the realist will not be the one to disturb the general belief by idle and fictitious doubts. For according to him it is a consensus or common confession which constitutes reality. What he wants, therefore, is to see questions put to rest. And if a general belief, which is perfectly stable and immovable, can in any way be produced, though it be by the fagot and the rack, to talk of any error in such belief is utterly absurd. The realist will hold that the very same objects which are immediately present in our minds in experience really exist just as they are experienced out of the mind; that is, he will maintain a doctrine of immediate perception” (125).
power of knowledge is entirely theirs; they have it and determine where it can be found. As a result, “the criminal class” is incapable of communicating with the men with power, the definers of the boundaries between reality and fiction because the criminal class has no stock in reality – no ability to represent it or shape it – and therefore remains exiled and voiceless. Dr. Hasselbacher is in fact capable of excluding the complaints of Wormold and the man from Miami alike because he defines knowledge as self-knowledge and reality as belief. No outside influence can disrupt of communicate with his epistemology. Dr. Hasselbacher, like the Secret Service, controls his own definitions of reality and fiction. Men with power appear to create knowledge through their ability to define for others what reality and knowledge are.

**Existing and Communicating in Code**

Secret agents, in order to maintain classified levels of reality, generate fronts and fictions that outsiders will take to be realities; the maintenance of their secret identities is what defines them as secret. Agents, like narrators that keep the truth-revealing plot twist hidden, conceal reality behind fiction. Although an agent’s front is the only truth available to the public, it is not of real importance on the international and political level.

In *Our Man In Havana*, Wormold’s job as a vacuum cleaner salesman is transformed from a hard reality to an “excellent cover” when the Secret Service recruiter, Hawthorne, defines it as such during one of their first meetings: “[The vacuum cleaners] are an excellent cover … Very well thought out. Your profession has quite a natural air” (Greene, 39). Wormold is astonished to find that his job is suddenly transformed from
truth to fiction, from reality to cover. It was not preconceived, but now in its new iteration it is a thought-out plan. Both realities are sustained, but in the shop’s new role it has the quality of appearing “natural” because it is no longer essentially “real.” It is merely a particularly truthful fiction. Wormold understandably protests “But it is natural,” it is a reality that has merely been transformed into fiction by someone who has the power to do so (39). When Hawthorne returns to England to report the recruitment of Wormold, the Secret Service Chief is at first resistant to the idea of recruiting Wormold, until eventually “the small shop for vacuum cleaners had been drowned beyond recovery in the tide of the Chief’s literary imagination. Agent 59200/5 was established” (45).

Reality is effectively “drowned beyond recovery” by the imagination of a man – a representative of a governmental power – who is capable of altering and redefining the boundaries between fiction and reality.

As Nietzsche would predict, the assumption that knowledge exists while it is really generated by making arbitrary distinctions between fiction and reality causes the Secret Service to suffer a “stutter,” a continuous displacement from reality. Hawthorne, the man that recruits Wormold into the Secret Service, is humorously obsessed with what looks and appears to be “natural” behavior. After pushing Wormold into a bathroom in order to recruit him, Hawthorne turns the sink on, but does not wash his hands:

‘Looks more natural,’ he explained (the word ‘natural’ seemed a favorite adjective of his), ‘if someone barges in. And of course it confuses a mike.’
‘A mike?’
‘You’re quite right to question that. Quite right. There probably wouldn’t be a mike in a place like this, but it’s the drill, you know, that counts. You’ll find it always pays in the end to follow the drill.’ (Greene, 23)

Hawthorne’s obsession with the word “natural” indicates his own removal from “natural” behavior. “Natural” behavior, as far as Hawthorne understands it, is an entirely neutral
behavior that is entirely empty of meaning or of purpose. His extended employment as a Secret Service recruiter has made of common behavior an absurd system of meaningless but “natural” actions. In order to give purpose to these actions, Hawthorne translates them into a language of usefulness, of functionality within the spy world: “it confuses a mike.” Turning on the faucets is given a synchronic purpose to its supposedly “natural” appearance as an action; Hawthorne relates to the reality from which he is so far removed through an exclusively purpose-driven relationship. Hawthorne enacts the displacement of meaning to the point of absurdity. So accustomed to generating meaning and purpose where it should not be, he is no longer capable of interacting in the real world in a real way: the word “natural” is emptied of its meaning. The “drill” is of maximum importance. It narrows the world down to a codified behavior, a system of categorizing and representing behavior without actually participating in real behavior. These codified terms, however, signify truth to Hawthorne. It is this displacement of meaning, this constant removal from the real world in favor of false constructions of knowledge that are communicated through a limiting and approximation-based language that Miller and Nietzsche are concerned with.

Nietzsche further “affirms that everything in the human world begins with an act of intuition or naming which is a metaphorical transposition of something outside human knowledge. That something remains necessarily unknown or unknowable” (Miller, 44). In other words, by transposing reality into metaphors (perception into image, and image into sound) humankind has generated the “airy structure” (Miller, 44) of language, concepts, and values in which to exist and assume that knowledge is possible. With this assumption, “the “thing itself” (which is precisely what the pure truth, apart from any of
its consequences, would be) is likewise something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something not in the least worth striving for” (Nietzsche, 82.) Every word is a mere concept – the residue of a metaphor – because “it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases – which means, purely and simply, cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal. Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things” (Nietzsche, 83). Every expression in language is a lie and an untruth, an approximation of the unknowable that is conjured through the false transposition of the real into stuttered metaphors. As the Secret Service continues to displace meaning, transposing it from reality, it continues to construct an “airy structure” around a “permanently unknown X [that] is neither thought, nor thing, nor word” (Miller, 44).

The language of communication with these higher powers is, in fact, an extreme transposition of reality into symbolic language. Wormold must use code in order to communicate his secret information to the Secret Service. The spy world is a world that transposes itself from reality in an effort to render itself exclusive in multiple interconnected ways: by retaining classified knowledge, by dividing reality from fiction on its own terms, and by representing knowledge in a classified and further codified manner. Each of these aspects of the spy world’s exclusionary self-containment, while purporting to relate to a more truthful reality than that witnessed by the common human, instead implies a further arbitrary transposition away from reality and towards the fictional, self-denying space of language. The spy world communicates through the system of structured and intentional mis-representations known as codes.

Codes are essentialized language; they are pure symbols that only communicate common language when read by those who know how to read them. Their relationship to
reality is that of a representation of a representation of the real object (i.e. twice removed). The language of codes is a pure language in that it has no relation to what it represents, only to that which it signifies. The signification of the code must be determined and understood by its “interpretant,” for the code will have no relation to the real except by a representative association within the interpretant’s mind. As Allan Hepburn argues, codes are “symbolic representational systems. They encrypt secrets. They presume shared knowledge, as in social codes, by which those in the know abide. Codes therefore exclude” (Hepburn, 50). Just as Hawthorne abides by the codified “drill” of what looks natural, he also expects knowledge to be communicated within codified language, similarly removed from reality, and yet somehow more real because exclusive.

In presuming shared knowledge among those that interpret them, codes not only establish an exclusive form of communication, but they also rest upon the assumption that knowledge exists, is human, and bears power over reality. Codes, in other words, are the spy genre’s subsequent iteration of the elements in language that frustrate Nietzsche. Allan Hepburn, goes further in stating that codes are “signs that neither resemble the thing they represent (an icon), nor have a causal or existential relation to the thing they represent (an index), but exist as a system of arbitrary designations” (Hepburn, 61). These arbitrary designations, therefore, purport to be true designations despite their misleading intentions.

Hepburn is explicitly indebted to Peirce in his analysis of codes. It is Peirce, in fact, who first articulates in the 19th century, “A symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant” (Hepburn, 240). The interpretant, the human mind, is therefore what produces a relationship between symbol
and reality. However, as Freud suggests in his essay on “Negation,” there is no such thing as an entirely false association, no such thing as an entirely denied statement: the mis-representation of a code is just another arbitrary designation of a symbol’s relationship to reality. Every symbol can represent a variety of signified realities. It is this symbolic fallacy that Wormold accidentally enacts when he lies in his reports to the Secret Service. In the world of *Our Man In Havana*, these re-designations are no longer arbitrary, but fully and completely real. Wormold is not living in a world in which knowledge is false and revolves around an unknown “X”, but one in which even his imagination, his lies, his fictions, carry weight precisely because codes are not transpositions away from reality, but, as far as the narrative and the Secret Service are concerned, *are* reality. His re-designations of symbols, therefore, become real, and generate the narrative twist that makes *Our Man In Havana* a uniquely exaggerated spy novel in which so many power structures based on definitions of knowledge are explicitly subverted.

**The Impulse Behind the Politics: Why We Desire to Know**

The illusion of the pursuit of knowledge, argues Nietszche, is essential to humankind, for knowledge “is human, and only its possessor and begetter takes it so solemnly – as though the world’s axis turned with it” (79). The desire to acquire knowledge is what makes humans powerful, self-important, and able to take possession of reality, however inconsequential that power might be on the universal scale. In the formation of language, “a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth” (Nietzsche, 81). These “binding designations” are deceptions in their own right. Truth in the non-
moral sense is unobtainable within this “airy structure” of false transpositions. To speak truth, therefore, is not to represent reality, but rather to use the usual designations – the accepted transpositions of reality – in an undeceitful manner. A liar, on the other hand, misuses fixed conventions by means of arbitrary substitutions or even reversals of names. If he does this in a selfish and moreover harmful manner, society will cease to trust him and will thereby exclude him … what they hate is basically not deception itself, but rather the unpleasant, hated consequences of certain sorts of deception. (Nietzsche, 81)

It is because of this system of binding designations that Wormold is so capable of creating a reality – however deceitful his intents – which the Secret Service (and subsequently the narrative itself) is willing to accept. Our Man In Havana exaggerates the Secret Service’s, the reader’s, and the narrator’s readiness to accept any usage of these binding designations as truthful. It is only when Wormold is exposed as a harmful and self-serving liar that he is tried in a martial court. However, it never occurs to the Secret Service to blame themselves for determining so forcefully what is truth and what is fiction. Similarly, humanity is prepared to ostracize the liar despite the fact that the liar merely substitutes one arbitrary designation for another. Nietzsche concludes that, in this system, “To be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors … To express it morally, this is the duty to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding upon everyone” (Nietzsche, 84). It is society that determines the binding nature of those designations, thus generating the linguistic space for the lie. The real world and truth, although dissimilar given that language is only an approximation of reality, are mutually exchangeable in the mind of society.

Nietzsche emphasizes that the choice to use the binding designations of language is a society-oriented decision. Freud’s “Negation” corroborates this conclusion by
asserting that the repression of the negated statement is caused by a society that divides acceptable from unacceptable thoughts. Van Eecke explains, “Denial is connected with situations in which the self-image of a person is threatened in such a way that the possibility of desire is destroyed” (4). The inevitability of engaging in a community through the false transpositions of language is therefore a constant negation and repression of reality in favor of socially acceptable norms and designations. Doing so avoids confrontation with the unknowable X from which the word, the concept, and the dream depart. Within this system of designations, Nietzsche argues, discovering truth is analogous to “someone [who] hides something behind a bush and looks for it again in the same place and finds it there as well” (Nietzsche, 85). Truth is based upon a human’s ability to recognize the concept and seek what that concept was derived from in reality. However, this is not truth, it is just rediscovery, just a repeated avoidance of the X.

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud elaborates upon the purpose behind seeking a structure in which to reproduce reality in a controllable fiction. While watching the famous fort/da game that his nephew plays, Freud concludes that the game was the child’s great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach. (14)

The child, in other words, executes a transposition of his mother’s departure into a system that represents departure and return through his interaction with toys. It is a renunciation of reality in favor of the satisfaction inherent in the fiction, in the game. The difference between the two is that “at the outset [the child] was in a passive situation – he was overpowerled by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an active part” (Freud, 14). The child makes a “cultural achievement”
by renouncing reality in favor of a synchronic but controllable game, a game that is more acceptable to himself and his presence within culture. He can now use fiction powerfully, determining it true and representative of reality, and subsequently exert control over it.

Freud and Nietzsche converge again in their vision of society as a continuous construction and induction into a “stammering” and “airy structure” of displacement. This structure is one that allows mankind the communal and socially acceptable drive for knowledge and control.

Ultimately, both Nietzsche and Freud recognize that it is through the lie that the intellect is ironically “free; it is released from its former slavery” (Nietzsche, 90). Van Eecke, in explicating Freud’s theory of negation, argues “in uttering a denial, a person tries to exercise negativity, required for the will to be free, by denying an epistemological connection rather than by putting distance between the objectively given and the volition of the will” (3). The connection between a statement and reality – its “epistemological connection” – is refuted in favor of projecting the subjective desire onto the objective reality. Through the lie the intellect is no longer bound to the repressive laws of language and social acceptability. Consequently, the intellect “with creative pleasure … throws metaphors into confusion and displaces the boundary stones of abstractions” (Miller, 90) thus posing a harmful threat to objectivity. The struggle between subjective and objective is an inherently human one, a struggle identifiable in the falseness of language. In fact, as soon as Wormold realizes that he is helplessly subjugated to the hypocrisy of objectivity, he chooses, instead, to free his intellect and lie.

*At the Crossing of Power Struggles, During the Dissolution of Semiotics*
Wormold, in accepting the job, subjugates himself to the binding agreement that his secret reports will “employ the usual metaphors” and will not disrupt the Secret Service’s refined mode of codified communication. As he starts writing his reports, Wormold is extremely aware of his role as a paid communicator of truth. He is expected to represent and communicate his reality so that the Secret Service can amass an even greater capital of knowledge. However, Wormold soon discovers that the truth is difficult to find, and, when found, is often far from exciting. Confronted with this problem, Wormold consults with the subjective epistemology of the drunken Dr. Hasselbacher:

‘The other day I was offered money.’
‘Yes?’
‘To get information.’
‘What sort of information?’
‘Secret information.’
Dr. Hasselbacher sighed. He said, ‘you are a lucky man, Mr. Wormold. That information is always easy to give.’
‘Easy?’
‘If it is secret enough, you alone know it. All you need is a little imagination Mr Wormold.’
‘They want me to recruit agents. How does one recruit an agent, Hasselbacher?’
‘You could invent them too, Mr. Wormold … [but] please don’t invent me as your agent … Just lie and keep your freedom. They don’t deserve the truth.’
‘Whom do you mean by they?’
‘Kingdoms, republics, powers.’ [Dr. Hasselbacher] drained his glass. (57-58)

Dr. Hasselbacher thus persuades Wormold to be his own source of truth, and to make that truth his power and his revenue. The conversation between the two isolates many of the problematic assumptions at play within the fictionalization of information. The conversation determines that secret information is a specific type of information that is classified, possessed by an elite, and should be protected at all costs; such information is a source of power. In addition, Dr. Hasselbacher insists that the determinant “secret” can
easily be modified. He is the first to show Wormold how to free himself from his slavery to the Secret Service’s usual metaphors and be one who, like Dr. Hasselbacher, “throws metaphors into confusion and displaces the boundary stones of abstractions” (Miller, 90) at the expense of others. By following Dr. Hasselbacher’s advice, Wormold will supposedly be able to achieve freedom by constructing lies – determinants that he denies to himself are real – and present them to “them” as true. The crucial “they,” however, remains purposefully vague until the last moment. Up to the instant in which Dr. Hasselbacher defines it, the pronoun merely represents the objective knowledge of the many. When the pronoun is defined as “Kingdoms, republics, powers,” however, it becomes clear that the information will not be shared directly with an objective entity, but with symbols of the power of humans.

Wormold’s lies and fictions – his attempts to liberate himself from the usual metaphors – will enter a space that is more and more rarified in its tethering to the real world. His freedom is therefore as fictional as the medium by which he attempts to acquire it: language. It is a slavery he cannot avoid, for Freud and Nietzsche’s theorizations of the lie as a conduit to freedom (like Dr. Hasselbacher’s) do not take into account the politics of knowledge that structure the spy world. These politics understand reality through transposed significances; in the spy world, code and truth are one and the same. There is no such thing as a lie, as long as it is communicated in code. In using the transposed significances to acquire freedom, Wormold simply authors truth without availing himself of his slavery to it.

The infinite recurrence of these transposed significances within Our Man In Havana expands to its most metafictional when Wormold sits down to write his first
invented reports. Although Wormold chooses to base some of his characters upon real people he meets in Havana, the agent that is first killed by the enemy is one that he had entirely generated from his own imagination. Wormold, hearing news of this strange occurrence, returns to Dr. Hasselbacher in protest,

‘I invented Raul.’
‘Then you invented him too well, Mr. Wormold. There’s a whole file on him now.’
‘He was no more real than a character in a novel.’
‘Are they always invented? I don’t know how a novelist works Mr Wormold. I have never known one before you.’
‘There was no drunk pilot in the Cubana airline.’
‘Oh, I agree, you must have invented that detail. I don’t know why.’
‘If you were breaking my cables you must have realized there was no truth in them, you know the city. A pilot dismissed for drunkenness, a friend with a plane, they were all invention.’
‘I don’t know your motive Mr Wormold. Perhaps you wanted to disguise his identity in case we broke your code.’ (146)

Dr. Hasselbacher, in keeping with his epistemology of self-generated knowledge through personal belief, allows for the possibility of Wormold’s imagination (as the similarly powerful imagination of another individual) shaping reality. Although it was Dr. Hasselbacher himself who had drunkenly advised Wormold to invent his reports, he demonstrates here that, in breaking codes, he was compelled to take Wormold’s words as truthful. The codification of false information endowed fiction with a form of legitimacy. Even when Wormold objects by reminding Dr. Hasselbacher “you know the city,” Dr. Hasselbacher does not take issue with his own knowledge, but rather with Wormold’s inability to admit his denial of his statement’s reality. He plays the analyst to Wormold’s negation. Dr. Hasselbacher no longer values his knowledge of reality when confronted with the symbolic value that surrounds codified language. Dr. Hasselbacher values code as a more truthful representation of reality than reality itself. Wormold, frustrated by the
power he has to author his own reality, asks himself whether “Shakespeare [had] listened to the news of Duncan’s death in a tavern or heard the knocking on his own bedroom door after he had finished the writing of Macbeth”? (Greene, 121). Even Shakespeare, who arguably had the greatest command of the English language, is represented within Our Man In Havana as a man haunted by his own fictions – just another precursor to Wormold – destined to author the reality that surrounds him.

Our Man In Havana, a spy novel that is aware of its own genre’s reliance upon specific definitions of truth, fiction, reality, and knowledge, subverts the very boundaries and power structures that make those definitions possible. This novel depicts a world in which secret information – the truth – is valued above all else, but it also depicts a world in which every character is a potential author of that sought-after truth. If any character can author truth, then the fundamental political, semiotic, psychoanalytical, and linguistic structures that the spy world is based upon reveal themselves as delicate, “airy structures.” However, these “airy structures” are not inherent only to the spy world: they are also the products of the impossible transpositions, metaphors, and constant deferrals of meaning that are inherent to human communication. While exaggerating and dissolving the boundaries of fiction within its own narrative, Our Man In Havana hyperbolizes the same epistemic fallacies that are committed every day, on a universal scale, when humans interact through language. As both Nietzsche and Freud indicate in their works, these fallacies preserve the fabric of society – even at the occasional expense of the sanity of its subjects – no matter how much they cause stammering and displacement of meaning in doing so.
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