



Eric Ambler and the Trick of Boundaries

by Nadia Priotti

In a critical study entitled *Significati del confine* Piero Zanini (1997: 52-53) points out that one way of neutralizing the influence of a boundary is that of crossing it, exploiting its weak points and choosing the right time. This action, however, implies a deep knowledge of the border itself and of its limits. At the same time, the experience of going beyond the border is closely related to the concepts of games and adventure (Zanini 1997: 138-139). Bearing in mind these considerations and in this perspective, we have tried to explore part of Eric Ambler's production, namely some novels written before the second world war, which represent a parody of thrillers of espionage, detective stories, or a blending of the two. The crossing of frontiers, in fact, has definitely been a main theme in his works, often representing an occasion for adventure and creating expectations of differences that may appear in the end insubstantial. In addition, Ambler's deep expertise in genre fiction has enabled him to force its typical patterns, experimenting with the mixing of formulas, thus crossing the boundaries of what had traditionally been considered separate categories.

A brief look at his biography can account for the interest shown in this topic, since he experienced contrasting situations throughout his lifetime and was driven towards different ideals: a scientific education later abandoned to follow his literary interests, then his hope in the Soviet Union and the subsequent disappointment with Stalin's policy. In other words, as John Preston has observed, "from the start of his life, he too was beset by opposing forces. [...] Throughout his upbringing and early



adulthood, we can see him being tugged between respectability and nonconformity, between science and literature, and between Communism and Capitalism” (Preston 2009: vii). The crossing of boundaries was also a frequent experience, as Ambler spent his life in a number of countries, easily adapting to local lifestyles: in France, just before WWII, then in the States, back to Europe in Switzerland and finally in England again. Besides, being born in 1909, he lived in a period characterized by political conflicts, a period in which borders were redesigned, with consequent movements of people across Europe. In his autobiography Ambler writes that he first came across the word ‘refugee’ in the winter before the Great War, as his neighbour was a Hungarian, probably a Croatian nationalist refugee (Ambler 1985: 24); later on in the book, he mentions the Turkish exiles in Nice, who gave him a great deal of information for his novel *The Mask of Dimitrios* (137).

As a result, it is probably not surprising that the title of his first novel, published in 1936, is *The Dark Frontier*, a parody of thrillers of espionage in which the frontier already appears as a concept charged with multiple meanings. The frontier certainly refers to the physical border dividing countries, to which specific procedures related to people’s identities and experiences are connected. Entering the unwelcoming territory of the imaginary state of Ixania in Eastern Europe, Professor Barstow has to go through passport control, he is asked specific questions about his reasons for travelling, his luggage is carefully inspected and his new camera confiscated. The ‘dark frontier’, however, is mentioned very early in the book with reference to a mental state, rather than a physical one.

The Professor, an eminent physicist, refers to two different aspects of his personality, a personality which partly recalls that of the writer himself: a methodical, precise one based on logic, and a more imaginative one which is ready to accept that not necessarily everything can be rationally explained: “One half of your brain became an inspired reasoning machine, while the other wandered over dark frontiers into strange countries where adventure, romance and sudden death lay in wait for the traveller” (Ambler 2012: 10). As expected, the second side of his personality will prevail in the novel, and the protagonist, taking the identity of a popular hero, crossing the mental as well as the physical frontier, will immediately face the sudden death of one of the passengers on the train he is travelling on, and then a cliff-hanging adventure. What is emphasized, then, is the character’s acceptance to live situations that are not under control, in a place that is completely unfamiliar.

The crossing of the frontier is again a dominant theme in another of Ambler’s early works, *Cause for Alarm*, published in 1938. The protagonist, Nicky Marlow, having lost his job, accepts a new contract with an arms manufacturing company, Spartacus, a contract which entails working in Italy. After a period of ten weeks in the country, he escapes across the Yugoslav frontier after having been accused of espionage, creating a real crisis between the partners of the Rome-Berlin Axis. The experience in a foreign country, on the Continent, forces Marlow to come to terms with his expectations and prejudices, and at the same time to reflect on his own role and, more widely, that of his country.



Initially, the system in which Marlow has to operate is described according to the stereotypical idea of a corrupt Italy, where it is important to know the right people in the right places. This fact does not surprise him, as he has been told about it before leaving England. Gradually, however, Marlow will understand that the situation is not as simple as it appears at first sight. Among the Italians, in fact, corruption regards mainly the people involved at various levels with the fascist regime. On the other hand, other characters are introduced, who distinguish themselves for their hard work, honesty and consistency. Among them, the most relevant character is Professor Beronelli, a famous mathematician, who was expelled from the University of Bologna after refusing to comply with the regime and defending intellectual independence. A ruined man, Beronelli has crossed another frontier, finding refuge in his madness and in a remote village very near the border, the place where the outcasts and the so-called 'dangerous' people still have a hope of survival.

At the same time, Marlow has to come to terms with his own role. Initially he keeps proclaiming his own innocence, despite practicing bribery to sell his machines. He justifies his behaviour as the implementation of the directives received, even when General Vagas, in order to achieve his own aims, puts him face to face with a moral question:

'But has it occurred to you, my friend, that these beautiful machines you are supplying, these very efficient machines, are being used to make shells which may one day burst among the bodies of your own countrymen? Have you considered the matter in that light?'

I stirred. 'I have considered the point. But it is no business of mine. I am concerned with selling machine tools. I am merely the agent. I did not create the situation. The responsibility for this is not mine. There is a job to be done. If I do not do it, then someone else will.' (Ambler 2009a: 78)

As the narrative proceeds, however, he will recognize his own involvement and will take the autonomous decision of doing something to damage the regime, rebelling against the policy of his own employers.

The experience Marlow goes through, therefore, qualifies itself as a 'loss of innocence', a theme that Ambler himself recognized as the *leitmotiv* of his oeuvre.¹ The character of the 'innocent abroad' can also be interpreted as a more general opinion on the British role in the international context and, as Michael Denning states, it is not simply used to show that the policy of non-involvement in Europe was a travesty of the truth, as Britain was "entangled in the violent struggles of the ideologies of fascism and communism on the Continent. [...] The price of recognition for Ambler's main characters [...] is the realization that 'England' no longer exists, that it is not uninvolved, that, though it may be naïve, it is not innocent" (Denning 1987: 73).

¹ See Snyder's reference to Hopkins' interview with Ambler in 1975 (Snyder 2011: 45).



Besides, the novel does not only show the falsity of national stereotypes,² revealing behaviours which share common features, no matter which country people belong to. Ambler's neutralism, in fact, leads him to what Snyder defines as "an impulse to debunk [...] stereotypes" (2011: 24) typical of espionage thrillers of the time, namely a hero/amateur/Briton driven by patriotic ideals and defeating an enemy/villain/foreigner without scruples in a clear-cut world where good and evil are easily recognized. In *Cause for Alarm*, instead, the hero appears incompetent and often reluctant to act, and when he does, he is not initially driven by patriotism, but by his desire to resist violence and the abuse of power he has to suffer, so mainly for personal reasons.

The enemies are to be found among foreigners, among the members of the fascist regime, but also among ruthless people who cooperate with these threatening forces out of personal or other people's interests: General Vagas, the Nazi spy of the novel, works for the institutions that pay him better, among which the arms-producing British company, Cator & Bliss;³ Spartacus itself, the company Marlow works for, practices bribery on a regular basis and sells arms to potential enemies, regardless of the consequences of its actions. The new enemy here introduced, which has no frontiers, is certainly business and its involvement with reactionary forces.

The criticism of the world of international capitalism will become even more explicit in *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1939), where, as Paolo Bertinetti (2015: 74) has observed, *Dimitrios* is perfectly consistent with the dark side of Europe between the wars, with a corrupt society in which dishonest commercial operations have become part of everyday life. Interestingly, in his autobiography Ambler describes the sketch he drew on the train to Nice about the book he wanted to write: "First there was a sketch-map of Europe made squiggly by the movement of the train. Across it all ran a still more squiggly line running from Istanbul to Izmir, then to Athens, to Sofia, to Geneva, to Belgrade and finally to Paris" (Ambler 1985: 136). Ambler's map, whose borders are blurred because of the movement of the train, represents visually what will become a key aspect of the book, since the whole of Europe has contributed to the shaping of *Dimitrios*, who is portrayed by Latimer not as a man but as a "unit in a disintegrating social system" (Ambler 2009c: 57).

On his journey throughout Europe, meeting a variety of people, from journalists to spies, from prostitutes to criminals, Latimer describes a world in which relationships are based on money or on violence, but never on personal trust. *Dimitrios*, a criminal driven by money and ambition, who constantly betrays his accomplices, represents thus the result and the mirror of an absurd society based on new, highly dubious values:

² For further details on this topic, with particular reference to Italy, see my essay "Overturning Stereotypes: Ambler's Vision of Italy and Italians" in *L'immagine dell'Italia nelle letterature anglo-americane e postcoloniali*.

³ Cator & Bliss had already appeared in *The Dark Frontier* through one of his managers, Mr Groom, whose task was to try to take possession of an atomic weapon at all costs.



But it was useless to try to explain him in terms of Good and Evil. They were no more than baroque abstractions. Good Business and Bad Business were the elements of the new theology. Dimitrios was not evil. He was 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*. (187)

In Ambler's novels, thus, the opposition 'Us'/'Them', with the moral simplifications implied in this distinction, disappears because there is not one side that can guarantee safety, honesty or innocence. "Evil, Ambler's fiction tells us, is systemic" (Stafford 1989: 135) and "the battlefield fluctuates without respecting the cartography of national borders" (Snyder 2011: 188).

In another novel of the same years, *Epitaph for a Spy* (1938), the issue of the frontier represents the starting point that generates the plot itself. It is in fact the protagonist's condition of stateless citizen that makes him an easy victim of blackmail from the institutions and forces him to cooperate with the police. Josef Vadassy is in fact a Hungarian citizen whose hometown, after the Trianon Treaty, was annexed to Yugoslavia. With a father and a brother executed for political reasons, Vadassy wanders through Europe, first to London, then to Paris, hoping every time to obtain citizenship. Vadassy has no choice but do what the police ask him. After all "what happened to an insignificant teacher of languages without national status was of no interest to anyone. [...] No consul would intervene on his behalf; [...] Officially he did not exist; he was an abstraction, a ghost" (Ambler 2009b: 18).

Paradoxically, having to identify a spy among the guests of the *Hotel de la Réserve*, this man without a country is given a list of names with the respective nationalities of all the people staying there: French, American, Swiss, British and German. Here again Ambler plays with the prejudices related to the concept of nationality, as exemplified in this short extract reporting a conversation between Vadassy and Monsieur Duclos:

'A business man must have an eye for a criminal. Fortunately, English criminals are always very simple.'

'Oh?'

'It is well known. The French criminal is a snake, the American criminal a wolf and the English criminal a rat. Snakes, wolves and rats. The rat is a very simple animal. He fights only when he is in a corner. At other times he merely nibbles.'

'And you really think that Major Clandon-Hartley is an English criminal?'

Slowly, deliberately, Monsieur Duclos removed the pince-nez from his nose and tapped me on the arm with them.

'Look carefully at his face,' he said, 'and you will see the rat in it.' (190)



By choosing characters from different countries and backgrounds, the writer dramatizes all the tensions of a Europe on the verge of a new war: differences of opinions and even arguments, at times ending up in fights, are present in the novel, often caused by misunderstandings, stereotypical assumptions and arrogant behaviours. Ironically, however, some of the nationalities prove to be misleading: the Swiss couple are in fact German and work for the Gestapo, the British lady is of Italian origin and so is Mr Roux, the real spy; what is more, none of the guests are in fact telling the truth about their identities.

If the potential danger of stereotypes is one of the main themes in this work, the novel also represents an interesting example of mixing of genres, showing the absurdity of establishing clear-cut boundaries between them. A story of espionage is here introduced within the structure of a detective story. The writer uses the setting of a hotel, which recalls the country house of many detective stories, but the investigation is carried out by an ordinary man with no experience nor authority, who has to solve a mystery in a limited amount of time through a series of conversations with the guests of the hotel. Through Vadassy's wrong assumptions, based for example on the stereotype of the spy, and the limitations of his deductive method to understand the complexity of reality, Ambler partly ridicules a genre which, unlike the thriller, had acquired a certain recognition among intellectuals. The myopic⁴ attitude regarding Vadassy as a result of "too confident a reliance on the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction" (Snyder 2011: 32) also regards the strict academic distinction between literary genres⁵ and, we could add, the distinction between popular and 'high' literature.

The loose use of the typical formula of the spy thriller makes Ambler's production an example of fiction which is half way between 'formulaic' and 'mimetic' literature. John Cawelti, though admitting the distinction is not so hard and fast, observes that

we might loosely distinguish between formula stories and their 'serious' counterparts on the ground that the latter tend toward some kind of encounter with our sense of the limitations of reality, while formulas embody moral fantasies of a world more exciting, more fulfilling, or more benevolent than the one we inhabit. (Cawelti 1976: 38)

However, in his attempt to transform and renew the formula, Ambler also managed to convey to his readers a lucid picture of the society they lived in, with its drift towards reaction, the obscure underlying role of big international companies, and

⁴ Snyder analyses the various optical metaphors that show "the perspectival relativity of inference" (2011: 31-32).

⁵ In his essay "Meditations on the Literature of Spying", published in 1965, so much later than the period taken into account, Jacques Barzun still expressed his annoyance towards espionage literature on the ground that it had introduced a "contamination [...] into the story of detection" (Barzun 1965: 172). In his "Introduction" to the anthology *To Catch a Spy*, Ambler (1986: 15-6) himself quotes, not without resentment, a review which had appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, where the label of 'serious' novel was applied on the basis of criteria that to Ambler seemed questionable.



the selfish, individualistic attitude of ordinary people. Apparently, the protagonists of these stories do not look changed by the experience they have undergone: Marlow ends up working for Cator & Bliss, while Latimer decides to write another of his detective stories; yet, they both become aware that certain realities often hide tricks and, more importantly, so do the readers.⁶

Going back to Zanini's essay we started from, Ambler seems to have explored the space of the boundary, that space between things that at the same time separates and puts in contact people, things, cultures, identities (Zanini 1997: xiii), thus introducing an idea of flexibility in a concept that implies in itself rigidity. Using the distinction Zanini makes between boundary – a separation between adjoining spaces – and frontier – an artificial construction turning towards/against somebody or something – (10-11), it can be said that Ambler was certainly more interested in the frontier. Referring to a contact between people and realities, this artificial line is shifting and negotiable, and thus represents an area in which ideas or realities perceived as different or contrasting can actually coexist and at times reveal their similarities, a space which forces us to come to terms with the 'other'.

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⁶ As Snyder observes with reference to the conclusion of *The Mask of Dimitrios*, Ambler presents Latimer "longing to return to the illusionary realm of an escapist aesthetic" (Snyder 2011: 37-8), but also adds the less reassuring image of the train running into a tunnel. In *The Intercom Conspiracy* (1969), again through Latimer, Ambler will further deal with the concept of evasion in contemporary society.



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