ROBERT LANCE SNYDER

Permissible Murder and Preempted Agency:
Francis Clifford's Cold War Spy Fiction

All but unknown today are the nineteen suspense novels of Francis Clifford, pen name of Arthur Leonard Bell Thompson (1917-1975), despite the fact that his combined book sales exceeded five million copies and his work won the admiration of prominent reviewers. Clifford readily accepted the descriptive rubric of "suspense" for his fiction. "Throughout I have concentrated on suspense," he acknowledged, "my belief being that only when a character is at the end of his (or her) tether – emotionally, physically, spiritually or financially – does his true nature emerge" (qtd. in "Clifford" 1980, n.p.). That pattern is especially pronounced in The Naked Runner (1965), All Men Are Lonely Now (1967), and The Blind Side (1971), his three Cold War spy novels and arguably the best of his corpus, that subvert the "Us" versus "Them" binary often said to be the genre's taproot.

In the only extant scholarship on Clifford, Adam Piette in 2016 devoted a few pages to the way in which The Naked Runner inscribes postwar "fantasies of permissible murder" (Piette 2016, 182), his larger argument being that today's National Security State, as Timothy Melley refers to it, harks back in its operational ruthlessness to formally sanctioned warfare's issuance of a license to kill. What Piette does not address is how this motif involves a dynamic of preempted agency deriving from intentionally compromised loyalties in Clifford's fiction. Appearing in the same year as Piette's essay was a monograph in which Phyllis Lassner contended that, "whether enforced or voluntary, exile is endemic to the secret worlds of espionage and to the character of spies" (Lassner 2016, 3). Lassner's study relies heavily on such early prototypes as Josef Vadassy in Eric Ambler's Epitaph for a Spy (1938), a deracinated Yugoslavian compelled to do the bidding of France's Sécurité Générale, but her paradigm does not encompass native-born persons who find themselves compromised by state machinations. These civilian casualties also become exilic figures, though their disenfranchisement is linked to choices they make along the way. Because Clifford's spy novels explore this neglected terrain, they warrant closer attention.

Undoubtedly Clifford's most celebrated narrative, owing in part to Sidney J. Furie's 1967 film adaptation, The Naked Runner dramatizes the National Security State's encroachment on the lives of ordinary citizens after World War II. 43-year-old protagonist Sam Laker's bête noire is Martin Slattery, an intelligence agent in whose company he spent a few months shortly after D-Day. Laker recalls their association at the time:

But Slattery was with him when he received the call about the flying bomb near [the House of] Lords, and for some reason it was Slattery he rang from St. John's Wood to say that his parents and sister were dead[,] and it was Slattery he walked with in Green Park a night or two later when, sodden with whisky and hatred, he swore what he would do when they let him loose in Germany. And Slattery who said, "You do that, Sam. You kill the bastards. Kill every bloody one of them you can." Which he did. And when it was
all over and he finally came home to the ruins and the emptiness, it was to Slattery that he made his last report before he was eventually demobilized. (Clifford 1965, 28-29)

Twenty years later the decorated veteran, now the widowed director of an office-equipment manufacturing firm, is contacted by Slattery, who is "still in the game – whatever the game was now" (32), and asked to serve as a courier of microfilm while visiting a trade fair in Leipzig with his son Patrick. Although assured that the request entails no risk, the businessman is reluctant to comply until Slattery mentions that Laker's contact in the German Democratic Republic will be Karen Gisevius, in late 1944 a fever-stricken partisan whom he was forced to leave in the care of a sympathetic villager during an ill-fated operation in enemy territory. This manipulation of Laker's feelings for a woman he thought long dead prompts him to participate once more in a covert endeavor.

Before Sam Laker reaches this decision, however, Clifford includes a key passage on the dehumanization to which the "permissible murder of war" can lead a combatant (27). Recalls Laker:

It took him twenty-nine days to reach the Allied lines and on the way he conducted a private war, the full volume of his hatred released at last for what had befallen his parents and sister and out of grief and uncertainty for the girl [Gisevius]. He killed where he could and when he could – an isolated sentry, two Luftwaffe corporals cycling together, all the occupants of a staff car, the crew of a stranded tank. There were others, too; he lost count. He did it out of a haunting fury and because he really didn't care whether he lived or died and because he could shoot marvelously well. And by the time he got through to the Americans he was wild-eyed as a hunted animal. (41)

As those searing memories play out in his mind before his overseas journey, Laker realizes vaguely that "two worlds were overlapping" and that "nothing would ever be quite the same again" (53), but the premonition falls short of what transpires when he is inducted into a nightmarish scenario of preempted agency. Soon after arriving in the GDR and leaving Karen Gisevius's watch-repair shop, Sam Laker is intercepted by the Volkspolizei and interrogated by Colonel Hartmann, head of the Soviet bloc's State Security Service in Leipzig. Sensing "his isolation as never before" (87), Laker is subjected to a mock execution in an outlying forest, an experience intended to convince the former marksman that he has no choice except to kill Rudolf Frenzel, a defector to the West, in Copenhagen a few days hence in exchange for his abducted son's life.

One way of construing Sam Laker's ontological crisis is to posit that he has been thrust into the primordial realm of 'Entfremdung,' or estrangement, and what Martin Heidegger in Being and Time famously calls 'Unheimlichkeit.' Although the two terms are not synonymous, the latter denotes the idea of finding oneself suddenly bereft of all previous validations of a normative identity. For Clifford's protagonist that process begins in deadly earnest when, despite protestations to Hartmann that he is "not a murderer" (113), he is sent like a marionette to Denmark. Once there and forced to follow a scripted schedule, Laker spends the night at an apartment directly across from Frenzel's hotel room and the next day retrieves a Russian-made sniper's rifle from a bank vault. Before then, however, he makes the tactical mistake of placing a telephone call to Slattery in London. The consequences of his futile attempt at self-directed action unfold ineluctably until, after the deadline for assassinating Frenzel (forewarned by
Slattery) has expired, Clifford's now exposed pawn wends his way toward the frontier to take revenge against Hartmann, thinking that his son Patrick is already dead.

Before *The Naked Runner's* concluding *peripeteia*, Clifford interweaves a reflection filtered through Sam Laker's consciousness that indicts the labyrinth of Cold War deception for the ways in which his main character's autonomy has been suborned:

The weather was clear as far as Berlin[,] and for some of the time he looked westward […] recalling how his father often used to say that when a man turned his back on something it usually got him again before the end, seeing a resemblance between that wartime gamble and this, that prolonged bout of murderous rage and this, gazing out on the country once openly trampled and fought over which was now the hunting ground of backroom entrepreneurs who'd devised their stealthy games of blackmail and death, catch-as-catch-can, their own dirty laws, their own ethics. (203)

The reverie, which borrows the metaphor of a "hunting ground" from Clifford's 1964 novel of the same title, anticipates *The Naked Runner's* end when Laker murders a man at long distance, supposedly Hartmann, who turns out to be a Sino-Soviet expert and defector from the U.S. State Department named Matthew Albright. While recuperating from his ordeal at a British military hospital in Hannover, Laker "began to see the rough outline of the whole appalling fraud." Adds Clifford: "All he could grasp was that he had been terrorized, debased, manipulated, led with a ring through his nose from beginning to end, forced to grieve, made to hate, sited to kill […] All to order" (249). Unapologetic despite his feigned solicitude, Slattery temporizes at Laker's bedside: "There's a war on, Sam. No one likes to admit it, but there is. For some of us it never ended. We fight it how and where we can" (254). Much earlier in his bestselling novel Clifford wrote that "intelligence had become a major postwar industry" (62), but his narrative's final sentence intones a kind of elegy for what that geopolitical development bequeathed. Though reunited with a convalescent Sam Laker, Karen Grisevius weeps "for what men had always done to one another in the endless collision of their dreams and would go on doing by way of lies and violence and dedicated cruelty until the world burned itself to a cinder" (255). The apocalyptic trope reveals Clifford's despair over humanity's lust for power and ascendancy.

His next novel, a full-fledged espionage thriller, expands on the moral cost of systemic Cold War deception by exploring its debilitating effect on an intelligence-industry insider. Unlike Martin Slattery in *The Naked Runner*, 38-year-old David Lancaster has never married and over the past eight months as personal assistant to Andrew McBride, soon-to-retire head of Weapons Coordination for Whitehall, has been transmitting classified information to the Russians on an advanced laser-guided missile defense system code-named Roman Candle. No motives are given for the protagonist's perfidy, but *All Men Are Lonely Now* implies that they involve his yearning for acceptance and connectedness. "Families belonged to other people," writes Clifford. "His own father and mother were dead[,] and there never were any brothers or sisters[,] only an uncle who unfailingly sent him a Christmas card from an address in Stirling" (Clifford 1967, 66-67). Having "acquired an incipient distaste for himself and his work," Lancaster is in search of "other loyalties […] something lasting, honest, devoid of betrayals" (109).
All the more ironic, then, is the fact that when the novel opens, habitually wary Lancaster has succumbed to the allure of Catherine Tierney, secretary to his office's second-in-command George Conway, with whom he has been spending weekends at his cottage in Connemara, Ireland, not realizing her deployment in the jargon of espionage fiction as a "honey-trap." Because "love was a language he had never learned" (23), Lancaster wages everything on his ability to outwit an internal investigation by the aggressive Conway and external scrutiny by Special Branch's Detective Superintendent Charles Sloan. Catherine's having "set alight [a] train of self-discovery, exposing secret places in his heart he never knew existed," the practiced dissembler comes to recognize a fundamental human need:

For too long he had been accustomed to an unnatural kind of loneliness, the kind that came from the stress of secrecy, discretion bordering on distrust, periodic ruthlessness. It suited some[,] and it had suited him. Once the cap fitted you wore it to the best of your ability, never quite free, never quite what other people were. With Catherine he was safe, but there were secrets even from her, and would continue to be. Was it unrealistic to suppose that once this crisis had passed, once Weapons Coordination was in the clear, once McBride had finally relinquished that creaking swivel chair of his, there might be a chance to get the hell out of it all? Catherine had set a pendulum swinging. (93-94)

The pendulum metaphor, which is repeated several times later in the novel, captures Lancaster's oscillation between two competing loyalties, the first involving his need to be loved, the other centering on his terrible burden of lies and dissimulation.

The narrative's bifurcated structure neatly captures this psychomachia within David Lancaster's soul. Part One (Chapters one to eight) portrays him as a dutiful, work-obsessed bureaucrat in Her Majesty's government who is routinely deferential to "Old Man" McBride and as intent as anyone, except abrasive heir-apparent Conway, in their twenty-five-person department on ferreting out the source of leaked data concerning Roman Candle. That he has been having an affair with Tierney, as Lancaster confesses to Sloan, is an admission he makes to deflect suspicion of his deeper betrayal. All the while he continues to act out his charade. Only midway through the novel do we learn that Lancaster frames colleague Stephen Hearne, apparently his sole friend, with incriminating copies of technical reports on Roman Candle. Part Two (Chapters nine to seventeen) then shifts to a more whorled pattern of oblique narration. Trapped by his widening skein of lies, the protagonist turns increasingly to Catherine as his salvation because "[a]nyone could begin again, slough a skin, mold another version of themselves" (152). The game of deception soon implodes, however, when Lancaster recognizes that he has been 'played' all along by Tierney but also by his patron McBride, whose generally benign nature and administrative acumen he has disastrously misjudged. With respect to Lancaster's supervisor the novel's grim ending takes us back to Piette's previously cited point about "permissible murder" in The Naked Runner.

The logic for that claim derives from the architectonics of All Men Are Lonely Now, specifically the Russian Formalists' distinction between fabula ('story') and sjuzet ('plot') as discussed by Peter Brooks (1984, 12-18, 24-27). Embedded within the novel's linear or discursive plot is a fabula that dates back a year and a half before the narrative opens when Lancaster, then employed by Inter-Services Security, targeted an associate named Walker to cover up his own duplicity. Once Clifford's protagonist had come
under scrutiny and transferred to Weapons Coordination, McBride invented the spurious tale of an East German defector who was divulging a British mole's complicity in massive leaks of technical data. Falling for the subterfuge, Lancaster proceeded to indict himself by his subsequent evasions. "Only [George] Blake did more damage" (241), asserts McBride, alluding to the infamous MI6 spy who after the Korean War worked as a double agent before escaping from Wormwood Scrubs prison in 1966 to seek sanctuary in the U.S.S.R. Even more damning, despite Lancaster's claims of innocence, are his exchanges with an intermediary in Connemara that Tierney secretly tape-recorded.

Unaware of this deception and deemed a traitor, Clifford's protagonist is subjected to the wartime penalty for collusion with a state-declared enemy – summary execution. Intellectually recognizing the difference between such a code of justice for treason and its juridical equivalent during a postwar era of supposed peace, "Old Man" McBride nonetheless opts for the former in the case of his duplicitous personal assistant. He does so in part because Lancaster earlier had endorsed a World War II ruse of sending a courier with falsified intelligence behind enemy lines. When McBride then weighs his subordinate's recommendation that an already condemned man named Albert Chance be used similarly as a decoy, he has no compunction about putting David Lancaster into the killing zone of a No Man's Land on the frontier between East and West Germany.

"There were other ways of dying" (245), writes Clifford, keynoting the title of his next novel. In a short coda, McBride defends his decision. When a much younger associate suggests that Lancaster's death amounts to murder because "[w]e aren't at war," the "Old Man," his face "masked by shadows," counters by saying: "Some of us are [...]"

For some of us it has never stopped" (250). The response of this otherwise sympathetic character echoes Slattery's words to Sam Laker at the end of *The Naked Runner*, but the seminal difference is that Clifford is now recognizing the readiness of the National Security State's guardians to invoke wartime penalties for treason against one of its own ranks. No longer is the enemy part of a heteronymous "Them."

Unlike *All Men Are Lonely Now*, Clifford's fourteenth novel is only in part an espionage story, its main trajectory being a tale of two brothers, respectively a priest and a spy, who committed themselves to very different paths in life after their unhappy adolescence. Both siblings are represented as confronting pivotal crises that hark back to earlier decisions about their future vocations. For Father Richard Lawrence, the narrative's nominal hero, that test of moral obligation comes when, witnessing the plight of his starving parishioners in war-torn Biafra, he sets out on an arduous trek from the remote village of Abaguma to seek emergency supplies. His cynical brother Howard, on the other hand, faces the choice between pending exposure as a double agent within Whitehall's Directorate of Naval Intelligence and his return from safety in Austria to bid farewell to the siblings' dying mother in England. In framing the *fabula* behind these parallel but asymmetrical plots, *The Blind Side* raises many of the same philosophical issues explored by Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). Clifford's novel also shows an affinity to an emergent postwar genre that, in the same year as its publication, critic Michael Holquist described as the "new metaphysical detective story" (Holoquist 1971, 135). A leading indicator of both dimensions is the way in which *The Blind Side* examines how virtually all commitments harbor lacunae that qualify the probity of human actions, however well or not they are intended.
The first of the narrative's five sections does not hint at this complication, instead valorizing Father Richard for setting out on his mission of mercy. Assigned to Abaguma more than two years ago, the activist priest before his ordination had been an Air Force pilot who during the Suez Crisis underwent a decisive conversion after rejecting the "clockwork Catholicism" of his youth (Clifford 1971, 127):

Unlike Howard he didn't entirely disown the faith he had quarreled with – Rosalind had spared him that. For a while Rosalind was everything, Rosalind and the flying [...]. But that November, while the headlines were screaming Suez, he was born again above Kasfareet airfield, born by way of shame and self-disgust as he strafed and hunted the terrified ground crews through the smoking aftermath of his own bombing. Within minutes he was changed, changed utterly: the future he had thought of could never be the future he would know. (128)

Richard's life-changing metanoia is incomprehensible to his father, an Army officer who never experienced the horrors of armed combat, as well as to his overbearing mother Tibbie, who is indifferent to the scale of human suffering in the world except insofar as it affects her financial investments, but for the younger of their two sons the Christian imperative of agape is more binding than the narrowly defined ecclesiastical notion of duty. Intent on saving his parishioners from their abandonment by international relief efforts, Father Richard commandeers a supply plane on the offshore island of Escobar and, after successfully air-dropping its cargo of food and medicine near Abaguma, veers too close to a battlefront on his return flight. Hit by antiaircraft flak, he struggles to a landing before his mangled left arm is amputated.

*The Blind Side*'s opening adventure saga, comprising nearly a third of the novel, establishes a moral standard against which Richard's brother will be measured, but after divulging Howard's actions as a traitor the text reveals that Father Richard's commitment to a life of clerical celibacy involved another kind of abandonment. "Only Rosalind forgave him," observes Clifford, "and then with difficulty, needing her own anguish to glimpse the extent of his vision. 'Good-bye.' She held and kissed him for the last time. 'Good-bye,' she said, and watched him go" (128). That disclosure is reinforced in the novel's coda when, after his arrest for espionage, Howard Lawrence writes a letter to Richard that includes this withering passage: "Is everyone expendable except you? – that's what you said. So now I've got a question of my own. And it's this: is everyone expendable on your behalf? Ask yourself that. Go back to the time you quit the Air Force and ask yourself that – from Rosalind on. What price do others have to pay for your good intentions?" (241; original emphasis). Although prone to self-exculpation, Howard here identifies a commonality of virtually all sacrifices made in the name of a "greater good: " without exception they entail the abrogation of some personal commitment or code of fidelity. True to its title, Clifford's fourteenth novel gives the last word regarding both brothers to Father Daniel Somerset, a rector in the parish of Evesham to which Richard has been reassigned. With genuine compassion for his new curate in light of Howard's letter, Somerset remarks: "We all have a blind side" (242).

That truism, of course, does not diminish the quantum difference between the two brothers' choices in life. One is devoted to the welfare of those in desperate need; the other is consumed by self-preservation at all costs. The stranglehold of the latter is dramatized by Howard Lawrence's actions once he comes under official suspicion.
Because appearances are everything to the chameleonic Howard, "[p]ity was something he had learned to do without, but it was vital to be liked, to be appreciated" (81). The hollowness of that value when elevated to an absolute becomes manifest as soon as Special Branch investigator Andrew Garner begins to close in on Commander Lawrence as the spy who has been providing Alexandrov Donskoy, a second secretary at the Soviet embassy in London, with classified information on an advanced submarine-detection system. While the threat of exposure is mounting, his brother Richard insists that Howard visit their mother one last time. At her bedside, casting about for the appropriate insincerity to mouth,

Howard ran his tongue over his lips, trying to remember what it was like to have something to fall back on instead of another version of himself. He had wheedled God in his time, but not for more than half his span of years, and then to no avail. Prayer meant belief, and he didn't believe. Early on, even as a born, trained Catholic, God had seemed to him a myth. Life was a labyrinth enough without those intricate, dogmatic mysteries, without the obligation of guilt and grief and grace, without the fretting for union with something nonexistent and unknowable. (158)

What ensues bears the stamp of Dostoevskian irony. When Garner's inquiries threaten to reveal his dealings during an earlier posting with a mercenary go-between in Lisbon, Howard flies to Portugal and brutally murders Rafael Macerda. Haunted by the horror of what he has done, the older brother then makes his way back to Richard's church in Evesham to confess his deed and the myriad betrayals that have shaped his life. What he seeks is not absolution but an understanding that "[h]e could never openly be his true self" (106), not comprehending how empty the postulate is in his case.

In a perceptive essay on Graham Greene's espionage fiction, William M. Chace quotes Jacques Barzun's observation that "[t]he novel is dedicated to subversion; the novelist is a spy in enemy country" (Chace 1990, 160). Barzun found little to like about the contemporary literature of spying, stating with obvious sarcasm that John le Carré's classic The Spy Who Came In from the Cold (1963) was "a really real realistic tale of modern spying" (167), but his larger point about fiction's investigative interest in the fraudulence of "men and their society" (167) is well taken. Basing his own approach on that comment, Chace shows how Greene's espionage narratives from The Confidential Agent (1939) to The Human Factor (1978) explore the marginality and estrangement of the individual who, burdened with a secret knowledge, grapples with the inescapability of "loneliness, [...] the vulnerabilities occasioned by love, and the fraternity of the spy and priest" (171). The last phrase calls to mind, of course, Howard and Richard Lawrence in The Blind Side. If hermeticism lies at the heart of the espionage genre, as Chace goes on to suggest, then Clifford like Greene assesses its moral cost. And in one respect he goes further – namely, by documenting how those who become enmeshed in the apparatus of the postwar National Security State, whether voluntarily or otherwise, discover too late that they are co-opted exiles within their own countries of birth.

Forced to reexamine his Cold War career in "licensed skulduggery" on behalf of the British Secret Service (le Carré 2017, 15), Peter Guillam in le Carré's novel, A Legacy of Spies (2017) questions whether the enterprise was worth the sacrifice of autonomy. In an imaginary conversation with George Smiley, former head of "Cambridge Circus," Guillam asks at the end: "Did you, George, consciously set out to suppress the humanity
in me, or was I just collateral damage too? […] Or put another way: how much of our human feeling can we dispense with in the name of freedom […] before we cease to feel either human or free?” (257). Although overshadowed as a writer by both Greene and le Carré, Clifford probed many of the same issues involving preempted agency. His three narratives discussed here support that hypothesis. Sam Laker in The Naked Runner is still capable of being the ruthless killer he was conditioned to become in World War II, but he is forced to that extremity by Martin Slattery's deception and Colonel Hartmann's threat concerning his hostage son's fate. In contrast, All Men Are Lonely Now reveals David Lancaster's vacuity before he is condemned by intelligence-industry mogul Andrew McBrife to "permissible murder" for treason, but even he earns readers' pity because without a family he is driven by a profoundly human yearning for love and acceptance. The two Lawrence brothers in The Blind Side, Clifford's most complex novel, seem initially to be diabolical studies in integrity, but the novel refuses to simplify their life histories. If Father Richard is heroic because of his selfless concern for those trapped in the Nigerian Civil War, his commitment to entering the priesthood comes at the price of annulling his bond with fiancée Rosalind. On the other hand, if Howard Lawrence is a self-seeking traitor to his country who has learned to do without pity, he shows some measure of decency in returning from abroad for his dying mother's sake. Francis Clifford hovers on the mainstream novel's margins, but he warrants rediscovery for dramatizing how easily we can become fugitives from our proper selves.

Works Cited


