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THE OPPOSITE OF SUAVE

Conceptions of honour in The Mask of Dimitrios by Eric Ambler



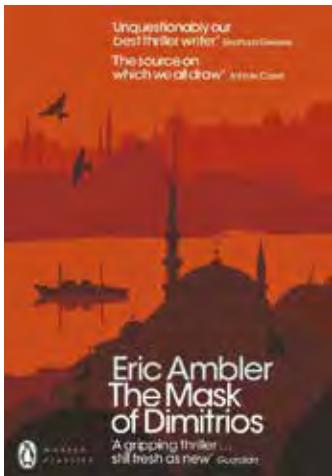
The popular author, Eric Ambler, fell out of fashion towards the end of a career that spanned nearly 50 years, but remains in the eyes of many critics a transformative figure in genre thriller writing.

The opposite of suave

Ambler successfully inverted the conventional spy story aesthetic established by John Buchan, William Le Queux and H.C. McNeile and set out to raise the quality of the popular espionage thriller by introducing ‘realism’, moral and literary seriousness, and popular front politics’ in to his work (Denning, 1987: 61). His protagonists were ‘the opposite of suave, the opposite of superman’ (Fenton, 2009: VI), engineers, managers, writers and academics who respond to the crises that Ambler contrived for them as might you or I. *The Mask of Dimitrios* is considered a masterpiece of the genre, and the most highly regarded from his first group of six novels, written between 1936 and 1940.

Honour is a common trope in the spy thriller and tends to be driven by questions around the nature of identity and conceptions of reputation, fidelity, and betrayal. The purpose of this article is to explore the central paradox at the heart of the Dimitrios narrative in relation to honour as an interchangeable moral equivalent, which in the typical Ambler novel becomes a shifting commodity that is traded, elided, and re-invented through the various interactions of the principal characters, but also something that becomes an abiding determinant of their fate (Ambler, 2009:1).

The premise for the story is perhaps conventional enough as it foregrounds a fatal convergence of two social opposites, in this case a former university academic and writer of popular crime fiction Charles Latimer, and Dimitrios, a notorious criminal assassin ignominiously murdered, whose corpse has been recently dredged from the Bosphorus. Purportedly embarking on a piece of creative writing research, Latimer seeks to find out more about Dimitrios. His investigation takes him across Europe and exposes an establishment hamstrung by corruption, and one bent on conspiring to service political power by any means – and at any cost.



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Ideology of Englishness

By invoking Providence, Ambler hints at human fallibility, casting doubt on the reliability of the protagonist, Charles Latimer, and his motivations in the pursuit of truth. He sets up Latimer as an arbiter, a political scientist who has critiqued a gamut of opposing ideologies before becoming a writer of pulp fiction, all of which are founded in Judeo-Christian codes of conduct and concerned with questions around civic identity, and among other things: European anarchism, democratic socialism, and racial theory. These are presented to us through Latimer’s ‘ideology of Englishness’, an implicit hegemony of Western ethical values; a corollary of which is a largely Christian, but martial conception of honour: courage, loyalty, duty, and service (Denning, 1987:118).

For instance, one of Latimer’s academic treatises apparently investigates Alfred Rosenberg’s work, then a principal tenet of Nazi thinking (*The Mask of Dimitrios* was published in 1939), which notoriously rejects conventional Christianity and espouses a myth of blood superiority, echoing earlier conceptions of muscular Christianity, but most notably celebrated in the chivalric romances of the late Medieval period and the promotion of chivalric values during the Crusades, it underpins the ordering of a world that is governed, if not by Christian-based hierarchies, then a ‘Nordic’ (white or ‘Aryan’) Nazi supremacy, manifestly Western in outlook and in direct opposition to the East. Though Latimer may be unreliable, the moral standard of the narrative world he inhabits is anchored in Western ‘superhuman law’ (Ambler, 2009:1).

Latimer’s retreat into writing fiction suggests a withdrawal from the world away from politics into a comfort zone where rules are ideologically palatable and safe; an echo chamber where perceived transgressions are brought to book, and a pragmatic acknowledgement that life does not imitate art, and that art, as characterised by the prosaic titles listed as his novels conforms to the prescribed rules of procedural detective fiction. As the Turkish Chief of Police, Colonel Haki, puts it: ‘In a roman policier there is a corpse, a number of suspects, a detective and a gallows’ (Ambler, 2009:11).

Colonel Haki first appears as an admirer of Latimer’s work, who reads ‘nothing but romans policiers’. The relationship between the two raises questions that dog the nature of Latimer’s obsession with the Dimitrios case, and in particular around the ethical underpinnings of academic research, or what could be described as honourable cause and the moral position of the academic-cum-novelist (Ambler, 2009:109). The cult or fetishization of knowledge, or perhaps how new knowledge can be squandered in the writing of fiction (from an Academy standpoint), informs the doubt and guilt that pervades the author’s central consciousness in the narrative, and provides insight into the more narcissistic impetus driving Latimer’s quest: ‘To have hold of the truth, to have explained that he was trying, for purely academic reasons, to trace the history of a dead

criminal named Dimitrios would have been a long and uneasy business' (Ambler, 2009:40). His subsequent meetings with Haki set up a central theme of identity and displacement and how this is mediated around all of the principal characters in the novel.

There follows a discussion between the two men that centres on the plotting of a detective novel, but this is overtaken by Haki's tantalizing offer for Latimer to experience true crime first hand, one that in Haki's view bears no comparison to any degree of verisimilitude in fiction: 'You see, Mr. Latimer? There is your story. Incomplete. Inartistic. No detection, no suspects, no hidden motives, merely sordid' (Ambler, 2009:14). The complicity of both men to share confidential information about Dimitrios; introduced to us as an archetypal criminal to demonstrate a point, and eventually proffered to Latimer on a mortuary slab by Haki as an indulgence, highlights if not the ennui that prompts the dishonourable nature of the arrangement in the first instance, then the stereotypical practices of a corrupt foreign (non Western) establishment, and the hypocrisy of an ethically moribund protagonist.

Taxonomy of Honour

What begin to emerge are the precarious hierarchies of values that intersect, intimated by the author in various ways throughout, mediated by Latimer and the various subaltern sources he enlists to investigate the life (and death) of Dimitrios. A pragmatic taxonomy of honour conception laundered by societal norms, immediately locates Latimer and Haki as somehow more honourable than their subject by dint of their status, despite their conduct; in effect exercising just one among many competing sets of (moral) standards in the narrative, and echoing the author's initial opposition that 'if there should be such a thing as a superhuman Law, it is administered with subhuman inefficiency' (Ambler, 2009:1).

Latimer is 'fascinated by the details contained in the police dossier', and this provides a measure of character, in the same way that other documents and reports, official or otherwise vouch for character and speak to a taxonomy of honour in the narrative. Letters of introduction, court depositions, registers of residency and refugee status, passports, death certificates, identity cards, letters of transit (see also *Casablanca*, dir. Michael Curtiz 1942), news reportage, and anecdotes all remain elliptical or fraudulent tokens of identity and are acknowledged as such. To be the subject of a secret police dossier, on the other hand, would already categorise Dimitrios in this taxonomy as honourless, or dishonourable in one reading, but in another speaks to a cemented reputation, and might be considered a badge of honour amongst his criminal peers or the political interests that would seek to employ his services. The dual reading of the Dimitrios dossier is pivotal and represents a central paradox at the heart of the narrative in relation to honour, and one activated by identity and its displacement.

Haki gives Latimer sanction to investigate Dimitrios by discussing the dossier, but most importantly, by agreeing for him to view the



corpse – which brings his reputation, or at least an incomplete police record, and the man together, but at the same time creates a distinction between the two. The body of Dimitrios on the mortuary slab and the 'squalid pile of clothes that was his estate' (Ambler, 2009:20) is a stark image, one that perhaps presents a moral truth to Latimer and recalls his earlier evocation of Old Testament lore: 'he died by violence. That is something very like justice' (Ambler, 2009:12), but the spectacle in the morgue is 'pitiable', despite it being 'the end of an odyssey', reinforcing the notion that actually there is no honour under these circumstances, only degradation and opprobrium; that honour is for the birds.

Uneasy Business

Through a series of encounters all characterized by conventional business practices (introductions, deals, payments) Latimer comes to understand the role of the *Eurasian Credit Trust*, an apparently reputable purveyor of transnational business finance based in Monaco, but in addition one that apparently operates clandestinely supporting criminal and espionage activity as well. The proximity between acceptable business practice and criminality is best articulated by Haki in his brief cameo of Dimitrios as the embodiment of the intersection between the two, amongst a



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group he dubs 'the professionals, the entrepreneurs, the links between the businessmen, the politicians who desire the end but are afraid of the means, and the fanatics, the idealists who are prepared to die for their convictions' (Ambler, 2009:11). This description, and in particular the use of *entrepreneur* connoting the active propagation of business activity for profit effectively as a conduit, again reflects the interrelationship between honour and transgression in the novel and highlights the *realpolitik* of international relations and a Janus-like duality. This is later laid bare by the journalist, Marukakis, who describes Dimitrios in terms of a cipher: 'For him there is no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest' (Ambler, 2009:65). Honour is ultimately functional for Dimitrios, an expedience for his own self-preservation.

The ironic use of *Trust* intimates Ambler's own scepticism regarding the fidelity of international financial institutions, and to some degree the lengths they go to manage and brand their reputations, however secretive their practices (the seat of the bank is also apposite to this in regards to codes of behaviour and liminal spaces, which is touched on later). His directorship of *Eurasian Credit Trust* appears to be the apogee of Dimitrios' chequered career trajectory, and clearly ties legitimacy and criminality together, and opens up the idea of the importance of reputation, and how it is in effect serviced by honour. The *Trust*, veiled by client confidentiality, clearly lends Dimitrios the best of both worlds: secures for him the air of respectability, and an honourable place in society, but also gives him freedom to operate unencumbered by any ethical considerations. Latimer's 'uneasy business' is typified by its transactional nature, and by intimation, attendant common business practice where *sharp* and *astute* become interchangeable dependent on your point of view.

The extent to which the characters are prepared to trade information with Latimer, namely the anecdotal flotsam that form the gradual accretion

of the Dimitrios reputation-identity, frames much of the action and could be characterized as a series of transactional business deals that tend to be conducted, even when physical violence looms in a relatively cordial fashion. Peters, Dimitrios' former criminal associate, puts it succinctly: 'The difference between Dimitrios and the more respectable type of successful businessman is only a difference of method or illegal method. Both are in their respective ways ruthless.' (Ambler, 2009:149). Conversely, Latimer also judges Peters as 'loathsome', with a mind 'divided too neatly. With one half he could peddle drugs and buy rentes (Government Bonds), and read Poemes Erotiques, while with the other he could excrete a warm, sickly fluid to obscure his obscene soul.' (Ambler, 2009:145). Latimer finds this dichotomy repellent and paradoxical; an opposition that illustrates a moral ambivalence except in reciprocal business terms; and the only 'honour among scoundrels' (Ambler, 2009:118). What constitutes a register of acceptable business practice appears to transcend or trump all other codes of morality in the narrative, and one that drives 'naked self-interest' as characterized by Dimitrios.

In this business economy, it is the affordability of honour and the accounting of reputation that is thrown into relief as leverage to extort money through blackmail. Blackmail is another common trope in the novel, and one that becomes a useful tool for all of the principal characters, and arguably Latimer also, albeit as a reluctant participant. Blackmail drives the final confrontation between Peters, Latimer and Dimitrios (his plan to fake his own death now exposed) and is prefaced by Latimer's concerns over the shifting moral high ground, and the scene itself is reminiscent of a duel where Latimer, to all intents and purposes, finds himself cast as a second. This duel, however, is fought not to gain 'satisfaction' in the conventional way, but is to preserve honour pegged to the bubble reputation that Dimitrios has procured to service his vanity, and one that gives him his desired status as well as access to wealth through his directorship of the *Eurasian Credit Trust*. In another reading this confrontation would be all about revenge, and a couple of gangsters settling old scores, which of course it is, but in the context of honour Dimitrios is also protecting a necessary business adjunct to his reputation-identity by keeping up appearances, one that his status now demands he must. Dimitrios has understood the utility of honour, and perhaps perversely comes full circle in the more traditional sense, by learning its real cost; the need to aggressively protect something he knows he now cannot lose.

Throughout the novel, the precarious hierarchies of values and their pragmatic taxonomy across religion, nationality, gender, political views and social standing all activate honour in different ways and are established through societal status attached to one of the above. Honour always resides with the establishment, and never with the outsider. Predestination, alluded to by the author at the beginning of the narrative in the form of Providence and one's place in the world, is interpreted differently,

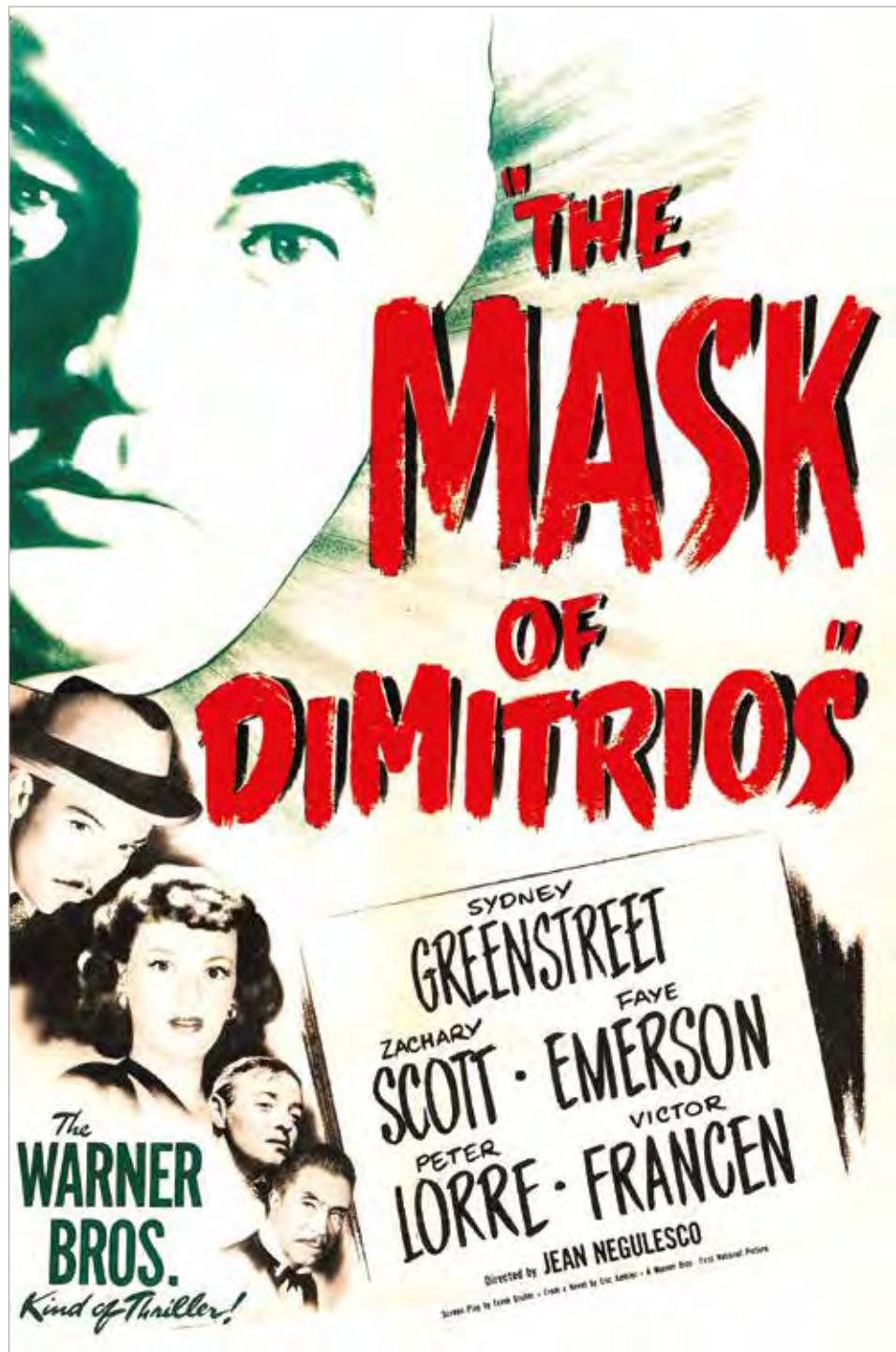
but perhaps as cynically by Peters whose constant reference to 'the Great One' appears alternately as a whimsical way of articulating the nature of the things, and licence for his various nefarious activities (Ambler, 2009:47). The absence of honour in his various criminal dealings is measured and countered by a Judeo-Christian set of values as to what is morally acceptable, but cynically or not, honour becomes irrelevant in the face of destiny, and his use of 'the Great One': 'as someone who understands that it is sometimes necessary, for business reasons, to do unpleasant things' (Ambler, 2009:168).

Cultural divisions defined by religion; Christian, Jew, Muslim also bleed into more bourgeois distinctions around national stereotypes, and to some extent the burgeoning appearance of political ideology, and in particular, Marxism (and how it transcends boundaries). Prim Englishmen, Turkish Authoritarians, Russian alcoholics, Greek Businessmen, and Bulgarian prostitutes all vie for a relative place in the sun. The 'ideology of Englishness', however, remains the ultimate arbiter as dictated by Ambler, where a pre-eminent ethical code, though not explicit for the most part, pervades the authorial tone of the narrative; one that is implicitly located in an English value system, and one that pronounces on all others. Latimer, by dint of his peripatetic lifestyle and his rejection of his former academic role takes on an ambiguous status. Though English in origin, his allegiances are questionable but are grounded at least in a Western tradition, and hence why the relationships between civic identity, fixed locations, and codes of behaviour and their semiotic significance become perhaps the more opposite measure of how honour functions in the context of the narrative.

Identity and Displacement

It follows then that Istanbul as a location for the opening of *Dimitrios* is indicative of Ambler's oppositional schema for the action to come, and as a backdrop to the speculative origins of Dimitrios (and his statelessness), becomes a well-trodden generic symbol of the boundaries that exist between East and West, both politically and culturally. This opposition is fundamental to the underlying conflicts in *The Mask of Dimitrios*, which in the context of honour codes freight *Constantinople* as a site of implicit Judeo-Christian ethical superiority, a Charlemagnian sense of entitlement; manifestly colonial ownership, where 'western knights found a world on which the imprint of the glories of the classical past, as a visible heritage was infinitely sharper than anywhere than in their homelands' (Keen, 1984:108). While Istanbul is symbolic in this sense, it is indicative also of the peripatetic nature of the narrative. Dimitrios is described as a 'great traveller' someone who by instinct 'stay[s] on the fringe of the plot' (Ambler, 2009:11), and the narrative as a whole takes place in a host of different countries, and travel more generally in genre narratives such as *Dimitrios* (e.g. *Stamboul Train*, *Casablanca*, any *James Bond*) becomes a necessary adjunct to the action.

For instance, Ian Fleming's meditations on his thrillers as being intended for warm-blooded



heterosexual males on trains, and aeroplanes (Vidal, 2009:74), as well as perhaps a measure of how long distance travel was beginning to become more mainstream during the pre-war period, and there is a suggestion that those who occupy the transit/ travel space, and its association with the hedged status of the spy; of shifting allegiance/no allegiance and mercenary imperative, somehow connote untrustworthiness or dishonour. There also exists a tradition that stretches back to antiquity, arguably a rebuttal of this position, and certainly one that became a hallmark of the medieval romance, that of the knightly lone adventurer, and

the cults of individualism and errantry (Keen, 1984:226). Errantry could also be construed as a central trope in many Ambler narratives where his protagonists find themselves away from home, and in erring ways their courage, code of values etc. are always tested as a consequence.

The liminality of travel, in effect being stateless suggests that there are different rules for those who are travelling: a perpetual act of escape, where there are no laws, or at least ones that are constantly in flux. Conceptions of honour when one does not belong, and spaces in which the action in *Dimitrios* plays out: holiday villas, hotel rooms, hostels, refugee camps,

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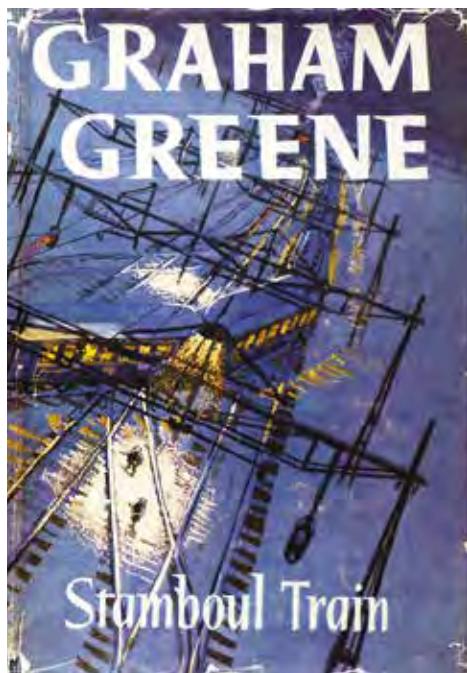


Image: © Nick Jones

train compartments, bars, restaurants etc. again point to the precariousness of colliding value systems in liminal spaces, and what has been described as a 'hollowing out of civic identity', and a diminishing of responsibility when in transit (Mishra, 2016).

Many of the characters in the narrative appear displaced; on the move or foreigners in the places we meet them (Latimer chief among them), which supports Giddens' ideas concerning 'distanciation', because everyone is an outsider there are no deep collective ties; society becomes atomized with no one universal conception of honour. Bauman also considers this to be indicative of postmodern readings in relation to fixity and social conformity, which highlights the paradox of Dimitrios and his dislocated status, and that honour can only exist for him on his own expedient terms: 'I propose that in the same way as the pilgrim was the most fitting allegory of modern life strategy, preoccupied with the daunting task of identity-building and the stroller, the vagabond, the tourist and the player offer jointly the metaphor for the post-modern strategy moved by the horror of being bound and fixed.' (Bauman, 1995:91). Dimitrios is permanently 'on the run' from moral conformity, and ergo in a permanent state of transgression, or another apposite reading, perpetually in limbo or a state of *Original Sin*.

With the imminent prospect of meeting Dimitrios, Latimer has become a compromised documentarist, and a burgeoning accessory to blackmail and murder. His earlier assertion that violent death for Dimitrios is justified rings of hypocrisy, particularly as he is to become now the de facto instrument of justice. Good and Evil are merely 'baroque abstractions' where art and scientific advancement appear in direct opposition to, and are superseded by, the pursuit of power and material wealth (Ambler, 2009:187).

Dimitrios dies amongst a blood strewn mess of thousand-franc notes, literally his own blood money; coupons redeemable for the estimable civic identity he has so desperately acquired; his price for honour. The author presents Dimitrios as a tragic figure who comes to his inevitable, providential end: already an itinerant orphan, he is uprooted by the Greco-Turkish War, and in the ensuing turmoil comes to understand that social formulations such as honour, reputation, and the surety of civic stability are equivocal, and easily sacrificed to vanity and political ambition, or manipulated for material gain. The apparent rise of Dimitrios to a directorship of the *Eurasian Credit Trust* demonstrates he understands that at least to the outside world he must conform to an overarching moral vision that binds society together.

Conclusion

The eponymous 'mask' facilitated in part by this dislocated status, could be reference to a façade of belonging, his throwaway identities become disguises behind which Dimitrios, the economic migrant whose only loyalty is to himself, dons civic fixity as a functional mechanism for social advancement. His attachment to the mysterious La Comtesse is also part of a strategy that elevates him by association to a state beyond reproach, and implicitly ties him

to aristocratic codes of behaviour (with its ancient traditions of chivalry); an honourable brand that money does in fact buy him, albeit temporarily, but one to which he can never belong, and one he understands he has to protect, not just to remain in a privileged milieu but as an act of survival. His understanding of how honour works, and the pivotal taxonomy of morality and transgression is reflected in his directorship of the *Eurasian Credit Trust*, with its dual, and characteristically duplicitous functions in this and other Ambler novels; at once a stalwart of legitimate, transnational business finance and a clandestine instigator of deadly intrigue on the international scene.

The authorial voice frames the narrative as a kind of morality tale where the characters' destiny seems largely driven by their own moral compass, created by colliding and thus exploitable value systems through which the *status quo* is rationalised or transgressive behaviour justified. Good and bad can be interpreted, dependent on reading. Tied to this is the dubious nature of mobility, which appears to propagate the evasive nature of honour in the dynamic, shifting fictional world of Ambler in immediate pre-war Europe. In this context, the imminent onset of the Second World War could be characterized as an extreme example of mobility, with all the pejorative ramifications this has, coupled with the irony perhaps that conceptions of honour were first promulgated in feats of arms. Latimer remains in retreat at the end of the novel just as he did at the beginning, only now he is able to understand his sanctuary more readily as a desire to return to an epitome of Englishness and stability. He crafts a sort of excessive fixity, with a detective story set in an English village in July; a citadel of civic identity and Englishness, with its inevitable codes of behaviour and predictably honourable outcomes: 'the clink of teacups and sweet smell of grass on a July evening... It was the sort of thing that he himself would like to hear about' (Ambler, 2009:226).

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