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Vol. VIII, No. 1: The World We Live In: The Novels of Eric Ambler

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The Hollins Critic

Volume VIII, No. 1

Hollins College, Virginia

February, 1971

The World We Live In: The Novels of Eric Ambler



I

The scene is vintage. As a steamer moves doggedly across Lake Leman, stopping here and there and loading and discharging passengers as it goes, two gentlemen in their later middle years meet on deck, it appears casually, and exchange the mild pleasantries appropriate to strangers of their age and class. They have, we are told, much in common. "In effect, the jobs they did . . . were the same; they were opposite numbers . . . Both had fought with bravery and distinction in resistance movements when their small countries had been under

The Hollins Critic

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Published five times a year, in the months of February, April, June, October, and December, by Hollins College, Virginia. Second class postage paid at Roanoke, Virginia. Copyright 1971 by Hollins College, Virginia 24020.

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The Hollins Critic is two dollars a year (\$3.00 in Canada and overseas).

German occupation. Both had been leaders and organizers, loyal to their governments in exile and, as professional soldiers from 'good' families, politically of the right. They had survived the occupation because they were hard, self-reliant and resourceful men, because they had despised heroics and action for action's sake and because they had learned early enough to disobey orders from remote commanders when they knew those orders to be unrealistic or ill-advised." No one notices them nor is it surprising that they go unnoticed. Their clothes and manners are too ordinary to attract attention.

But appearances are, as always, deceiving. What no one else on board knows, what in fact both men have taken elaborate pains to conceal, is that each is the intelligence chief of a small NATO country, that they have known one another for fifteen years, and that between them, by a succession of tiny steps no one of which was significant enough to necessitate commitment until now, they have conceived and are about to execute a swindle that will, in a single blow, expose the idiocy of big-power espionage, spit in the eyes of the United States and Russia and, if all goes well, line the pockets of the swindlers themselves.

Their scheme, we gradually learn, is the result of a complex of coinciding factors. Both men—their names are Colonels Jost and Brand, but these, it develops, are only pseudonyms—have reached what it is now evident is the highest rank or pay either can expect. Their respective countries, though part of NATO, are "pygmies involved in a struggle between giants." Both have been humiliated repeatedly by the indistinguishable arrogances of the CIA and KGB. As victors over the Germans, both believe fundamentally in the use of guerrilla tactics for bringing down the mighty. Both recognize that most intelligence work simply makes a secret of what is already widely known. Their disillusionment, in other words, is complete, and both want to retire. But neither can afford to. What better way, then, than to do it together, by the joint employment of their highly specialized skills and knowledge, and to kill a number of mutually annoying birds with the same stone? Two aging spies, in short, are coming in from the cold—and getting rich in the process.

Thus, with his customary mastery of scene and detail, his highly developed awareness of the complexity of human motive and his usual stylistic cool, does Eric Ambler open *The Intercom Conspiracy*, his thirteenth novel (or the thirteenth he now claims), a novel that condenses and concentrates many of the thematic obsessions characteristic of his earlier books and, at the same time, adds another portrait to the gallery he has been painting for more than thirty years. It is a gallery that, viewed all of a piece, in turn epitomizes a world; and Ambler's world—far from being the projection of an adolescent's fantasies of spies who foil master-plots while they wallow in booze and broads—is very much the world we live in.

II

Espionage is among the oldest of literary subjects. Tales of spying and subversion abound in Homer and the Bible, and English and American history and legend—King Alfred's infiltration of the Danes, for example, or Nathan Hale's exploits on Long Island during the Revolution—are rich in incidents of clandestine enterprise. Shakespeare treats espionage as a normal and indeed inevitable feature of warfare, whether military or political, and with the rise of the novel fully dressed narratives involving the feats of spies become common. Dumas builds many of his chronicles around conspiracies and their (usually surreptitious) undoing. One of Cooper's early books is entitled *The Spy*. A key character in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* is an agent identified by the same designation. Until the latter part of the nineteenth century the subject was treated—whether well or ill—like any other.

Then rigidity set in. As with the novel of crime, where the allied artifices of the English country-house weekend, the trickily baffling murder and its tidy solution by a genius of deduction had replaced the more complex perceptions about criminal behavior of Dickens, Dostoevsky and Conrad, a series of conventions eventually crystallized into the "spy novel," which reviewers and critics in turn labeled a branch of the "detective story" and in the next breath dismissed as "popular entertainment." In an imaginary but representative case—the novels of Anthony Hope and the even more successful tales of E. Phillips Oppenheim can stand for the class—an unmistakably aristocratic Englishman, out of Eton and Balliol, discovers an intrigue of unspeakable evil and to others unmanageable dimension, doffs monocle and dons disguise, infiltrates the councils of the conspirators, by his mastery of languages, psychology, firearms, equitation and swordsmanship—above all by exploiting the virtues bred into his class—sets matters right, renounces (or more rarely gets) the girl, and rides off into the sunset, jaded again but secure in the satisfaction that he has Done Well and Not Let Down the School. Yarns of this sort often provided enough thrills, twists, reversals and straightforward action to leave their readers begging for more (a few, like Oppenheim's *The Great Impersonation*, still do), but they resembled the reality of international espionage about as closely as "Julia" resembles contemporary black life or "Bonanza" the post-Civil War West.

It is Eric Ambler's distinctive contribution to 20th-century fiction that he was able both to discard such preposterous conventions, which were strangling the literature of espionage, and to establish a believable world, shabby, gritty, devious, threatening but compellingly interesting, to replace them. His achievement, accomplished first through a series of five novels that reflect the period of "jitters" that preceded Hitler's invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War II, later—after a silence of eleven years—in a group of tales drawn from the atmosphere of the Cold War, parallels what Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were doing, at roughly the same time, with the detective story. In his famous essay "The Simple Art of Murder" Chandler said of Hammett (what he might as easily have said of himself) that he "gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse." By returning espionage to the kind of men and women who spy or conspire because the world they live in works that way (the key line in *Epitaph for a Spy* is the observation that the agent "needed the money") Ambler not only overthrew a cliché but created a new kind of fictional milieu. The glamorless landscapes of John le Carré would be inconceivable had not Ambler discovered and put to use the sensibility that perceives them.

Though the ablest, he was not quite the first to do so, however. Two writers of an earlier generation momentarily suggested the direction his work eventually would take, even if, in the end, neither exploited, as Ambler has, his original insight. In *The Power-House* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps* John Buchan created the figure of an innocent man hunted down like an animal. Building on his experiences during World War I, Somerset Maugham portrayed in the sketches that make up *Ashenden* the drab and hopelessly unromantic reality in which agents and double agents actually operate. Afterward Buchan returned, in the Hannay novels that followed, to more conventional narrative, while Maugham wrote nothing further about espionage. Yet Ambler, it appears, took something from both. All of his early and several of his later novels use Buchan's innocent as perceiving figure and organizing consciousness, and throughout his work, like a dark undercurrent, there runs an obsession with the evils of cartels, trusts and consortia that echoes and amplifies Buchan's repeated suggestion that the plot at hand is no more than the visible part of a conspiratorial cobweb of immense scope and power. From Maugham, perhaps, Ambler derived some of his special feeling for the seedy hotels and dingy cafes and the dreary, colorless agents who appear in them, as well as his knack for setting them down in the neat, lucid but tellingly flat and dispassionate prose appropriate to their portrayal.

Ambler went so far beyond either, however, that their influence on his fiction must be considered, at best, as no more than shadowy. For instead of using a fresh perception once and then abandoning it, he broadened and deepened his vision book by book, expanding and developing it this way and that, adding to and enlarging it as its associations and extensions became clearer and richer, until in the end he had not only reinvigorated a tired subject (and by so doing returned it to the mainstream of contemporary literature) but in the process created that special world—with its distinctive themes, characters,

Eric Ambler

Eric Ambler was born in London on June 28, 1909. He took an engineering degree and worked for a brief time as an engineer's apprentice. Mr. Ambler dabbled in acting and advertising until 1937 when he settled upon a career as a professional writer. During the war he served in the British Army, attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and was awarded the U. S. Bronze Star.

Besides his other literary achievements, Mr. Ambler has produced films (notably "The October Man"), written screenplays, and even created a series for television, "Checkmate." Among his films are "The Way Ahead" (1944), "The Promoter" (1952), "The Cruel Sea" (1953), "The Purple Plain" (1955), "A Night to Remember" (1958), "The Wreck of the Mary Deare" (1959), "Topkapi" (1964), and "The Golden Silence" (1969). He has also contributed many short stories and articles to magazines and newspapers, has edited an anthology of spy stories, *To Catch a Spy*, and has published one book of his essays, *The Ability to Kill*.

Mr. Ambler is married and lives in Switzerland.

— L. D.

stylistic features and recurrent preoccupations—that is the inevitable mark of the considerable novelist.

III

Ambler has said that "in most human beings ideas of spying and being spied upon touch fantasy systems at deep and sensitive levels of the mind." One need not be especially psychoanalytical to see that over the course of his novels a series of fantasy systems of his own recur regularly and that they in turn provide the thematic touchstones and establish the operational structures of his most characteristic work.

He discovered the first of them with his earliest books—the famous pre-World War II five upon which his reputation as a "master of suspense" rests—and was to use it as either an organizing principle or an important subsidiary idea in most of his later novels as well. Simply put, it might be described as "the loss of innocence." It is, of course, one of the commonest of literary themes, employed, among others, by Dickens, Henry James and Conrad in some of their most important novels. Ambler uses it, however, not only as a controlling idea—the thing, or one of them, that his books are about—but as the vehicle by which his plots are developed, his actions unfolded and his suspense created.

In *Background to Danger* (1937), for example, Kenton, a British journalist down on his luck in Central Europe, agrees, in the course of a depressing train ride, to carry a stranger's packet of papers across a border—for a small sum of money. Almost immediately he finds himself the object of a search by the agents of several countries and the target of their guns. Before he reaches safety at last (and he does so not, as in Buchan, by the discovery of his own courage

Books by Eric Ambler

THE DARK FRONTIER

London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936. 7/6.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939. 2/.

UNCOMMON DANGER

London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1937. 7/6.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939. 2/.

As BACKGROUND TO DANGER

New York: Knopf, 1937. \$2.
Toronto: Ryerson, 1937. \$2.25.
Garden City: Sun Dial, 1940. \$.79.
Philadelphia: Triangle, 1943. \$.49.

EPITAPH FOR A SPY

London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938. 7/6.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939. 2/.
New York: Knopf, 1952. \$3.
London: Bodley Head, 1966. 18/.

CAUSE FOR ALARM

London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939. 7/6.
New York: Knopf, 1939. \$2.
Garden City: Sun Dial, 1940. \$.79.
New York: Knopf (Black Widow Thriller), 1945. \$2.
Toronto: Ryerson (Black Widow Thriller), 1945. \$2.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1949. 5/.

THE MASK OF DIMITRIOS

London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939. 7/6.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940. 2/.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1944. 5/.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965. 16/.

As A COFFIN FOR DIMITRIOS

New York: Knopf, 1939. \$2.
Toronto: Ryerson, 1939. \$2.25.
Garden City: Sun Dial, 1940. \$.79.
Toronto: Blue Ribbon, 1940. \$.98.
Cleveland: World, 1944. \$.49.
New York: Knopf (Black Widow Thriller), 1945. \$2.
Toronto: Ryerson (Black Widow Thriller), 1945. \$2.

JOURNEY INTO FEAR

London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940. 8/3.
New York: Knopf, 1940. \$2.
Toronto: Musson, 1940. \$2.
Garden City: Sun Dial, 1942. \$.79.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1944. 3/.

INTRIGUE

'(Journey Into Fear, A Coffin for Dimitrios, Cause for Alarm, Background to Danger)
New York: Knopf, 1943. \$2.95.
Toronto: Ryerson, 1943. \$3.49.
New York: Knopf, 1952. \$1.95.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965. 30/.

DOUBLE DECKER: TWO COMPLETE SPY NOVELS

Cleveland: World, 1945. \$1.
Toronto: Ryerson, 1945. \$1.69.

SKYTIP (with Charles Rodda as "Eliot Reed")

Garden City: Doubleday, 1950. \$2.50.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1951. 9/6.

JUDGMENT ON DELTICHEV

London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1951. 10/6.
New York: Knopf, 1951. \$3.
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1954. 6/.

TENDER TO DANGER (with Charles Rodda as "Eliot Reed")

Garden City: Doubleday, 1951. \$2.50.
As TENDER TO MOONLIGHT
London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1952. 10/6.
Toronto: Musson, 1952. \$2.75.

THE SCHIRMER INHERITANCE

London: Heinemann, 1953. 12/6.
New York: Knopf, 1953. \$3.

THE MARAS AFFAIR (with Charles Rodda as "Eliot Reed")

Garden City: Doubleday, 1953. \$2.50.
London: Collins, 1953. 9/6.
London: Collins, 1955. 6/.

CHARTER TO DANGER (with Charles Rodda as "Eliot Reed")
London: Collins, 1954. 10/6.

THE NIGHT-COMERS

London: Heinemann, 1956. 13/6.
As STATE OF SIEGE
New York: Knopf, 1956. \$3.50.

PASSPORT TO PANIC (with Charles Rodda as "Eliot Reed")

London: Collins, 1958. 10/6.
London: Collins, 1960. 6/.

PASSAGE OF ARMS

London: Heinemann, 1959. 16/.
New York: Knopf, 1960. \$3.95.

THE LIGHT OF DAY

London: Heinemann, 1962. 18/.
New York: Knopf, 1963. \$3.95.

THE ABILITY TO KILL AND OTHER PIECES

London: Bodley Head, 1963. 16/.

A KIND OF ANGER

New York: Atheneum, 1964. \$4.95.
London: Bodley Head, 1964. 18/.
Toronto: Queenswood, 1964. \$3.95.

TO CATCH A SPY (ed.)

London: Bodley Head, 1964. 16/.
New York: Atheneum, 1965. \$4.50.

THE INTRIGUERS

(Passage of Arms, State of Siege, The Schirmer Inheritance, Judgment on Deltchev)
New York: Knopf, 1965. \$5.95.

DIRTY STORY

New York: Atheneum, 1967. \$5.95.
London: Bodley Head, 1967. 21/.

THE INTERCOM CONSPIRACY

New York: Atheneum, 1969. \$5.95.
London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970. 25/.

and native cunning but by the expert assistance of the amiable Russian agent Zaleshoff) he has shucked his (symbolically British?) complacency about the course of European politics and faced up to the pervasive evil of totalitarianism. "It's not just a struggle between Fascism and Communism," he defiantly tells one of his captors. "It's between the free human spirit and the stupid, fumbling, brutish forces of the primeval swamp."

Three other of the early and one of Ambler's later novels are based on a similar theme. In *Epitaph for a Spy* (1938) the stateless young language teacher Vadassy must uncover the identity of an agent to free himself of espionage

charges. In *Cause for Alarm* (1939) Marlow, an English engineer sent to run the Italian office of a British armaments firm, blunders his way into the middle of an internal struggle between competing Axis intelligence systems and—again with the aid of the busy Zaleshoff—escapes to tell the tale only after his eyes have been opened to the reality of the political decadence that in a year or two will plunge Europe into a new world war. *Journey into Fear* (1940) puts Graham, another armaments engineer, into the unwitting possession of secrets that Axis agents want and are willing to kill him to get. *State of Siege* (1956), a tale set in Southeast Asia in post-war days, is constructed in much the same

way. In each case Ambler's important point is that political innocence only blinds one to the omnipresence of social decay and its manipulation for aggressive state purposes, and his suspense comes from the uncertainty of his central characters about themselves and the world they live in rather than from simplistic literary trickery.

With *A Coffin for Dimitrios* (1940) Ambler added to his fantasy of lost or violated innocence a second major theme that was to serve as the basis for his greatest post-war novel as well. Charles Latimer, the British historian and best-selling writer of detective stories who is the central consciousness of the novel, is one of Ambler's innocents too, but he is also an active seeker after the truth of his times. His curiosity piqued by the chance view of a criminal's corpse in Istanbul (one of Ambler's favorite settings), he spends the succeeding months running down the life story of Dimitrios, whom he at first believes to be only the common thief he had seen in a morgue. Bit by bit, however, he discovers that Dimitrios was something more complicated—heroin smuggler, political assassin, spy and agent for a vast international trust with tentacles in every corner of the armed camp that Europe has become—and by the time he has reached the end of his search Latimer has come face to face not only with the truth about Dimitrios (which is frightening enough) but with the ubiquitous amorality of European political life. The densest and most complex of Ambler's early novels (for some readers the masterpiece of his entire career), *Dimitrios* uses the search for truth as a way of depicting the world of the 1920s and '30s, and it is in its richness and breadth of portraiture and suggestion, rather than in its cliff-hanging plot, that its stature resides.

Pursuit of the truth serves also as the mainspring of *Judgment on Deltchev* (1951) and *The Schirmer Inheritance* (1953), the two novels with which, after a silence of eleven years, Ambler returned to fiction. In *Deltchev*, built around a show trial in an imaginary but presumably representative satellite state, a British journalist's determination to discover the real character of the defendant becomes Ambler's means of anatomizing the contradictions and cross-purposes of Balkan political life under Soviet rule. *Schirmer* (with *Dimitrios* one of the twin peaks of Ambler's accomplishment) uses a lawyer's search for the lost heir to an American fortune as the avenue to a panorama of post-war Europe, with its hordes of displaced persons, its unstable polity and its resulting assortment of competing interests, factions and parties. As tightly packed as *Dimitrios*, it mixes history, contemporaneity, scene and character to form a blend that provides one of the broadest and most vivid views of the aftermath of World War II in European or American fiction.

Two additional concerns, evident in Ambler's early novels but subsidiary in them to his preoccupation with the larger ideas of lost innocence and the search for reality, appear fully developed in his later books.

Trained as an engineer and blessed with an extraordinarily clear and orderly mind, Ambler from the beginning exhibited an interest in the lacy details of technology and business—his pre-war novels abound in them, a substantial part of *Dimitrios* is devoted to Latimer's unraveling of the operations

Homage To Eric Ambler

Like water oiling the bristled piles,
Rust on a freighter's plates,
Moving like shadows along the dockside,
The thin scratch of a phonograph,
The needle scraping like wool on chafed skin,
The touch of a hand for only a moment,
An echo, an echo, an echo like water.

You stand on the balcony with a slim cigar,
You know too much, your eyes are heavy with it,
You are in fog leaning like a streetlamp,
Like a street, wet and electric,
Aware of common danger, a passage as of arms,
A state of continuing siege, your eyes are heavy,
Like smoke, like fog, like the roll of waters.

The light crackles down the mountain walls
So that your hair stands on end, you tighten,
The darkness flees into alleyways,
Under trees, slips under passing cars,
You are tense as a lit fuse, sparks,
A hiss of nerves, you strike a match
With a scrape like needles on the stone wall.

But you have solved it, working alone,
Working with others and with no loss of self-respect,
Cracked it like a simple code, notes of a song,
You feel the hand that holds hard, that grips,
Your eyes are narrow as the iris of a lens,
You say the word, the words, like the light
That spreads on water, you see the broken day:

You write it on the walls.

—R.H.W. DILLARD

of the Eurasian Credit Trust, and the early pages of *Schirmer* meticulously describe an involved legal situation—but it is not until *Passage of Arms* (1960) that he first places a business transaction at the center of a novel. A tale of elaborate intricacy, it builds a Bengali clerk's discovery of an arms stockpile abandoned by Malayan terrorists into what Dorothy Hughes has called a "mosaic" of conflicting interests—black-marketeers, opium smugglers, gun runners and an innocent American couple are among them—but its ultimate effect is to create a symbolic model (echoing Buchan's vast conspiracies) of intrigue

on a far larger scale. It thus stands, with *The Intercom Conspiracy* (1969), which depicts a swindle of similar complexity, as one of Ambler's more sophisticated paradigms of contemporary life.

A final group of Ambler's novels grows out of his interest in bizarre and raffish behavior, evident in the portraiture of all of his books but at last made an end in itself in the two picaresque novels about Arthur Abdel Simpson, *The Light of Day* (1963) and *Dirty Story* (1968), and in Ambler's slightest and least important book, *A Kind of Anger* (1964). Later used as the basis for the highly popular film *Topkapi* (in which Peter Ustinov's portrayal of Simpson stole the show from such seasoned hams as Maximilian Schell, Melina Mercouri and Akim Tamiroff), *The Light of Day* tells Ambler's customary tale of intrigue, but its central interest lies not in the action but in the character of Simpson, pimp, pornographer, thief and scoundrel, who finds himself over his depth in an attempt to burgle Istanbul's Seraglio. With its sequel, which takes Simpson, after a characteristic failure to make a blue movie, into a baffling African civil war, *The Light of Day* differs from the rest of Ambler's novels in tone and treatment, for Simpson recounts his adventures in a colorful (and frequently obscene) personal style quite unlike the dry, detached way in which most Ambler adventures are narrated, and its importance lies in its searching yet curiously sympathetic revelation of Simpson's elaborately self-serving personality—a substantial and for many readers unforgettable addition to the literature of roguery.

Lost innocence, the truth behind "the truth," the mosaic of conspiracy, picaresque—these, in patterns of increasing complexity and enormously varied shifts of emphasis, are the matter from which Ambler has built his world. They are scarcely the concerns of the conventional "thriller."

IV

The Intercom Conspiracy is Ambler's *Tempest*—an autumnal work of extraordinary virtuosity that recapitulates, recombines, varies and inverts the principal themes of more than thirty years and adds to them a bleak yet human spirit of disenchantment and renunciation that reflects, like its predecessors, the spirit of its time.

Its twin Prosperos, Colonels Jost and Brand (both rogues in Ambler's most picaresque vein), prepare and execute a conspiracy of, even for Ambler, Byzantine intricacy. Bitter and bored with the Cold War, they surreptitiously, through a Swiss lawyer, Swiss bank accounts and a dummy office in Munich, purchase a rightwing newsletter—then, still covertly, leak military secrets (of little actual value) through its pages until the outraged CIA, KGB, British and West German intelligence, blackmailed but baffled as to how and by whom the thing has been done, drive up its price and buy it out of existence for an inordinate sum. In the end Jost and Brand find the retirement they seek—Brand, facing death, in the bosom of his family; Jost, chick in arm, on Majorca (appropriately, an island). The swindle has worked, and worked profitably.

Two innocents fall in the process, however. Theodore Carter, working editor of the newsletter, is driven nearly mad by the machinations of which he has no comprehension, and though in the outcome he suffers little more than a searing harassment at the hands of big-power agents, the scales have fallen from

his eyes. The other victim, in one of Ambler's most elaborate inside jokes, is less lucky. Charles Latimer, who three decades before had tracked down the truth about Dimitrios, goes too far at last when, having ferreted out the way the "Intercom conspiracy" was worked, he falls into a trap set by Brand. He winds up buried in concrete on a highway near Versailles, his zeal for truth satisfied for good.

Ambler's wittiest and most sophisticated novel, *Intercom* is distinguished also by its antipathy to all power, left and right. In the 1930s a staunch anti-Fascist, in the 1950s suspicious in turn of Soviet policy, Ambler reveals himself in 1969 as purged of faith in the wisdom, good intentions or competence of either of the great post-war powers, and the conspiracy of Jost and Brand is his way, Prospero-like, of renouncing both. The hell with you all, he seems to say—surely echoing the antipathy to political action that has become so common, East and West, in these post-Hungary, post-Vietnam years.

Yet this is not to suggest that *Intercom* is in any way a swan song. Though the capstone of Ambler's career, the novel that—if he never wrote another—would add the ultimate touch to the continuous fable of international politics he has been writing since 1937, a fable that, as one critic has written, presents in microcosm "the century of uncertainty and fear, blundering and irresponsibility, through which all of us are groping our way," it also, by its technical daring and its high, dispassionate wit, hints at new and brighter things to come.

Now past sixty and writing at the peak of his abilities, Ambler is finishing a fourteenth novel; and others, no doubt, will follow it. Jost's and Brand's revels are ended, to be sure, but not his.

—PAXTON DAVIS

March

If I hear his baying hounds
across the wind, I am Diana.
It is morning in the dark month
of the year. My name is Esther
if it please the king
to hang the sons of Haman.

In this last month
of the religious year,
we have the sound of hell.
At dark I paint a cross
on the open doors and leave
the house. I hear
a thousand tinkers building
lean-tos in the rain.

—ANNE WARNER

Cold Front

There comes a day in winter when the loom
Is broken and the shuttle flies wild; the clouds
Are woven warnings torn from the frame and blown
Across a world turned inside out, a garment
With its lining exposed to greys of space—
A rush into the weft of frozen wind,
Northwest javelins of hurtled air.

I—naked while the fabric swiftly rips,
The shuttling curtains shift and cross the sky—
Reach toward that roof of wind. And now I fear
The loom will hurl me through dissolving woofs,
The maelstrom whirl me past my flesh toward clouds
That interpenetrate with cold and time,
The chaos in the crumbling corridors

Of air. But watching from my attic eye,
I see the patterns come again, the loom
Repaired, the shuttle pulling a straighter edge
Across the northwest threads, a robe of blue.

— LARRY RUBIN

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