

ESSAY

Sound, Interrogation, Torture: John le Carré and the Audible State

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“There is an etiquette to interrogation as there is about everything else,” observes Ned, the narrator-protagonist in John le Carré’s *The Secret Pilgrim* (1990; 201). As Ned implies, interrogation involves customs and ceremonies—an etiquette of ruthlessness—meant to extract the maximum amount of information from interrogatees. Improvising as they go, interrogators may pretend to be sympathetic, or they may threaten violence to hasten confession. In some cases, they record the interrogation; in others, they conduct their questioning beyond the reach of cameras, microphones, or scribes. They use strategic silence or switch lines of questioning to take interrogatees by surprise. By asking one question after another without seeming to heed answers, they conceal their own thoughts and motives. As le Carré represents it, interrogation is strategic conversation, resulting in extorted speech, in which larger forces regulate the dynamics of exchange: military, political, national, legal, statist. In reckoning with the means and ends of interrogation, le Carré engages with state security instantiated in soundworlds, as well as the rights of individuals to speak without coercion, and the limits of freedom under duress. In his novels, he imagines an audible state in which all sound counts as information, although nowhere are the state and its imperatives more audible than in scenes of interrogation and torture.

Interrogations are ubiquitous in le Carré’s novels as formal apparatuses and substantive content. A vetting interview instigates Samuel Fennan’s supposed suicide in *Call for the Dead* (1961), an interview that George Smiley remembers as “particularly friendly” but that Fennan interprets as ruinous to his Foreign Office career (10). In

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A Perfect Spy (1986), Magnus Pym assails refugees with queries: “Where did you come from? What troops did you see there? What colour shoulder boards did they wear?” (447). The barrage of questions forces the interrogatee to remember details that may have seemed irrelevant but that bear crucial information for military strategy or foreign policy. In *A Small Town in Germany* (1968), an agent named Alan Turner investigates a security breach by cross-examining everyone who knows Leo Harting, a low-level worker at the British embassy in Bonn who disappears with sensitive files. Turner adopts various approaches as an interrogator: deference, aggression, patience, skepticism, conjecture. The same methods give a formal design to *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974), in which Smiley, through guesswork and interviews, figures out which highly ranked member of the secret service is a double agent. The novels that make up the Karla Trilogy—*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977), and *Smiley’s People* (1979)—all recount, in greater or lesser detail, Smiley’s interrogation of Karla, the Russian spymaster, in a jail in Delhi, during which Smiley, feeling ill and overcome by heat, says more than he should and Karla never utters a single word.¹ Smiley dwells on this interview because it signifies his greatest failure: he breaks the protocols of interrogation by talking about himself. As a verbal tactic, interrogation has implications for human rights and for the disclosure of information within novelistic discourse. When does dialogue veer into coercion? When does coercion escalate into torture?

Interrogation scenes in le Carré’s novels model interactions between states and individuals. While being questioned, the interrogatee can prevaricate, theatricalize, feign innocence, cooperate, or deploy any number of other strategies that convey the discrepancy between state authority and personal freedom. In *Our Game* (1995), Timothy Cranmer cites two “golden rules to being interrogated”: “The first is never volunteer extraneous detail. The second is never tell a direct lie unless you are able to stick it to the bitter end” (14). Of course, the interrogator can also equivocate, hector, accuse, sympathize, or do whatever it takes to extract information.

In paradigmatic interrogations, the interrogator speaks on behalf of the state, while the interrogatee challenges state authority. During questioning, the interrogator presumes to know everything, down to the minutest intimacies and convictions, and extracts them from the interrogatee’s conscious or unconscious mind. Under the protocols of interrogation, the interrogatee’s rights are suspended, or thought to be suspended, before questioning even begins. From a certain perspective, the most effective interrogation leaves the individual nothing and the state everything: authority, ubiquity, omniscience.

According to the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933), a state has four criteria: a permanent population, a territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. A state exerts authority over everyone within its territorial boundaries—citizens, aliens, tourists, asylum seekers—those with the full rights of citizenship and those deemed to have fewer political or social rights than citizens, or none at all. By definition, a sovereign state reserves the right to protect itself from internal or external threats. To do so, it relies on police forces, military defense, and intelligence agencies. Despite the visibility of such security systems, the state itself is hard to locate. It is not a single entity, but a conglomeration of ideals, practices, policies, and institutions. Statehood—or what might be called stateness or enstatedness—resides both in government and in the population over which the state exercises its authority. The state establishes and maintains legal order; when people obey the law, even laws that they think wrong or immoral, they uphold the validity and sovereignty of the state. After assessing various theories of statehood, Matthew Hart concludes that the state is “an idealization that emerges out of concrete governmental practices and has durable material effects” (“Writing Like a State” 272). Interrogation scenes bring together security measures generated by the state with the material effects of those practices. Through diplomats, bureaucracy, and government, the state formulates and perpetrates its overt policies. Yet the state also operates through covert agents, some of

whom enact roles and enforce policies that run counter to their personal convictions or the law. For le Carré, the overt state combines with its covert counterparts in interrogation scenes. Whereas the state remains remote and elusive, during interrogations it makes its prerogatives and imperatives heard. Interrogations articulate, better than other interventions, the demands that the state makes on its population—namely, to disavow practices that run counter to its ideals or to the interests of the people over whom it exercises sovereignty. The soundworld of interrogation, dominated by the rhythm of question and answer, renders the state audible.

The Audible State

Some critics, categorizing le Carré as a genre writer, emphasize the archetypes, conventions, and formulas in his thrillers (Barzun; Sauerberg; Cawelti and Rosenberg). Other critics situate his novels amid discussions of human rights, refugees, and statehood, issues that are central to his thinking and that bear pointedly on scenes of interrogation. Phyllis Lassner aptly discusses Jewish refugees and the precariousness of citizenship in le Carré's early novels (166–215). With reference to the later novels, Conor McCarthy argues that British and American intelligence agencies breach domestic and foreign laws through covert operations; these breaches “extend as far as suggestions of involvement in torture and collusion in terrorist killings” (108). In these accounts, thrillers provide access to the political imaginary of the surveillance state. As Bill Haydon remarks in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, “secret services were the only real measure of a nation's political health, the only real expression of its subconscious” (367).²

In all his novels, le Carré is preoccupied with state sovereignty and its limits; its policies of immunity, protection, and detention; and its offshore jurisdictions and ambiguities. Novels may be “inherently associated with the extraterritorial,” which is to say zones where state sovereignty is suspended or subdivided (Hart, *Extraterritorial* 233). For le Carré, interrogation rooms are extraterritorial

insofar as they exist beyond the legal protections of the state—in jails, in cellars, out of sight. Interrogations amplify contradictions between state sovereignty and human rights. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights bans torture (article 5), as does the European Convention on Human Rights (article 3), it persists within and between nation-states. Interrogations, which take place in the gray area between state prerogatives and human rights, challenge the expectation that states protect individuals—whether citizens, resident aliens, or refugees—by revealing the capacity of the state to inflict harm on those individuals.

For le Carré, the state is a comprehensive soundworld in which every conversation can be turned to account. In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott argues that states use standardization, measurement, and related techniques to render societies legible: “State simplifications such as maps, censuses, cadastral lists, and standard units of measurement represent techniques for grasping a large and complex reality” (77). Whereas Scott dwells on visual manifestations of the state, le Carré proposes that the state is equally invested in audibility. Through wiretaps, bugged phones, institutional interrogations, court proceedings and their transcripts, and, increasingly, recorded exchanges between suspects and law enforcement officers wearing body cameras, the state insinuates itself into the everyday soundworlds of individuals. The audible state functions bilaterally. On the one hand, agents sift soundworlds for meanings that bear on state security. Hearing like a state requires comprehensiveness: the state listens to everything that it can and arranges auditory information into patterns. On the other hand, the state makes its positions and policies audible through exchanges, whether in courtrooms or interrogation cells. Although interrogations purport to protect national interests, they also complicate those national interests by rendering explicit the demands that the state places on individual liberties.

Interrogation is a peculiar form of dialogue because its modes tend to be fixed, not free. At the same time, dialogue, with its rough equivalence between fictive duration and actual duration,

or “narrative time and story time,” is integral to novelistic representation (Genette 87). As Maria DiBattista points out, unanswered questions in novels mobilize both frustration and speculation, and thus generate “narrative movement” (271). In David Lodge’s view, literary criticism ought to locate “meaning in the dialogic process between speaking subjects” (86). A writer who organizes scenes around conversations, debriefings, and forensic inquiries, le Carré often draws parallels between novelistic discourse and theater in order to reinforce the importance of dissimulation in verbal exchanges. Certainly not all dialogue is interrogative, nor are all interrogations dialogic, not least because interrogatees can remain silent during questioning. In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Jim Prideaux, who has undergone an “interrogation resistance course,” is shot in the back and taken prisoner in Czechoslovakia (306). Under interrogation, he knows that “silence would be impossible and that for his own sanity, or survival, there had to be a dialogue, and at the end of it, they had to think he had told them what he knew, all he knew” (303).

In Jim’s situation, silence does not prevent brutality. He is hooded, bombarded with noise, forbidden sleep, electroshocked, and examined by “medicos” who ply him with questions; he invents stories “to make them stop and listen. They listened but they didn’t stop” (307). In this case, dialogue and torture overlap. Although physical torture such as Jim suffers has clear demarcations, verbal exchange may or may not be torturous depending on its psychological content and degree of aggression. Interrogation perverts the assumption of presentness in dialogue by supposing that the interrogation will never end. During torture, whether physical or psychological, the present tense becomes unendurable because no past or future can be imagined. “It was over for a while,” writes Jean Améry about being tortured by the Gestapo: “It is still not over” (36). Abiding by the perverse etiquette of torture, the interrogatee exteriorizes information or stories, which may be false, confessional, or incriminating, but which always exist in the immediacy of dialogue. Turning novelistic conventions on their head, interrogation converts dialogue itself into torturous exchange.³

Throughout *A Legacy of Spies* (2017), a novel that examines the reasons for which the Cold War was fought, inquisitors question Peter Guillam mercilessly, while he thinks about “deflection” (17), “complicity” (22), and deniability: “From the moment of denial [in an interrogation], things are never going to be the same” (19). After remembering “a purpose-built isolation cell” where agents train new recruits to withstand or administer interrogations (176), Guillam reflects on “enhanced interrogation” (197). As Robert Lance Snyder observes in a discussion of le Carré’s post-Cold War novels, “enhanced interrogation” refers to “torture by proxy,” in which questioning is inseparable from physical brutality (*John le Carré’s Post-Cold War Fiction* 110). More specifically, “enhanced interrogation” evokes George W. Bush’s defense of cramped confinement, walling, sleep deprivation, waterboarding, and other techniques used against detainees during the “war on terror.” At Abu Ghraib, some detainees were “locked in boxes the size of coffins” (Johnson et al. 121), a detail recalled in *A Legacy of Spies* but transposed to the Cold War: an East German woman who suffers from claustrophobia is nailed into a box in what is called, in an appalling euphemism, “investigative confinement” (84).

During his national service, le Carré learned interrogation methods that “horrified” him because they “seemed indistinguishable from torture” (Sisman 94). In March 1951, as a member of the intelligence corps, he was stationed in Graz, Austria, where he interrogated refugees about their reasons for defecting from Soviet bloc countries, their political commitments, and, when expedient, their possible return to their countries of origin as British agents. In a speech given to the Anglo-Israel Association in 1997, he recalled “trawling the refugee cages of Styria [in Austria] and questioning refugees washed up from all over Middle and Eastern Europe” (*Nervous Times* 10). These refugees were numerous and polyglot: Hungarian, Yugoslavian, Czechoslovakian, German. In 1951, approximately one thousand people fled every day from the German Democratic Republic to the Federal Republic of Germany, “while the influx of Soviet-bloc escapees into Germany, Austria and

Italian Trieste was estimated at 1,500 monthly” (Cohen 150). That year there were 254,842 foreigners living in Germany, ostensibly protected by the Stateless Aliens Act (1951), which guaranteed rights to education, work, legal representation, and social security; in reality, these people were housed in refugee camps where fair treatment, let alone access to rights, was by no means assured (Proudfoot 431). Among these internees, le Carré honed his skills as an interrogator.

Interrogation techniques have to be limber enough to accommodate a wide variety of interrogatees, yet precise enough to obtain specific information. During the Second World War, interrogation became widespread in Britain, as elsewhere, yet British interrogators left little documentation about their methods (Jackson 27). Between 1941 and 1945, interrogators at the Royal Patriotic School, also known as the London Reception Centre, gleaned intelligence from approximately 34,000 refugees who had fled the Continent to the United Kingdom (Photiadou 19). The Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre (CSDIC) and the Prisoner of War Interrogation Section (PWIS), which reported to the War Office and army, respectively, broadened and intensified interrogation tactics. Although wartime interrogation centers were opened around Britain, the most notorious were Camp 020, run by CSDIC in southwest London, and the London Cage, operated by PWIS at 6-8 Kensington Palace Gardens (Fry 13–22; Jackson 129–47). A self-trained psychologist named Harold Dearden “dreamed up the regimes of starvation and of sensory and sleep deprivation that were intended to break the will of Camp 020’s first inmates” (Cobain 20). Among interrogation techniques used at Camp 020, prisoners had to stand at attention for twenty-four hours or kneel while being beaten about the head (32).

During the war, the British War Office advised interrogators to question prisoners “singly and out of sight and hearing of each other” to prevent them from preparing “stories” (*Manual* 23). The army distributed pamphlets ordering soldiers to remain silent if they were captured and questioned. Under no circumstances should prisoners divulge

information about equipment, installations, training, defenses, damage, or conditions at home. Nor should they say anything that could reveal information indirectly. Indoors or out, it was unsafe to converse even with soldiers you knew before capture: “Because you cannot find the microphone, don’t think there isn’t one. We know there is, and that the enemy will be listening” (*Precautions* 3). Enemies pretending to be British or Allied personnel mixed with prisoners to obtain information. A pamphlet entitled *Zo! You Von’t Talk!* (1942) instructs British prisoners of war not to be duped by ham actors, stool pigeons, know-it-alls, or friendly enemies who pretend to know where you are from. Nor should prisoners fall for rhetorical tricks: “Your comrades have told us everything so why don’t you?” (7). In every circumstance, talking is treacherous, yet prisoners of war have to weigh the cost of silence against credible threats and physical endangerment. No conversation, no matter how private, takes place beyond earshot of the state.

In 1958, le Carré joined MI5, then moved to MI6 in 1960, where he remained until the runaway success of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963) busted his Foreign Office cover. Among his secret service responsibilities, he interviewed refugees from Soviet bloc countries in England, much as he had done in Austria in the early 1950s. “Effective vetting required much more detailed and thorough examination,” Adam Sisman explains, “not least because real traitors were unlikely to advertise themselves by membership in the [Communist] Party” (196). As he labored over dossiers, le Carré wondered, “should we trust him? Or her? Should their employers trust them? Might he be a traitor, spy, lonely decider, a suitable case for blackmail by the unscrupulous opposition?” (Introduction xi). Recalling these duties later, he divided interrogators into the friendly and the hostile:

I did quite a lot of interrogation, and it was always the sweet kind, the long patient discussions, the befriending and so on. I have complete contempt for the other sort of interrogation. Most people, if they want to confess something, they need help.

They need compassion. They need a pastoral connection and an intelligent connection, not a bullying one. (Interview 00:10:12–37)

If friendly interrogation involves compassion, “the other sort,” by implication, involves shouting, threats, blackmail, hostility, and physical aggression.

Le Carré describes himself as a good listener. While he was in Moscow doing research for *Our Game*, he talked to Chechen and Ingush groups about ethnicity inside Russia: “All I wanted to do, exactly as when I was with the Palestinians in south Lebanon, was listen, find out what made them tick, just listen” (“Art of Fiction” 71). In interrogations, as le Carré understands them, compassionate listeners extract information that suits their purposes more easily than if they shout or threaten physical violence. He characterizes listening as an act of attention: “if you are a good listener and not adversarial, people love to talk about themselves” (59). The friendly interview has a confessional, even therapeutic, quality, insofar as the interrogatee divulges secret information that it is a relief to share.

As a listener, George Smiley embodies compassionate attentiveness, although his compassion masks other motives. According to Peter Guillam, Smiley “listens like nobody I ever knew” (*Legacy* 259). In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Smiley assumes a “Buddha-like inscrutability” while questioning Ricki Tarr (43). His listening has a nearly mystical intensity, generated by its relation to secrecy: “He had that art, from miles and miles of secret life, of listening at the front of his mind; of letting the primary incidents unroll directly before him while another, quite separate faculty wrestled with their historical connection” (108). To piece together a story, he filters out static and probes inconsistencies. While talking to Toby Esterhase, “Smiley seemed to be listening to sounds that were not in the room” (334). This style of listening requires an ear for what is transpiring not just outside the room but also outside the present. In his ability to range across time and space, Smiley listens like a state. He plugs into several sound portals at once: an immediate conversation, prior conversations, even future conversations that follow from all that he has heard.

He listens for scraps of information that may be useful to the state even as he poses questions that indicate what the state wants to know.

As a professional listener, Smiley picks up the minutest sounds of dissidence in conversations, where treachery, loyalty, and ulterior motives make themselves heard. Eva Horn remarks that Smiley transforms the art of listening “into a technique that combines interrogation and psychoanalysis,” because he gleans intelligence while conveying benevolent interest (272). By contrast, Karla’s daughter, Tatiana, being treated for schizophrenia in a Swiss clinic, asks as many questions as Smiley does when they meet. In their interrogative probing, they behave like an analyst and analysand. Smiley listens scrupulously to everything Tatiana tells him, a tactic that makes her realize that he is a “dangerous man” because he represents “the forgiveness of the authorities” (le Carré, *Smiley’s People* 369, 370). She understands that Smiley’s sympathetic listening conceals his true motive, which is to extract secret knowledge from her and to make the most of it on behalf of the state. Like any other interrogation technique, compassion guarantees neither sincerity nor neutrality. Smiley is dangerous because of his capacity to listen like a state: any information that pertains to security he treats as useful.

“An intelligence officer is nothing if he has lost the will to listen,” Ned declares in *The Secret Pilgrim* (249). Styles of listening appear throughout le Carré’s novels. In *The Honourable Schoolboy*, Jerry Westerby uses his cover as a journalist to besiege interlocutors with questions. He does not always wait to hear their answers. Jerry thinks of interrogation as boxing: “to keep asking is to stay punching” (461). He asks questions with disarming, journalistic connivance. He lets Charlie, a renegade with a drug addiction, ramble until he discloses what Jerry wants to know: “He asked questions but often Charlie didn’t seem to hear them. At other times he appeared to answer questions Jerry hadn’t put. And sometimes a delayed action mechanism threw out an answer to a question which Jerry had long abandoned” (437). As Jerry practices it, interrogation alternates between hostile urgency and friendly prompts until a story emerges; he

combines “pastoral” compassion with “bullying” to obtain what he needs to know. Throughout le Carré’s novels, careful listeners make connections and draw inferences that bear on military or state security. In this sense, listening is a form of input and decoding that simplifies, recombines, or situates information within the context of a bigger story. In le Carré’s novels, that story concerns state secrets, state security, and their audibility.

Sound Thieves

Novels need to be heard or overheard, not just read. Their soundscapes—whistles, groans, screams, dialogue, hubbub, music—can be played at high or low volume, which is to say that readers often do not listen for sound at all, and thus miss a semantic dimension of novelistic discourse. In Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), Watson hears muted footsteps, a key turning in the lock, and sobbing in the night at Baskerville Hall. These sounds perplex him until he understands them as meaningful clues and traces them to their source. On the moor, he hears a “dreadful cry” (68) and a “terrible scream” (126), which the villainous Jack Stapleton attributes to a bittern or weird noises from the bog as gases escape and mud shifts. Stapleton deliberately misleads Watson by suggesting that the sounds are supernatural and acousmatic rather than natural and identifiable. Yet detective fiction rationalizes the inexplicable in order to dispel mystery. Strange noises all have an explanation if only someone asks the right questions. A woman sobs for her criminal brother; a hungry dog howls from its lair on the moor. When Stapleton disingenuously asks Sherlock Holmes, “did you hear anything else besides a cry?” (131), he tests the acuteness of Holmes’s hearing while prompting further questions about the acoustic properties of novelistic discourse: How does sound signify in a novel, and how should readers listen to acoustic effects embedded within narrative?

Like Conan Doyle, le Carré thinks of novels as acoustically resonant.⁴ In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* as in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, sounds

cut across the narrative at different intensities. Although these sounds can be categorized as disruptive or meaningful, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* conjectures that all sound functions as deliberate effect, code, or information if accurately heard. Michel Chion calls this phenomenon “semantic listening,” in which sound, beyond its acoustical properties, bears meaning “as part of an entire system of [sonic] oppositions and differences” (50). If flashes of light from the garden at a safe house are signals, as the narrator explains in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, is it not possible that the “moan of a hooter at night” is likewise an encoded message between parties who do not want to communicate by telephone or walkie-talkie (352)? Although the narrator never clarifies whether the hooting is random or intentional, this example leads to a general principle: novelistic sound bears meaning, but only if it is represented as audible in the first place.

In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Smiley, holed up in a hotel near Paddington Station—his headquarters while he investigates the mole’s infiltration of British intelligence—listens to traffic noise (117, 127) and footfalls in the corridor (95). He knows where people are and what they are doing by the noises they make. Somewhere down the hall, “an undiscovered genius . . . tapped patiently at an old machine” (130). A drunken Welshman belts out a song in the stairwell (139). The clattering of seagulls on the parapet outside his window causes Smiley to remember a conversation that he had in Cornwall with his unfaithful wife, Ann (152). The sound, stirring an unconscious connection, creates an auditory bridge to the past. Smiley listens to ambient sounds because any one of them might turn out to be important. Someone may be staking out his hotel or sneaking up to his door, and sound will be Smiley’s first warning. The accuracy of Smiley’s listening directs the reader to novelistic acoustics, where auditory information has to be separated from background noise.

In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, everyone has a distinct way of listening. Alwyn, a receptionist, listens “like an eagle” (180). Tarr “listen[s] with his eyes,” a sure sign that he is a spy, according to Irene, his Russian lover (47). Percy Alleline, a

brash Scot, accuses his colleagues of not paying attention during a meeting: “Listen to me. Listen exactly, and remember” (191). Inadvertently Alleline touches on the ephemerality of sound and its relation to memory. Listening does not mean remembering, physical sound being in the present and not always an object of attention. Certain sounds mark historical moments, as when the anti-war folk song “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” introduced by an Australian disc jockey, wafts from a car radio (132). Someone hums a tune from *Hair* (95). While riffling through logbooks inside the Circus, Peter Guillam listens with heightened sensitivity to the creak of a trolley on linoleum, “a sudden swell of voices” (95), an outburst from Bill Haydon, the clatter of typing, the ringing of telephones. Throughout the novel, sound creates a “background jingle” or total soundworld that anyone can tune into at will (131). In effect, the narrative provides readers with a sensitive microphone that approximates the comprehensiveness of listening like a state. By representing soundscapes in detail, le Carré urges readers to hear how the state articulates itself, just as the state listens to and makes use of everyday soundworlds as part of its security surveillance.

In *The Pigeon Tunnel*, le Carré admits that he has “an ear for voices,” a talent for mimicry that he acquired from his mother (280). He could parody Etonian accents (Sisman 174), an ambassador’s “schoolboy German” (224), “an earnest Russian *kulturnik*, an American radio interviewer” (Brucoli and Baughman 21). He claims that being English means being “branded on the tongue,” in the sense that accent announces class standing while limiting social mobility (qtd. in Banville). In his novels, he profiles characters by their voices. Everyone in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* is identified by accent, not just Welsh baritones and Australian disc jockeys. Ricki Tarr has a “colonial accent” (34); Mary speaks in a “stylish classless drawl” (84); Roy Bland has a “caustic cockney voice” (92). In these cases, accents are theatrical as often as they are authentic, the product of education or social convention as much as upbringing and class.

Despite interrogatees’ best efforts to keep secrets, their voices provide information about their

backgrounds. For this reason, the US Army field manual called *Intelligence Interrogation* (1992) advises that interrogators remain alert to changes in “the source’s every gesture, word, and voice inflection” (1.13). The “source,” to use the army’s term, may possess information that he “is not aware he has” (3.1). Interrogators therefore should have an ear for voices, both their physical properties (tone, accent, impediments) and their content (stories, facts, idioms, innuendo). Taking notes allows the interrogator to refer back to details and establish sequence, the manual advises, while warning that note-taking may prevent the interrogator from noticing important body language. In *The Honourable Schoolboy*, Smiley writes in a notebook while questioning Sam Collins about his work in Asia. Suspecting that Sam is hiding information, Smiley makes him repeat his story “in the way of trained interrogators the world over, listening by long habit for the tiny flaws and the chance discrepancies” (95). Sam neglects to mention his romantic interest in Elizabeth, an omission that Smiley registers but does not immediately query. Smiley collates Sam’s undisclosed story with the ulterior story of how and why military intelligence was compromised in Hong Kong. In this regard, stories interlock to form a narrative about security and its failures within the audible state.

At all times, conversation is fraught with the danger of interception.⁵ In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, microphones in walls and bugs in telephones, as the instruments of state security, pick up confidential conversations, as when Smiley has listening devices reverse engineered in a London safe house to record Bill Haydon conversing with his Russian contact. Invisible listeners are everywhere. Knowing this to be the case, Smiley turns on a transistor radio to foil covert listeners while he talks to Lacon (129). For the same reason, Sam turns up the music “as loud as they could bear” when Smiley interviews him (236). Sound cancels sound, not just noisily but tactically. In a related instance of sound blocking, Control covers his telephone with a tea cozy to muffle its ringing. He filters out importunate sounds to concentrate on finding the mole inside the Circus, though he has grave doubts about sound

security at headquarters: “from the ceiling hung a baffler against electronic eavesdropping—a thing like an electric fan, which constantly varied its pitch” (150). Control’s doubts turn out to be justified. After Haydon is caught, Smiley orders an intensive search for listening devices inside the Circus. Searchers turn up eight microphones hidden in desk drawers and filing cabinets, and another three embedded in walls (*Honourable Schoolboy* 64).

Starting from the premise that sound is always accessible to secret listeners, le Carré evolves a theory of sound theft. In *The Honourable Schoolboy*, Smiley remarks that Karla runs “sound-thieves” who infiltrate British security by acoustic means (63). Like Smiley listening with different parts of his mind to capture telltale inconsistencies in a story, the sound thief listens intentionally to live or recorded conversations to make deductions about an adversary’s identity, motives, and plans. Because sound is everywhere, it seems to belong to no one. It is both ephemeral and immaterial. Stealing sound thus means picking up something that lies in the open and has no intrinsic value. The sound thief operates in a market that depends largely on being in the right place at the right time or coming into possession of incriminating recordings. Despite its ephemerality, sound has value as information, insofar as it relates to state secrets and security.

In *The Mission Song* (2006), Salvo, an interpreter who works in audio surveillance for MI5 in London, refers to himself as a “sound-thief” (48). Raised in Congo before it became Zaire or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Salvo speaks several languages fluently, Swahili, Shi, Kinyarwanda, French, and English among them. As an interpreter, he operates like a listening device whose function is to record and decode sound without imposing his personal opinion. A “listener by nature,” he pays particular attention to people’s accents (60). He identifies Irish brogues, sub-Saharan dialects, “white Rhodesian” voices (69), and a “Blairite wannabe-classless slur” as indicators of characters’ political dispositions (15). From time to time, he exceeds his mandate by tuning into conversations that his boss has not authorized him to hear.

While listening to audio feeds during an assignment on a remote island in the North Sea, Salvo learns that a capitalist consortium wants to stage a coup in Congo and install their own man as president, with the goal of exploiting mineral resources in that country. While thieving sound, he puts himself in the contradictory position of listening on behalf of the state while hearing the torturous measures that the state can undertake to protect corporate interests. From conversations picked up by hidden microphones, he overhears a thug named Tabizi torturing a Congolese national named Haj. The more he listens, the more Salvo identifies with Haj, who resists the machinations of the Western capitalists. He imagines that he and Haj share a bond—as Africans, as agents of racialized resistance. He thinks of himself as Haj’s “keeper” (196), and he feels a twinge of “mutual recognition” pass between them (214). Listening leads Salvo to project his own ambitions onto Haj, which is to say that he listens passionately as a person rather than impassively like a state.

As he finishes the interpreting job in the North Sea, Salvo steals all the tapes and notebooks that he was supposed to destroy. For violating the terms of his employment, British authorities strip him of his citizenship on a technicality and then detain him as a stateless person. In this regard, *The Mission Song* critiques “the accountability of states” and “the complexities of transnationalism” (Snyder, *John le Carré’s Post-Cold War Fiction* 94, 102). This critique intersects with le Carré’s constant exposure of “the pernicious legacy of morally repugnant compromises that Western intelligence agencies glossed over or suppressed in their mythologized versions of history” (Snyder, “Secret Cold Warriors” 21). Salvo is punished for trying to intercede in the sound-world of the state, where covert operations, dubious foreign policy, and secret meetings in extraterritorial spaces leave only minor traces of having happened in notebooks and on tapes. The ephemerality of conversation complicates Salvo’s position: everything that he hears is deniable. The government department for which he works is deniable (le Carré, *Mission Song* 1). His mission to the North Sea is deniable (262). Even Salvo is “deniable” (45). To

his story about a coup d'état in Congo, British security agencies turn a deaf ear. They deny the existence of any such meeting, even though a “putsch” in Kinshasa makes a brief appearance in the news shortly after Salvo's return to London (314).

In *The Mission Song*, conversations behind closed doors are not public property, nor are they private: they belong to the security state. For this reason, sound theft qualifies as a crime. Salvo is bound by the Official Secrets Act because of the nature of his work. For his illicit listening, he is in “serious breach” of that law, though he wonders, “how official are these secrets? If I myself am deniable, then so presumably are the secrets” (246). The deniability of secrets does not preclude them from existing. The state merely keeps those secrets sub rosa to prevent the public from knowing, or knowing in detail, that torture underlies foreign policy and offshore investment. As Timothy Melley points out, spy narratives can function as forums for public debate about “enhanced interrogation” and “the efficacy of torture” (45, 202), actions that the security state takes to preserve “plausible deniability” (see 143–49). In *The Mission Song*, the state sponsors audio surveillance and abrogates democratic rights—measures that are intended, paradoxically, to protect democracy. In *The Pigeon Tunnel*, le Carré decries “the British public's collective submission to wholesale surveillance of dubious legality” (19). In some cases, sound theft points to weaknesses in state security. In Salvo's case, sound theft leads him to understand the hypocrisy of the state, which officially endorses laws against torture and unofficially perpetrates acts of torture. Salvo falls short of listening like a state, which means filtering out, in order to disavow, the disturbing sounds of interrogation and torture.

Techniques of Interrogation

Good interrogators “need intelligence, patience, a good memory, and the skills of a psychologist” (Stewart and Newbery 101). According to the US Army manual on interrogation, an interrogator should also possess an interest in human relations and an innate enthusiasm for collecting information

(*Intelligence Interrogation* 1.13). Knowledge of foreign languages broadens the scope of questions that can be asked while respecting the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (1949), which specifies that questioning should happen in a language understood by the prisoner (article 17). The more languages an interrogator speaks, the greater the access to information without needing translation. An alert interrogator notices a respondent's mood changes, obduracy, and signs of diminishing resistance. A mix of approaches—flattery, repetition, misleading questions, control questions that test truthfulness—can unsettle the interrogatee (*Intelligence Interrogation* 3.20–22). Interrogators should not betray surprise at any information (3.12), nor should they ask compound questions that allow for ambiguous answers (3.23). The good interrogator identifies useful information, verifies it, and then applies it to the situation at hand.

In a conflict zone, interrogation has military benefits, although it is also used to convert prisoners or break their will (Kleinman 1583). “The threat of coercion usually weakens or destroys resistance more effectively than coercion itself,” advises a 1963 manual from the Central Intelligence Agency on counterintelligence interrogation (*KUBARK* 90). In the 1950s, interrogation techniques moved into the realm of psychological warfare, effected through hypnosis, truth serums, brainwashing, and sensory and sleep deprivation. “Every man has his breaking point,” Harold G. Wolff theorized in *Military Medicine* in 1960 with specific reference to communist tactics during the Korean War. After drawing an analogy between physical and mental endurance—just as there is a limit to the stamina of a runner or swimmer, “so there is a breaking point for the high level functions of the brain” (94)—Wolff concludes that “firm military discipline, convictions, loyalty, and mutual trust” can stop prisoners of war from capitulating to communist brainwashing (103). During the Malayan Emergency (1948–60), British interrogators “target[ed] and probe[d] more precise issues for collection” (Maguire 135)—namely, information that could be used in anti-communist and

counterinsurgency propaganda as elements of psychological warfare.

Le Carré is aware of the evolution of interrogation techniques in decolonizing countries. In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Ricki Tarr is a gunrunner in Malaya during the Emergency and resurfaces in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising (36). In *The Honourable Schoolboy*, Rucker, the superintendent of police in Hong Kong, has a sketchy background in trouble spots, all of them former British colonies or protectorates: “ex-Palestine, ex-Kenya, ex-Malaya, ex-Fiji” (20). As le Carré knew from first-hand experience, “two-thirds of those recruited [to MI5] from 1955 onwards would come from the Colonial Service. They joined in clusters as each of the colonies became independent” (Sisman 191). Informed by wartime and postwar practices, the techniques of interrogation in le Carré’s novels combine psychology and shrewdness with physical restraint, brutality, and sometimes torture.

Smiley’s People resembles a manual of interrogation techniques. Characters fall into the roles of interrogator or interrogatee according to prior experience and expectations. The first spoken dialogue in the novel is a question, a threat of exposure, and a confirmation all bundled into one: “Your name is Maria Andreyevna Ostrakova?” (13). Although punctuated interrogatively, the question sounds like an accusation, as if Ostrakova were about to be arrested. Assuming the right to identify her in a Paris street, the stranger who asks this question revives Ostrakova’s memories of interrogation in Stalinist Russia. The stranger—his name is Kirov—smells of “Moscow interrogation rooms” (15). When confronted by him, Ostrakova assumes a stance of submission and silence that she learned “in the old days, when such questionings were part of her daily life” (15). She pinches her arm to distract herself from impending violence, as if one small, self-inflicted injury might stave off greater injuries suffered under interrogation. Drawing on past experience, she lists rules to observe during questioning, all of them negations: “never to match rudeness with rudeness, never to be provoked, never to score, never to be witty or superior or intellectual, never to be deflected by fury, or despair, or the surge of sudden

hope that an occasional question might arouse” (16). For Ostrakova, emotional composure precedes mental control. Under Kirov’s questioning, her integrity and dignity, which is to say her responsibility to herself, lie entirely in the hands of the interrogator or the state that he represents.

Interrogation has a built-in expectation of offense and defense, in which omniscience, or the appearance of omniscience, is at stake. Smiley tends to ask questions only when he knows the answers in advance. In *The Secret Pilgrim*, Ned notes that Smiley’s “questions were answers: George, we used to say, never asked unless he knew” (10). This tactic gives the interrogator the upper hand. If all is known in advance, the interrogatee may decide to divulge everything, because it merely confirms the truth. In this regard, interrogation is “structured to project a sense of omniscience” that plays on the interrogatee’s uncertainty and vulnerability (Stackhouse 80).

In *Smiley’s People*, Smiley acknowledges that his interrogation techniques are coercive because he assumes omniscience: “he was talking Villem into a corner, making him answer as a prelude to making him obey” (119). Similarly, Mikhel, a Baltic nationalist who snitches on his friend Vladimir, realizes that he is in “the loser’s corner” because he cannot guess what Smiley already knows and therefore cannot gauge what he ought to say (131). While interrogating someone, Smiley allows silences to “produce an awkward tension” (115). During these silences, he correlates what he knows with what he does not, although the interrogatee has no way of guessing what part of the story has just snapped into place in Smiley’s mind. Smiley asks questions to fill in gaps or to prove the veracity of the story that he has already pieced together. He not only listens like a state but also thinks like a state: omnisciently. All information is part of a larger story about state security. In *Smiley’s People*, his “patient but persistent questioning” reconstructs the intricate plot masterminded by Karla (268). By asking appropriate questions, he can figure out how to alter outcomes from the course that Karla has set, like a chess master who foresees all the possible moves that follow from one critical move on a chessboard.

During interrogations, Smiley resorts to theatrical gestures and histrionic pauses. While questioning someone, officially or informally, he frequently pauses to polish his glasses on the broad end of his tie. The give-and-take of dramatic dialogue provides a model for Smiley's interrogation technique. Indeed, *Smiley's People* and *The Mission Song* bear remarkable affinities to Samuel Beckett's plays about extorted speech and torture, such as *Rough for Radio II* (1961) and *Not I* (1973). In these plays, violence disintegrates syntax and leaves gaps in verbal sequences. In *Not I*, the interrogatee's speech has to be inferred from ellipses: ". . . what position was she in! . . . whether standing. . . or sitting. . . but the brain— . . . what? . . . kneeling? . . . yes . . ." (216). In *The Mission Song*, Salvo, listening with headphones to Tabizi torturing Haj in another room, registers "the guttural threats and curses on the one side, and the screams, sobs and entreaties on the other" (199). The transcription of what Salvo hears uncannily resembles the disrupted speech in *Not I*: ". . . not true. . . not true. . . still not true? . . . still not true? . . . don't go to sleep on me. . . nobody's going to let you sleep here. . . open your eyes. . ." (201). In Beckett's play and le Carré's novel, ellipses, far from being inert, imply blows with fists or truncheons. Where questions stop, physical torture starts. Typographically the ellipses look like blanks, but they register Tabizi's punches or Haj's grunts of pain. The reader is called on to interpolate the sounds of the state—or in this case, corporate capitalism in its paramilitary guise—by virtue of their omission. By adapting dialogic conventions from drama, le Carré heightens his critique of interrogation as extorted speech, speech that yields to the violent demands of the state. During interrogations, the state expects answers even as it makes its own demands heard loud and clear.

In *Smiley's People*, Smiley stages the interrogation of Grigoriev, an attaché at the Russian embassy in Bern, as a *mise-en-scène* in which Smiley plays the role of "a low-key official time-server" (336). He poses questions in a dull voice and never once, "by an over-hasty follow-up question or the smallest false inflection of his voice, departed from the

faceless role he had assumed for the interrogation" (345). Like the stenographer in *Rough for Radio II*, Smiley writes in a notebook throughout this interrogation, though he uses this technique to humble Grigoriev by not looking at him and to make him think that every word he utters carries some vital secret. Smiley theatricalizes. He holds the pen in such a way that "a man like Grigoriev would feel positively obliged to give him something to write down" (339). For his part, Grigoriev claps his hands on his head, mops his sweaty brow, and laments his fate in Chekhovian exclamations: "'Oh, Grigoriev!' he cried. 'Oh, Grigoriev! You are so weak! so weak'" (338). Grigoriev appeals to other auditors in the interrogation room as if they were spectators at a performance. By taking notes, Smiley minimizes the conditions under which the interrogation happens—physical constraints, blackmail, or other "pressures," as Smiley calls them, that are brought to bear on the interrogatee (336). The notes are *aide-mémoire*, but they are also a record of the interrogation as an act of extorted speech, in which the interrogator has ultimate control over what is said, recorded, and archived. To think like a state means to take control of the novelistic dimensions of a character's life in every detail, from past to present, and make him see the consequences of his actions *vis-à-vis* the state forevermore. Anything outside the state remains "unimaginable" (Baucom 713). Thinking like a state means denying that anything exists beyond the temporal and spatial reaches of the sovereign state, including audible soundworlds.

In *Smiley's People*, most conversations are taped and available for replay. Every safe house, including the flat where Smiley discusses the murder of the ex-agent Vladimir with secret service agents, is wired with microphones, which means that everything that is said, regardless of its confidentiality, can be reviewed later for factual consistency. For the debriefing about Vladimir, "the tape is perfect," except for a crucial snatch of conversation that happens just beyond the range of the microphones (78). The audible state expands in scale beyond interrogation, as a structure in which interlocutors have to face each other, to comprehensive coverage, in

which auditors can be distant in space and time. Regardless of security risks, all conversations have a life on tape that projects them beyond the present into the future. When Grigoriev cashes a check under a false name in a Swiss bank, Esterhase's team photographs and audio records him. Claus Kretzschmar clandestinely tapes a conversation in a sex club to compromise Kirov. These recordings resurface later as incriminating evidence. The comprehensiveness of surveillance confirms the ubiquity of the state, while also confirming that conversation outlives its immediate utterance to become evidence in stories about betrayal and breaches of security.

In this regard, novels function like recording devices. They capture sound and dialogue comprehensively. They know who said what to whom, and they transmit those conversations into the public realm, as a radio, phonograph, or cassette might. Novelistic omniscience extends the omniscience of the state insofar as novels locate characters within a plot and track the dissidence, or conformity, between character and state. In *Smiley's People*, the narrator takes on the role of an anonymous secretary while taunting the reader with questions that touch on the omniscience enacted by interrogators: "Did Grigoriev sense the new alertness round him—the discreet freezing of gestures? Did he notice how the eyes of Skordeno and de Silsky both hunted out Smiley's impassive face and held it in their gaze?" (344). While this passage is focalized in Esterhase, who does in fact notice these gestures, the narrative is regulated by technologies of recording and replay as versions of omniscience. While the interrogative voice dominates in *Smiley's People*, the correct answers, if correct answers actually exist, may not be known until the tape of the interrogation is replayed sometime later as proof that nothing exists outside the state and no story happens without the state hearing it.

Hearing Torture

Whereas le Carré represents interrogation as a routine part of intelligence work, he keeps torture scenes hidden; they are overheard or reported rather than directly represented. In *The Mission Song*,

Salvo hears Haj being beaten without seeing him. In *Smiley's People*, Smiley finds the corpse of Otto Leipzig, his face "blackened with bruising and gagged with several strands of rope," several days after thugs torture and murder him (242–43). In *The Secret Pilgrim*, Polish henchmen take turns beating Ned before they chain him to a scalding hot radiator. Although he wants the pain to stop, Ned refuses to concede to his torturer "the part of me that made me separate from him, and was therefore my survival" (164). In these instances, torture is the limit case for interrogation, the point at which questioning tips into physical violence. At that point, consent, responsibility, and agency are revoked, and the interrogatee becomes a victim.

The Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War allows interrogation but not ill treatment of prisoners: "No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind" (article 17.4). While forbidding coercion, the Geneva Convention nonetheless recognizes that questioning turns, almost inevitably, into violation. Torture does not necessarily begin with physical injury, since you can torture prisoners without hitting or restraining them: constant noise or nonstop light suffices. Scenes of torture in le Carré's novels usually occur in the nebulous interrogation rooms of the Cold War or the equally nebulous backrooms of global capitalism. The Geneva Convention does not apply to them, since the victims are members of corporations or secret services, not soldiers taken prisoner in a combat zone.

The scene in which Salvo overhears Tabizi torturing Haj raises numerous ethical questions. What is the bystander's responsibility to the torture victim? Because Salvo is employed as a sound thief to listen, transcribe, and then forget what he has heard, is his ethical position compromised a priori? Améry captures the ethical dimensions of torture through its audibility. Knowing that "no scream penetrated to the outside" when Gestapo agents

tortured him (22), Améry imagines other victims whose screams “penetrated as little into the world as did once my own strange and uncanny howls” (23). If no one hears those cries, no help is forthcoming. Not hearing agonized screams may also signify a refusal to acknowledge the ongoing existence of torture as a human rights violation. To take that stance is to think like a state, insofar as the state chooses to acknowledge or disavow certain acts as it sees fit.

“The tortured are a class apart,” Peter Guillam thinks about Jim Prideaux’s having been tortured in Czechoslovakia: “You can imagine—just—where they’ve been, but never what they’ve brought back” (le Carré, *Legacy* 253). Astonishingly routine though it may be in the securitized state, torture inverts the social world by disallowing humane or humanitarian intervention. It begins with interrogation yet remains at the threshold of audibility. In his critique of the state, le Carré imagines interrogation rooms as potential or actual torture chambers, from which sound, even when captured on tape, rarely achieves audibility in the outside world. He thinks of the state in terms of its auditory abilities—its all-hearingness—or more specifically its ability to make itself heard through the questions that it asks.

NOTES

Claire Seiler and Carolyn Ownbey read and commented on drafts of this essay while it was in progress. Oliver House kindly guided me through John le Carré’s papers at the Bodleian Library. I wish to thank all three for their generosity and keenness of insight.

1. In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Smiley narrates this interrogation at length (206–23). The interview is briefly reprised in *The Honourable Schoolboy* (133). In *Smiley’s People*, this interrogation scene is mentioned several times (162–64, 337, 373).

2. In *The Pigeon Tunnel* (2016), le Carré repeats this observation with a slight alteration, then adds, “in Britain our secret services are still, for better or worse, the spiritual home of our political, social and industrial elite” (19).

3. When formalized interrogations enter novelistic representation at mid-century, they are inseparable from torture. In Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1941), Gletkin blinds Rubashov with light during a series of “hearings.” In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Winston’s body convulses with electric voltage while

O’Brien asks him rhetorically, “How does one man assert his power over another, Winston?” (Orwell 279). In *Casino Royale* (1953), Le Chiffre beats James Bond while questioning him about hidden money. According to Bond, “the beginning of torture is the worst. A crescendo leading up to a peak and then the nerves are blunted and react progressively less” (Fleming 113).

4. Le Carré frequently alludes to Sherlock Holmes (*Tinker* 128; *Smiley’s People* 126, 270, 284; *Our Game* 176–77). Detective fiction and spy thrillers converge on the primacy of interrogation. The best detectives, like the best spies, ask informed questions. Inappropriate questions lead to false surmises and wrong conclusions.

5. Interception does not guarantee the authenticity of information. In a draft of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, Tarr submits reports about Jim based on secret recordings: “The report was evidently a transcript of an interview. Only one speaker was quoted. It was written in Tarr’s own longhand” (le Carré, *Drafts*, page numbered 94). In this passage, not included in the published novel, the filtering of one voice through another casts doubt on the origin and credibility of information.

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Abstract: While completing his national service from 1951 to 1952, John le Carré served as an intelligence corps officer whose duties included the interrogation of refugees; as a member of MI5 and MI6 between 1958 and 1963, he interrogated defectors from Soviet bloc countries to test their sincerity or duplicity. In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, *The Honourable Schoolboy*, *Smiley's People*, *The Secret Pilgrim*, *The Mission Song*, and le Carré's other novels, interrogation scenes contribute to the total soundworld of the audible state. As a way to gather information through extorted speech, interrogation occurs in extraterritorial nonplaces or undisclosed, deniable locations. Drawing on historical documents, this essay positions interrogation in terms of torture, human rights, and the capacity of the state to inflict harm or to extend protection to individuals under its authority. In le Carré's novels, characters not only listen like states—comprehensively, omnisciently—but also begin to think like states.