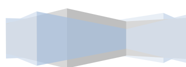
The Haunted Gentleman:
The Redemption of Conventional Masculinity
in John le Carré's *The Constant Gardener* (2000)

Sara Martín, UAB
2008

Introduction: Making Choices

Suppose you are a talented writer with a solid world-wide reputation in search of a subject. Suppose a friend suggests that you focus on the abuses of the pharmaceutical corporations in Africa, instead of on the corruption unleashed by the oil industry in the former Soviet Union –your first option.[1] Who could be your hero? What would you call your new novel? Faced with these choices, British best-selling author John Le Carré decided to narrate his moral tale about the horrors of illegal drug testing in Kenya using as a frame story a second moral tale, that of a white, English, middle-aged, widowed hero in search of redemption for his failure to prevent the brutal death of his young wife Tessa. Since this man, Justin Quayle, is the 'constant gardener' of the novel's title, we may wonder which of these two moral tales is Le Carré's real priority. Although most reviewers agree that both the novel and its successful film adaptation (2004), directed by Fernando Mereilles, focus on the ruthless exploitation of the Third World by villainous First World corporations, it is my contention that this theme is actually just the background to the main story. This deals with the nostalgia for the figure that best embodies idealized upper-class British masculinity: the gentleman, as represented by the ill-fated Justin Quayle.

Le Carré, Mereilles and the film producer, Simon Channing Williams, see *The Constant Gardener* as a hybrid story, part corporate thriller, part romance. As a corporate thriller delivered by a writer well versed in the intricacies of spy fiction (if not its absolute master), and in the ugly realities of global power, *Gardener* is, however, too bland to move readers to political action, even of the kind confined to intention). What certainly moves readers –to tears– is the sad romance, with its sacrificial hero and heroine trapped in a conflict that is both post-feminist (how much may partners conceal from each to other?) and profoundly neo-Victorian (can heroines transgress rules and still survive?). Despite its apparent progressive topic and combative discourse, the romance shows that *Gardener* is also candidly backward in its praise of traditional masculinity as an alternative to the immoral men who run or protect the powerful corporations. Justin –the just gentleman in search of justice– is killed off figuratively by the author (and literally by the mercenaries that gang-rape and murder his wife) in an avowedly heroic end, which is partly punishment for his emotional detachment from Tessa but also a celebration in the face of widespread male betrayal of a sorely missed male breed, brought back into literature out of hopelessness.



[1] See the documentary *John Le Carré: From Page to Screen*, included in the bonus features of the DVD edition of the film *The Constant Gardener* (Focus Features, Spotlight Series, 2005).

The nostalgia for the honorable British gentleman that Justin embodies is appealing yet dangerous for, after all, his chivalry is still patriarchal. By choosing Justin to be his hero, Le Carré eschews other choices that might increase the effectiveness of his moral tale of corruption and also fit better current trends in British fiction, whether out of political correctness or plain sensibility. Interestingly, we needn't speculate about these alternative choices since Le Carré includes them all as characters in his novel, making Justin oddly superfluous.

The dense, well-crafted plot of *The Constant Gardener* narrates how Swiss-based pharma Karel Vita Hudson (KHV) and its British business partner, the conglomerate Three Bees, start testing a new wonder drug –Dypraxa, developed to prevent TB– among the unsuspecting dwellers of the Nairobi slum of Kibera. They start testing long before the drug is ready for human use, with the complicity of Her Majesty's Government. Tessa and her close friend, the African activist Dr. Arnold Bluhm, discover that dozens have died due to the illegal trials and decide to submit a report to the British Government, as she "clung to a pathetic notion that the Brits had more *integrity –virtue* in government– than any other nation" (498, original emphasis).[2] The pair stir instead a hornets' nest and end up murdered. Justin, to whom Tessa never communicated their findings apparently to protect him, sheds then his job at the British High Commission in Nairobi to become a hunted (and haunted) man as he struggles to expose the conspiracy against Tessa and Arnold and make their report public.

There is no *need* at all to focalize the story through Justin, as it is easy to see. An unmarried version of passionate Tessa would make a perfectly suitable heroine and, if that choice seems too Eurocentric and too heterosexist, black, gay Dr. Bluhm might make an ideal hero, which he is anyway though only marginally. Two other secondary characters, both women, also beg for more attention. One is Lara Emrich, the scientist who ruins her brilliant career for inventing Dypraxa and then trying to stop KHV's secret testing. The second, Ghita, is an Anglo-Indian employee of the Nairobi High Commission who decides to fight the System (in Le Carré's own spelling) from the inside, but does so too late to untangle the lies that ultimately kill her beloved Justin, Tessa and Arnold.

Le Carré's decision to place Justin in the spotlight rather than any of these other potential heroes, even at the cost of blurring his anti-corporate message, shows that he is motivated by a more urgent issue than the sinister conspiracy to kill innocent Africans, redolent as this is of real life events. The author himself offers a clue by explaining that "Justin, I determined, should be a man who almost accidentally married his conscience."[3] From this perspective *The Constant Gardener* is the story of how this man fails to heed his conscience –a muffled one indeed– until it is too late. Logically, this approach makes the choice of the Dypraxa scandal, not of Justin, superfluous since his moral conflict could have been shaped by many other issues. Justin's clash with his conscience allows Le Carré to consider whether the masculinity that he embodies –gentle but weak, tougher later yet still gentle– can survive in the British hegemonic circle of (male) power to which it purportedly belongs. The answer is negative, which is why Justin *must* die. Le Carré implies, however, that Britain is worse off for excluding gentlemen like his hero from her inner circles of power. On the other hand, although Justin is also in a sense punished by the author for responding to the call of honor only

[2] All quotations of *The Constant Gardener* are from the 2005 Hodder edition.
[3] In an interview included in the same documentary, *John Le Carré: From Page to Screen*.

after his wife's death, Le Carré doesn't realize that his own plot depends in excess on the violent murders of those subordinate to hegemonic masculinity –women (Tessa), black gay African men (Arnold), and the practically unindividualised Dypraxa victims.

Justin's belated awakening into heroic action is articulated by his relationship with Tessa –her femininity conditions his masculinity– and also by his peculiar rivalry with Arnold for her emotional (rather than sexual) fulfillment. Actually, Justin's erratic behavior towards his wife shows that he can't harmonize the contradictory demands of the chivalry (or gentlemanliness) that guides him: he wants to be both a pre-feminist, protective husband and a post-feminist, open-minded partner without quite realizing that these roles are incompatible. Justin suffers –and this shows Le Carré's conservatism– for allowing the second role to take over, to the point of his total detachment from Tessa. Yet this detachment is also due to his belief that gentlemen must respect ladies' decisions, including keeping dangerous secrets from their husbands. Confused by these conflicting codes, Justin abandons Tessa to her own limited emotional resources (and to Arnold's tutelage) with catastrophic results for their marriage and their survival.

As regards Arnold, *The Constant Gardener* shows a manifest inability to overcome colonialist attitudes, for his characterization is subordinate to that of the main white characters. We may even suspect that he is presented as gay in order to free Justin's from sexual jealousy and not because Le Carré needs to criticize the appalling treatment of gay men in Kenya. Although he is presented as *the* perfect man, Arnold is burdened with Tessa (and so, with Justin), given a horrifying death because of her political naiveté, and reduced to the role of minor saint in her doomed moral crusade. Le Carré's inability to focus on Dr. Bluhm as his main hero explains better than any other aspect of his novel why the impact of his anti-corruption tale is so moderate and why Justin is the only possible center of *The Constant Gardener*, as the title announces.

The Haunting of the Gentleman: Tessa's Ghost and Justin's Romantic Mission

Before exploring what kind of gentleman Justin is –for there is not only one kind– and why he is both haunting and haunted some preliminary considerations are due. Christine Berberich begins her recent book on *The Image of the English Gentleman in Twentieth-Century Literature: Englishness and Nostalgia* thus:

> Gentleman –a word simultaneously conjuring up diverse images, yet one so difficult to define. When we hear the term, we might think of Englishness; of class; of masculinity; of elegant fashions; of manners and morals. But we might also think of hypocrisy; of repression; of outdated behaviour befitting the characters of a Victorian novel, but which no longer holds any value in today's society. (2007: 1)[4]

All these issues are relevant in *The Constant Gardener*, a novel that links together a marked neo-Victorian spirit in its revaluation of chivalry with the spirit of the genre that made its author world–famous: spy fiction. As Berberich herself observes, "Ian Fleming, the author of the Bond books, clearly created his master spy as an English gentleman" (2007: 162). On their side, Bruccoli and Baughman remind us that

[4] Berbich's analysis includes chapters dedicated to the works and personalities of Sigfried Sassoon, Anthony Powell, and Evelyn Waugh and also to Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*.

> The Spy Novel is a British genre. (...) Americans aren't very good at it (...) The disparity –at least before the Cold War– may be accounted for by the English tradition of the gentleman amateur: the patriot who serves England out of a sense of public-school privilege. (2004:11)

Justin, of course, is not a spy nor is *The Constant Gardener* spy fiction. His mission is not serving England but exposing her lethal hypocrisy and in more than one sense he carries it out to debunk public-school privilege. Yet Tessa's large inheritance –she's far richer than him– frees Justin from the need to depend on his job, funding thus both his investigation of her death and also his new status as independent gentleman, quite in the tradition of the Victorian and Edwardian amateur gentleman.

In *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* Mark Girouard rationalizes the Victorian fixation with the gentleman as a way "to produce a ruling class which deserved to rule because it possessed the moral qualities necessary to rulers" (1981: 261). As he points out, "As a dominant code of conduct [chivalry] never recovered from the Great War partly because the war itself was such a shatterer of illusions, partly because it helped produce a world in which the necessary conditions for chivalry were increasingly absent"(290). This decadence of the circumstances and of the gentleman himself is what Kazuo Ishiguro reflects so critically in his masterpiece *The Remains of the Day* (1989), published in the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Le Carré, who has been striving since then to find new post-Cold War subjects, considers in *Constant Gardener* the failure of today's British ruling classes to act morally against the alarming greed generated by neo-imperialist globalization. Ishiguro has his own amateur gentleman, Lord Darlington, suffer (in the early 1930s) the vicious attack of an American senator who believes that his day is over and that only professional politicians should take part in world affairs. Le Carré, on the contrary, attacks British professional politicians as immoral, giving his amateur gentleman the responsibility to set a counterexample for the 21st century.

Justin's gentlemanliness is not, evidently, that of the most superficial definition of the gentleman, the one that dominates advice books such as John Bridges's *How to Be a Gentleman* (1999). Justin's tragedy, in fact, is that everyone perhaps including himself believes that he *is* the kind of gentleman interested only in etiquette, good looks and odd hobbies (his gardening) when he is actually a far more complex type. His neo-Victorian personality is not, nonetheless, just the product of Le Carré's nostalgic conservatism but proof that British (indeed Western) society has not managed to reach yet the end of the course towards justice that the Victorians first sketched. Evidence of this is the little distance separating J.S. Mill's words in *The Subjection of Women* (1869) from Harvey Claflin Mansfield's in *Manliness* (2006). Claiming that it is time for "the morality of justice" (2006: 179), Mill writes that

> The main foundations of the moral life of modern times must be justice and prudence; the respect of each for the rights of every other, and the ability of each to take care of himself. Chivalry left without legal check all forms of wrong which reigned unpunished throughout society; it only encouraged a few to do right in preference to wrong, by the direction it gave to the instruments of praise and admiration. But the real dependence of morality must always be upon its penal sanctions –its power to deter from evil. (227)

137 years later, Mansfield makes exactly the same point despite the progress in legislation:

> We now believe it is safer to rely on the law rather than an ideal. The new law shows respect for the equality of the sexes and drops the odious presumption that men are stronger, women are weaker. Thus gender neutrality came into being, replacing gentlemanliness as the standard of both morality and common courtesy. (2006: 5)

In words that fit to perfection Justin's transformation from ineffective chivalrous gentleman into heroic knight for our times, Mansfield states that "It is justice, not pity, that makes the gentleman. If you believe you can afford to do justice to others, if you consider you have from some extrahuman source a margin of safety, then you will be not soft but gentle." (2006: 118)

In this search for justice Justin faces not a single villain but, as corresponds to Le Carré's critique of corporations, a chain of villainous acts carried out by selfish men, from corrupt civil servants to mercenaries, passing through greedy businessmen and scientists. Since Justin's enemy is diffuse, his gentle kind of heroism is better defined by his relationship with his damsel in distress. Tessa haunts him (figuratively, of course) throughout the novel, first as a decaying dead body and next as a voice that Justin invents to make up for his isolation once he becomes a man on the run. This haunting, which is presented through abundant flashbacks as the novel begins in media res with the finding of her body, actually begins about four years earlier when Tessa first intrudes in Justin's life in a way short of terrifying for him. Alive, Tessa forces Justin the self-centered ageing bachelor to become a generous, loving husband; once dead, she gives Justin's masculinity a second jolt, forcing him to shed the last remains of his selfishness in order to become a hero for her sake. Regrettably, she has to die to accomplish this.

Le Carré is wary of the melodramatic elements in his plot and so *The Constant Gardener* is initially focalized through Sandy Woodrow, Head of Chancery at the High Commission. This means that Justin is presented indirectly, through the point of view of a treacherous friend who, despite coveting Tessa, starts the chain of betrayals that lead to her death. Justin initially ignores that his wife has lured Sandy to be her champion within the System with a vague promise of sexual gratification which she doesn't intend to fulfil. She assumes that Justin's career will be protected in this way but Sandy's main loyalty is to his employers; aware of this, they entrust him with the responsibility of keeping an eye on her. Who should control Tessa, sexually and as an activist, becomes, thus, the main issue isolating Justin from his circle of treacherous male friends, employers and enemies, as all agree that Justin is not man enough for the task. They dislike him, above all, because his lack of concern forces the other men in the System to control Tessa, with disastrous consequences.

The Justin we see through the eyes of his superiors –mainly the jealous Sandy and the cold-blooded Sir Bernard Pellegrin, the "Foreign Office mandarin" (34) responsible for Africa– is a man despised practically on all accounts: for his soft good looks, his polite manners, his reliability in social events, his gardening. His only strong point seems to be his trophy wife but when she shows her true colors the marriage becomes his greatest liability. Weak Justin is seen as a husband who somehow deserves being cuckolded, which is why rumors concerning Tessa and Arnold are rife. That

instead of raging against wife and friend, Justin rages against the accusers –and he is a man "not given to anger" (100)– only increases the aversion of his male betrayers.

Le Carré shows through Justin's indirect presentation that men's insights into other men are limited by their hierarchical placing; the surprise that Justin's bold behavior after Tessa's death elicits all around arises only because the wrong clichés have been pinned onto him. To begin with, before marriage and even afterwards Justin is primarily seen as an unsexed bachelor. Ironically, his description gathers together a collection of features easily recognizable as those of the gentleman hero of romance, quite in the style of Jane Austen's Darcy. Clearly, he must be a magnet for the ladies. Justin is a dark-eyed man with a "handsome dark head" (45) full of thick graying hair, a "studiously handsome face"(30), "nicely carved lips"(31) and a "famous golden voice"(27); he can wear as easily his "tailored tropical suits" (28) as "his stupid straw hat" (88). No wonder much younger Tessa falls for him. Yet, Pellegrin sees Justin as "the professional bachelor (...) the *spare male* (...) perfect manners, probably gay (...)" (154, emphasis original), missing the fact that he is, rather, quite sexy, "as a few of the better-looking wives" (155) secretly know. Sandy even fails to notice that his wife Gloria, the ridiculous vapid Foreign Office wife that Tessa is expected to become, falls in love with widowed Justin the moment she sees him as a tragic hero.

Justin's diplomatic career is also negatively affected by the little respect he commands from his employers. Sandy discloses that only compassion for the death of his and Tessa's stillborn son saved Justin from the ignominy of losing his job. Interrogated by police officers Rob and Lesley about Justin's function in the High Commission, Sandy chuckles that "he's our in-house Old Etonian for a start" (94) before explaining that he holds a minor post as British representative and secretary of EADEC (the East African Donors' Effectiveness Committee), a consultative body as ineffective as Justin. Among the "checklist of Justin's meagre attributes" Sandy stresses that he is "a *gentleman*, whatever that means" (98, emphasis original) implying that only his gentlemanliness saves Justin from being jobless. At the same time, it is somehow implied that gentlemanliness is a quaint trait only found in soft men (Justin's surname is, after all, Quayle).

Tessa pins on Justin yet another cliché, that of the chivalrous protector, because she is an extremely dependent woman –a feature that may certainly irk feminist readers. Justin accepts this new role after a serious struggle with himself and never stops feeling that he is a "love-thief"(49) because Tessa loves him for whom he never is. Their first meeting ignites the spur of a romantic fantasy in Tessa's mind to which Justin responds precisely because he is a gentleman and ladies must not be disappointed. The couple meet when she makes an embarrassing intervention attacking a dull lecture he delivers. Justin, twice her age, used to seducing women soon "understood the burden of beauty and the curse of always being an event" and "having knocked her down, he therefore rushed to help her to her feet" (158). Tessa takes his gallantry as a sign that he will always protect her, and she mentions marriage almost immediately, making "no secret of wanting an older lover" (162). Justin, far from corresponding, is petrified: "all the while the practised womaniser in him sent out dire warning signals of the most emphatic kind: abort, this one's trouble, she's too young for you, too real, too earnest (...)" (160). He, however, relents and abandons his old self to become "the droll, adoring father-figure to a beautiful young girl, indulging her every whim as the saying goes, letting her have her head any time she needed it. But her protector nonetheless, her rock,

her steadying hand, her adoring elder gardener in a straw hat"(164). This magnanimous chivalry is actually just narcissistic fulfilment, as proven by Justin's blindness to Tessa's agony after their baby's death. After all, his profession has taught him that "studied ignorance is an art form."(168)

Recalling Tessa's "teasing, foxy, classy voice"(57), Sandy concludes that it is "no wonder she and Justin fell for each other –they're from the same thoroughbred stable, twenty years apart"(57). Justin's view of his wife's motivations is, naturally, more personal: "Tessa's darkest secret was her virtue"(165), he explains to Rob and Lesley to clarify why he trusted her with Arnold. "She had married convention (...) Me. (...) After her parents' death she had scared herself. Now, with me to steady her, she wanted to pull back from too much freedom. It was the price she was prepared to pay for not being an orphan any more" (165). This explains why the British expats at Nairobi tend to see them as father and daughter, an aspect rewritten by the film adaptation in which the age difference is downplayed (Ralph Fiennes as Justin was 43, Rachel Weisz was 34 though Tessa's age is given as 24) and their eroticism emphasized. In the novel Justin's role as Tessa's father-figure is crucial for her to overcome orphanhood though not dependence. Tessa, a barrister like her father the judge (her mother is an Italian countess), has strong principles but no particular vocation. "In their first months together," Justin recalls, "Tessa had talked of nothing but her father and mother (...)" (233) until under his "artful guidance" (233) she finally focused on Africa. Once in Kenya, and happily pregnant after a three-year wait, she becomes determined to creating a better world for her baby. Meeting Bluhm, she sets out to work among the African women dealing with, as Justin lists, "Property rights, divorce, physical abuse, marital rape, female circumcision, safe sex. The whole menu, every day. You can see why their husbands get a little touchy, can't you? I would, if I was a marital rapist."(28)

His sympathy for Tessa's work (not job, as she is not a salaried employee) is taken to a turning point handled very clumsily by Le Carré despite its importance in his critique of Justin's masculinity (and of Tessa's stubborn, childish femininity). Readers are asked to believe that Tessa decides to have her baby in the poorly equipped Uhuru Hospital out of solidarity with the Kenyan women. Arnold, not Justin, convinces her not to deliver her baby in the slum of Kibera, as she initially wishes, but both men accept Uhuru, feeling that forcing Tessa to give birth in a private clinic amounts to a betrayal. Baby Garth, named after her father, dies of causes never explained, apparently for no other reason that Le Carré must punish his heroine for her gender-based activism and her husband for condoning it. Also, because he needs to have Tessa witness a Dypraxa-related death, that of a teenage mother. The image of Tessa breast-feeding this girl's black baby is in the end more useful to fuel the rumours about her infidelity than to explain her dogged pursuit of the Dypraxa villains.

His son's death, not Tessa's, is the test of manhood that Justin fails. Seeing a little boy play, Justin recalls that what he resented about Garth's death was that it "deprived me of my further education"(327). Possibly because he blames Tessa and also because he is a coward, Justin fails her in her grief "By letting her go it alone. By emigrating from her in my mind. By making an immoral contract with her. One I should never have allowed. And nor should she"(153). Given her own emotional limitations, Tessa fails to reach out for Justin to share their pain. She turns then the Dypraxa scandal into her quest with Arnold's help –much to Justin's relief, which he masks, once again, as chivalrous generosity: "Tessa was desolate. If she'd needed a hundred Bluhms as far as

I was concerned, she could have them all and in the terms she wished"(169). A woman, his boss Alison, is the only one to point out that the key issue is not whether Justin should have restrained Tessa regarding Dypraxa as "that would be sexist." She asks actually "*how*, in reality, you remained *totally* ignorant of her *activities* (...)" to which Justin can only answer that "I'm afraid that's what happens when you put your head in the sand" (214, emphasis original). Although Justin convinces himself that Tessa concealed her investigation to protect him, the discovery that she also kept from him Arnold's homosexuality hints at her disillusion with him. This also justifies her risky choice of Sandy as her champion though not her inability to make her own voice heard without men's help.

Justin's penitence for not being the man his wife needed is ceasing to believe in the System and "and all I stood for" (413) to finally allow himself to be figuratively possessed by Tessa: "What he needed now was one huge plunge into the heart of her secret world; to recognize each signpost and milestone along her journey; to extinguish his own identity and revive hers; to kill Justin, and bring Tessa back to life" (261). When he is badly beaten up, Justin calls out to the ghost in his mind that "*I've passed the exam I've been shirking all my life. I'm a graduate of pain*" (382, original italics). This new "Justin the loner, taking nobody's orders but his own; Justin impassioned on the warpath, determined to uncover what, in an earlier life, he might have helped to cover up," as seen by the head spy Donohue (467), feels "resolved. And in some dark sense purified. He had never supposed that his search would have a good end"(411). And so, after leaving in safe hands evidence of Tessa and Arnold's findings he allows himself to be murdered.

Le Carré concludes with a mournful dose of cynicism that Justin, Tessa and Arnold die for nothing, since the good guys helping them are consigned to "the catacombs of official Whitehall" (548) or denied better posts as civil servants, whereas the villains are promoted or given plum jobs. The efforts to release the documents that the three heroes so painfully put together are thwarted. This ending is meant to provoke the reader into considering whether it is necessarily true that powerful corporations are untouchable and that heroic sacrifice for the sake of justice is useless, but it is somehow more effective at showing how individual conflict dominates over the Dypraxa scandal. After all, when closing the book the reader is still haunted by the ghosts of Justin and Tessa (secondarily by Arnold's) rather than by the dim ghosts of Dypraxa's many victims.

This haunting is meant to be erotic. "Eroticism," George Battaille writes "is assenting to life up to the point of death. (...) Indeed, although erotic activity is in the first place an exuberance of life, the object of this psychological quest, independent as I say of any concern to reproduce life, is not alien to death" (2001: 11). This applies to Justin's Romantic ending, which is a suicide –as the British Government pretends– since he refuses to protect himself from danger. By embracing death as he would embrace Tessa, Justin culminates his other transformation from detached husband to desiring lover, which is why in the film her name is his last word. Edward Gallafent observes that since Tessa is constantly defined by the desire she elicits, Justin must formulate "a benign version of her, free of the currents of desire" before becoming "the ideal bereaved lover whose existence is devoted to her memory" (2006). Actually, Justin's waning desire for Tessa, the bereaved mother, is revived by her death to become a high Romantic passion that he never felt for the living woman.

Film reviewer James Berardinelli complains that "Justin never comes vividly to life, and his romance with Tessa engages us on an intellectual, but not emotional, level" (2005). As subjective as his is my impression that the anti-corporate message in *The Constant Gardener* is lost in the distracting emotion, or desire, elicited by Justin's Romantic choice of following Tessa to the grave. As Catherine Belsey reminds us

> There are in the reading process (...) two desires in play: on the one hand, the desire of the fictional figure within the text, and on the other the desire of the reader. What stories of demon lovers suggest is that the desire defined in the fiction cannot be met by a mortal lover, because in the end desire is not of the other, but of the Other, and its gratification is both forbidden and impossible. The desire of the reader, however, is permitted. (1994: 182)

Justin cannot find fulfilment since his "demon lover," by which Belsey simply means a person no longer living, is unreachable. Yet his desire for Tessa makes readers feel a sympathy so strong that we may safely call it desire: an erotic longing for love to overcome death. In this regard, the ending of *The Constant Gardener* recalls that of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* –different as her reasons to kill off Heathcliff are–,[5] an effect accidentally underlined by Ralph Fiennes's screen roles as Justin and Heathcliff (in Peter Kosminsky's 1992 version of Brontë's novel).

Just as Heathcliff is haunted by the ghostly presence in his mind of his dead love Cathy, Justin is haunted by Tessa's. This necrophiliac desire, however, is totally at odds with the need to reveal the Dypraxa scandal. Le Carré ends up thus following Brontë over Mill as a guide in his neo-Victorian resurrection of the gentleman. Justin appears to be a useful model for other men in his (gentle)manly determination to unmask the villains but he is ultimately useless because by dying he delegates justice onto others whose motivations are easier to thwart. Justin's Romantic mission to redress the offence against Tessa's memory and that of the Dypraxa victims *should not* end in his death, especially as it might easily become a mission for life and, thus, a far more effective form of penitence and redemption.

By turning his hero into a Romantic victim, Le Carré leaves all the other victims without a spokesperson; this may be a fine ending for neo-Victorian melodrama about masculinity but not for a political novel about globalization –what *Constant Gardener* is supposed to be. The political message that gentlemen alert to the call for justice are sorely wanted in the fight against the villainous men in power is perfectly valid but it is not satisfactory enough because these gentlemen are needed alive. So are women like Tessa and men like Arnold, preferably working for collective action, not for individual heroism. Our Pavlovian conditioning to love the hero, ingrained in our minds by the still strong pull of 19th century Romanticism and Victorianism, makes us root for Justin but in the 21st century we need to root for justice, and demand that he lives on and fights for it.

The Hunting of the Dark Knight: Arnold's Neo–Colonial Marginalisation

[5] Essentially, Heathcliff must die as punishment for his villainous behavior towards the kin of the his beloved Cathy; in short, because he is not a real gentleman, only one in appearance.

The martyrdom of Dr. Arnold Bluhm deserves a separate article on the difficulties to overcome racial stereotypes in Western white men's representations of African men. Yet, since he has been created as a marginal character in Justin's tragedy, this is how I will approach him, leaving a more complete post-colonial critique to others. Even Bluhm's horrendous ending, the climax of his ghostly presence in *The Constant Gardener*, is presented as a warning from a concerned pal (the dying spy Donohue) to scare Justin back into a cosy life as a rich man. Arnold, Donohue reports, was kidnapped as Tessa was being murdered, left with no water or food in the dessert and tortured for two days; when he still refused to disclose the location of the copies of the documents that Tessa and he had compiled, "they tortured him to death to be on the safe side and because they enjoyed it. Then they left him to the hyenas"(512). Significantly, either the writer Jeffrey Caines or director Fernando Mereilles rewrote this death for the film adaptation to include castration, the stuffing of Arnold's mouth with his own genitals, disembowelment and his crucifixion head down, quoting St. Peters's.

Making no comment on Bluhm at all, Giles Foden, author of *The Last King of Scotland* (1998), a controversial novel about Ugandan dictator Idi Amin Dada, enthuses that in *Constant Gardener*

> The African details feel as right and true as the British ones (...)" noting that "Le Carré is very good on expatriate-servant relations, as in a moving scene in which the Quayle staff mourn the loss of their mistress (...) As that passage demonstrates, Le Carré does not have the 'almost colonialist arrogance' of which he himself accused Rushdie with regard to *The Satanic Verses.* (2000)

Leaving Rushdie aside, it is clear enough that both Foden's review, with its telling praise of the representation of "expatriate-servant relations" and Le Carré's novel smack of "almost colonialist arrogance," especially as regards the marginalisation of the main African character in the book, Bluhm.

Between the 1850s and the 1880s, Lynn Segal reminds us, "English upper- and middle-class men departed for Africa to prove their 'manhood.' They read avidly about white men's adventures in the 'Dark Continent:' the Black man serving as the necessary foil, the essential opposition, giving substance to the superiority of the white man." (2007: 145) Although set at the end of the 20th century, the situation is not so different in *The Constant Gardener*, with British ex-colonies like Kenya providing the business opportunities to test the 'manhood' of neo-imperialist British men. As for the black man serving as foil, the irony is that in an attempt to sound less colonialist Le Carré reproduces the scheme already used by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1898), leaving the Africans in the background as the white hero fights his battle to unmask corruption. Chinua Achebe famously protested back in 1970 that "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth" (1988: 13). The same can be still said today about Le Carré.

"The sources of imperialism and the sources of the Victorian code of the gentleman are so intertwined that it is not surprising to find this code affecting the way in which the Empire was run (...)"(1981: 224), Mark Girouard notes. Global neo-imperialism still depends, as Le Carré shows, on that public-school ethos of chivalry for its sustenance and its critique. Yet, the new element in the equation is the rise of some African men to the status of (Western) gentleman. Thus, police officer Lesley responds

to Sandy's ugly suggestion that Arnold may have killed Tessa snapping back that "Bluhm's as close as you'll ever get to a *good man* (...) He's done a lot of really, really good things. Not for display, but because he wanted to. Saved lives, risked his own, worked in awful places for no money, hidden people in his attic." (103, emphasis original) As Justin later recalls, Tessa saw her friend Bluhm as "A perfect man. (...) Even Justin the sceptic had never thought of him in any other way." (313)

A residual scepticism (or badly masked jealousy), however, tarnishes the presentation of the *black gentleman* perhaps because even Le Carré feels that Bluhm is, well, too good for an African man. Patronizing Sandy sees Arnold as "the Westerner's African, bearded Apollo of the Nairobi cocktail round, charismatic, witty, beautiful"(35). Bluhm, whose actual nationality is never mentioned, works for a small Belgian medical NGO, privately funded, acting watchdog in corrupt Africa. As Sandy adds for the reader's benefit, Bluhm –whose age is not given, either– was a hero in the Algerian war (1954–62) and eminent enough to have been seen "discoursing from the rostrum of the United Nations lecture hall on medical priorities in disaster situations" (35). What the experienced, intelligent Arnold sees in Tessa's slapdash crusade is not made clear, though Justin explains that she followed him because "Arnold was the authority of suffering. He not only treated torture victims in Algeria, he was tortured himself. He had earned his pass to the wretched of the earth. I hadn't." (171)

This jealousy of Arnold's heroic status is what makes him a suspect in Tessa's death. For green-eyed Sandy and the racist media, Arnold may be a handsome gentleman hero but he is possibly also an adulterer if not a rapist and murderer. Kobena Mercer denounces this hypocritical racism:

> Blacks are looked down upon and despised as worthless, ugly, and ultimately unhuman creatures. But in the blink of an eye, whites look up to and revere the black body, lost in awe and envy as the black subject is idolised as the embodiment of the whites' ideal. This schism in white subjectivity is replayed daily in the different ways black men become visible on the front and back pages of tabloid newspapers, seen as undesirable in one frame –the mugger, the terrorist, the rapist– and highly desirable in another –the athlete, the sports hero, the entertainer. (2002: 196)

Le Carré also tries to condemn the hypocritical attitude towards the respected doctor Bluhm by condemning his accusers. Yet, by characterizing Arnold as gay he further contributes to sexualizing him and to undermining his heroic status, for Bluhm *cannot* be heroic in his duplicitous life as a closeted gay. As Justin learns, Arnold's double jeopardy is that if he had declared his homosexuality he wouldn't have been able to continue his aid work in homophobic Kenya; in order to protect his work (and his life), Arnold adopts the pose of a playboy, "thus attracting the criticism reserved for trans-racial adulterers" (312). Tessa, who keeps his secret believing that loyalty to a friend in danger outranks loyalty to a husband, becomes ultimately Arnold's main liability as she reacts carelessly to the rumours about her infidelity.

Since Arnold is recalled only in flashbacks and there is no bereaved lover to mourn him, he can be very conveniently used simply as a prop to describe Justin's shortcomings. Once his body has been found, Justin discovers thanks to the draft of an essay in which Tessa attacks the illegality of homosexuality in Kenya, that his wife's "moral tutor, black knight, protector in the aid jungle" (29) was a homosexual.

Resentful that he was not allowed into this secret, "The tides of jealousy that Justin had for so long held at bay suddenly broke banks and engulfed him" (313). This, oddly enough, seems to be jealousy of Tessa, as she enjoyed a strong intimacy with:

> A man to touch the homoerotic nerve in all of us, he had once remarked to her in his innocence. Beautiful and soft-spoken. Courteous to friends and strangers. Beautiful from his husky voice to his rounded iron-grey beard, to his long-lidded, plump African eyes that never strayed from you while he spoke or listened. Beautiful in the rare but timely gestures that punctuated his lucid, beautifully delivered opinions. Beautiful from his sculpted knuckles to his feather-like, graceful body, trim and lithe as a dancer's and as disciplined in its withholding. Never brash, never unknowing, never cruel, although at every party and conference he encountered Western people so ignorant that Justin felt embarrassed for him. Even the old ones at the Muthaiga said it: that fellow Bluhm, my God, they didn't make blacks like him in our day, no wonder Justin's child-bride has fallen for him. (313)

This passage shows not only the appalling racism of the British colony in Kenya but also Le Carré's (and Justin's) difficulties to transcend it. Arnold may be a handsome gentleman as much as Justin but British mainstream fiction is not ready yet to accept him as the main hero, much less to accept a version of *The Constant Gardener* in which the tragic lovers were Arnold and a gay Justin (that "homoerotic nerve" remains untouched, or does it?). The passage also shows the demeaning erotisation of African men, whether gay or heterosexual: it is hard to imagine a novel by a black African man in which a white male would be presented in similar voyeuristic terms.

If Arnold's marginalisation in the novel is questionable, this is even more so in the film, as one of its strongest selling points was that it had been shot on location in Africa. The documentaries accompanying the DVD edition reveal the blatant neo-colonialist nature of the adaptation. To begin with, although actors Ralph Fiennes and Rachel Weisz appear on screen expressing their enthusiasm about working in Africa, French-Beninian actor Hubert Koundé (who plays a much younger, far less imposing Bluhm) only appears in scenes from the film. Oddly enough, much is made of the fact that an actor playing a very minor role –Bernard Otieno Oduor as Jomo– is a local Kibera man whereas Koundé's African origins are ignored. The documentary *Embracing Africa: Filming in Kenya* is particularly embarrassing as regards the neo-colonial nature of film making, for producer Channing Williams insists that the Nairobi slum of Kibera benefited much: 2,000 local people were employed and a bridge built for the film was left for the community to use. Director Fernando Mereilles marvels that Kibera is even poorer than the Brazilian favelas he is familiar with, as if this enriched his film. Smiling, star Ralph Fiennes ensures that "I didn't feel any negativity or resentment" from the Kenyan locals, implying that some measure was perhaps due. In another documentary, *John Le Carré: From Page to Screen*, the author praises Mereilles for bringing a "Third World eye" to the adaptation; Mereilles agrees that he saw the story "from Kenya's point of view,"[6] though he just ads to Le Carré's plot local

[6] Mereilles explains that "I was given the script, I really liked the story. The love story. I liked the political drama. I liked the idea of talking about the pharmaceutical industry. That's why I decided to do the film. But, the story, the first script, had a lot to do with the British class society, you know. And I took all this out. I mean, a lot of, so, I took a lot of characters out and I tried to bring the story to Kenya. Watching the film, you see a lot of scenes in the streets, in the markets, and those scenes weren't in the script in the first place. So this is my contribution, bringing Kenya to the film and taking a bit of the British issues out." (*ABC – At the Movies* http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s1490092.htm)

colour shot in a pseudo-documentary style without really rewriting its main issues. If he had, perhaps Bluhm, the only African in the cast of Le Carré's characters, would have been given more screen time.

Actually, the little attention that Arnold receives is a telling sign not only of his marginalisation as a hero and as a (gay) African man but also of the general hypocritical distrust with which African masculinity is regarded in Le Carré's novel and in the film. British High Commissioner Porter expresses his belief that if Africa were given to the women "the place might work" (36) just when the British Government that he represents finally succeeds in silencing Tessa; the same opinion is defended by Lorbeer, the treacherous scientist who runs the Dypraxa tests and who puts the murderers on her trail. Tessa's activism in favour of the African women, the violent raid into Southern Sudan inserted in the film, and also the homophobia that hinders Arnold's work characterize (heterosexual) African men as brutes too corrupt and irresponsible to solve the grave problems of Africa.

The continent itself is seen as the stereotypical maid in distress of melodrama, an object of lust for the (corporate) villain and of adventure for the (white) hero, never her own woman. *The Constant Gardener* emphasizes thus the Eurocentric message that Africa is poor and desperate because of *her men* and not because of the poisoned legacy left by the patriarchal, imperialist British men. Understanding where real evil lies, Justin is killed playing the hero against his British peers but African Arnold is not even given a chance to fight back, though we are repeatedly told that he *is* a hero. Le Carré is too wrapped up in Justin's Romantic tragedy to realize that he is, like Conrad, offending African sensibilities, especially those of African men. As Chinua Achebe pointed out in the passage already quoted on *Heart of Darkness*, "the victims of racist slander who for centuries have had to live with the inhumanity it makes them heir to have always known better than any causal visitor, even when he comes loaded with the gifts of Conrad" (1988: 13). Or of Le Carré's.

Conclusions: Reimagining Our Heroes

The Constant Gardener is, like any other novel, as much a product of the author's sensibility as of his zeitgeist. As a literary work, this novel is, like its film adaptation, an intriguing text which boldly attempts to blend together an old-fashioned neo-Victorian, Romantic discourse on masculinity with a new political awareness. Le Carré does not fail to move his readers, though he moves them in directions he may have miscalculated. The transformation of his hero Justin Quayle from an unmarried, ineffective minor diplomat into a heroic martyr invoking the memory of his dead wife and of her political activism works very well at an emotional, erotic level but is far less successful as a call to men to be gentle yet firm in their search for justice –to be a new kind of anti-patriarchal gentlemen. This partial failure is compounded with Le Carré's failure to imagine an alternative to individual heroism and within it, an alternative to the habitual white, male figure of the hero. Particularly worrying is the treatment that African men receive in the person of Dr. Arnold Bluhm, whose characterization as a hero does not prevent Le Carré (nor Mereilles) from dismissing him to the margins.

Both novel and film show thus the limitations of mainstream fiction to imagine new stories that open up to a greater variety of masculinities (and femininities) in depth

and not just on the surface. To be fair with the author, and the adapter, we respond to *The Constant Gardener* because it mirrors our easy addiction to melodrama and our inability to demand a more committed political fiction. The fact that we respond to the appeal of Justin's transformation better than to the appeal of the Dypraxa victims' for justice stresses the impression that the transformation of masculinity is a pre-condition for the transformation of justice, as J.S. Mill already argued. Perhaps the time elapsed since then is simply not enough for such a massive change and this is why we retell the same story, asking the gentleman to return again and again. Let's hope next time we can finally imagine him joining forces with all those who oppose patriarchal abuse and not as a lonely hero in love with death.

REFERENCES

ABC – At the Movies. 17 November 2005. "*The Constant Gardener*: Margaret interviews Director, Fernando Meirelles and Actors, Ralph Fiennes and Rachel Weisz." http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s1490092.htm (Accessed October 2008)

Achebe**,** Chinua. 1988. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." (1970). In *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-87,* 1-13. London: Heinemann.

Bataille, George. 2001. *Eroticism* (1957). Translated by Mary Dalwood. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Belsey, Catherine. 1994. *Love Stories in Western Culture*. London: Blackwell.

Berardinelli, James. 2005. "*The Constant Gardener*, A Film Review by James Berardinelli."http://www.reelviews.net/movies/c/constant_gardener.html (Accessed October 2008)

Berberich, Christine. 2007. *The Image of the English Gentleman in Twentieth–Century Literature: Englishness and Nostalgia*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate.

Bridges, John. 1999. *How to Be a Gentleman*. Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press.

Bruccoli, Matthew & Judith S. Baughman. 2004. "Introduction."In *Conversations with John Le Carré*, edited by Matthew Bruccoli and Judith S. Baughman, xi-xiii. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi.

Girouard, Mark. *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1981.

Foden, Giles. "Garden of good and evil: Giles Foden sees John le Carré, chronicler of the cold war, find new enemies in *The Constant Gardener*." Saturday December 23, 2000. *The Guardian.* http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,,414785,00.html (Accessed October 2008)

Gallafent, Edward. November 2006. "Intuitions in Africa: Personal and Political Knowledge in *The Constant Gardener*." *CineAction*, 70: 59-65. http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Intuitions+in+Africa%3a+personal+and+political+knowledge+in+the...–a0155477211 (Accessed October 2008)

Le Carré, John. *The Constant Gardener* (2000). London: Hodder, 2005.

Mansfield, Harvey Claflin. 2006. *Manliness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Mercer, Kobena. 2002. "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary." In *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, edited by Rachel Adams and David Savran, 188–200. London: Blackwell.

Mereilles, Fernando. *The Constant Gardener* (2004). London: Focus Films, 2005.

Mill, J.S. 2006. *The Subjection of Women* (1869). In *On Liberty and the Subjection of Women*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Segal, Lynne. *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*. London: Palgrave, 2007.

You are free: to Share — to copy, distribute and transmit the work
Under the following conditions:
Attribution — You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
No Derivative Works — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Notice — For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.