

# PATHOLOGY IN JOHN BUCHAN'S *THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS*

NATHAN WADDELL

John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915) is a text of valetudinarians. Throughout, if its protagonists are not wounded they are nauseous, diseased, or mentally unsound. Famously written while Buchan himself was in bed recovering from a duodenal ulcer, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* begins with Richard Hannay, the hero, admitting that England's weather made him "liverish" (7) and that the talk of ordinary Englishmen made him "sick" (7). Hangovers are commonplace: an "old potato-digger [who] seemed to have turned peevish" buries his "frowsy head into the cushions" (29) of a railway carriage; an intoxicated roadman can think of nothing but his "fuddled brain" (51); and one of the Black Stone conspirators uses inebriation as an alibi (106). There is reference to "influenza at Blackpool" (42), "colic" (53), and Hannay is subsequently laid up by a ten day stretch of malaria: "it was a baddish go, and though I was out of bed in five days, it took me some time to get my legs again" (74). Even the political head of the Admiralty is convalescing at Sheringham (84), and Franklin P. Scudder, upon whom so much depends, is referred to as gripped by a "mania" (80) for covering his tracks, while Hannay thinks him a "madman" (9).

In this article I offer some thoughts on the function of pathology in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, both with an eye to its depiction of sickness and disaffection, and to the linked issue of its representation of, and attitude towards, the "pathology" of paranoia. In doing so, I take the largely untrodden route of emphasizing the ambiguousness and double-sidedness of this text. My article focuses on the function of the body in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in the urban environment, landscape, and psychosis. It starts by examining the presentation of London as a site of abjection, degeneracy, and the nihilistic, and emphasizes that this identity is not neatly cordoned off from the rural spaces against which it is ostensibly defined. It then moves into a discussion of contemporary criticism on prosthesis in the spy thriller, suggesting that paranoia in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* itself approximates to a variety of prosthetic enhancement. And it closes by reflecting on the complex status of paranoia within Buchan's narrative, engaging with David Trotter's work on spy thrillers and "paranoid professionalism," and thinking about how *The Thirty-Nine Steps* relates paranoia to the ludic.

The catalyst for action in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is Scudder's discovery of a conspiracy aimed at causing chaos in Europe. His anti-Semitic explanation of that plot places the blame firmly on "financiers" (10) and "Jew-anarchists" (11) whose goal is to reap a high

reward from international chaos: “A clever man can make big profits on a falling market,” notes Hannay, “and it suited the book of both classes to set Europe by the ears” (10). However, in time Scudder’s views are disproved. Walter Bullivant points out that Scudder ““had the artistic temperament, and wanted a story to be better than God meant it to be. He had a lot of odd biases, too. Jews, for example, made him see red. Jews and the high finance”” (81).<sup>1</sup> By decoding Scudder’s notebook, Hannay learns that the genuine conspiracy is in fact a German plot to get “nothing less than a statement of the disposition of the British Home Fleet on mobilization” (38) in order to mine Britain’s coastline and sink all British battleships with submarines. And yet, despite the falsity of Scudder’s initial claims, they remain significant insofar as they introduce a major trope into the urban context of London in which the novel opens. Discussing what he believes to be the grim effect of Judaism upon global commerce, Scudder draws on the pseudo-ethnographic discourse of degenerationism to dismiss the comparatively smaller world of Teutonic criminality as typically depending on the business of a ““prognathous Westphalian with a retreating brow and the manners of a hog”” (11). This description has the double effect of reinforcing the novel’s signalling of Anglo-German rivalry and difference, and links the urban with a typography of the abject, the wretched, and the morally disfigured.

Scudder himself is not so very far from such qualities. On the one hand, when he first seeks Hannay out in order to take refuge in the latter’s apartment, his feverish manner, drawn face, edginess, and “small, gimlety blue eyes” (8) can be ascribed to a dread of being eliminated: “I think that the look in my companion’s eyes,” Hannay says, “the sheer naked scare on his face, completed my conviction of his honesty” (13). And yet, on the other hand, Scudder’s account of how he came to trust in Hannay in the first place reveals both something of his own dubious linkages with the murkier aspects of the city, and the troubling pervasiveness of degeneracy within that setting. In order to outwit his pursuers, Scudder “acquires” a corpse – “you can always get a body in London if you know where to go for it” (13), he points out – and, getting himself up “to look like death” (13), locks himself in his bedroom: “When I was left alone I started in to fake up that corpse. He was my size, and I judged had perished from too much alcohol, so I put some spirits handy about the place. The jaw was the weak point in the likeness, so I blew it away with a revolver” (14). Now “dead,” he goes to Hannay, who lives in the same block of apartments, in order to wait out the conspirators. In one regard, Scudder’s activities morbidly prefigure his own murder in Hannay’s smoking room. But in quite another they intimate a disreputable underside to a London which, for Hannay, is at first simply clubs, finance districts, restaurants, theatres and entertainments.

The *Thirty-Nine Steps* offers a vision of the cityscape that hints at a dark underbelly to its seemingly carefree world of tea parties at the houses of “Imperialist ladies” (7) and “shop-girls and clerks and dandies and policemen” who “had some interest in life that kept them going” (8). In this text, London is both a site of decadent ruling-class abandon and a “God-forgotten metropolis” (15) inhabited by exotic revolutionaries and degenerate bodies. Scudder’s valet is “a whining fellow with a churchyard face” (16). There is a sense of illness about Hannay’s milkman, “a young man . . . with an ill-nourished moustache” (22). Loafers shuffle through back streets (23) and men in well-thought-of apartment blocks are murdered by heartless politicians (18). For Hannay, an immigrant himself, London is an alienating, defamiliarizing locality that isolates and estranges more than it nourishes and sustains: “I returned from the City about three o’clock on that May afternoon pretty well disgusted with life” (7), Hannay says. Above all the metropolis is a place of suffocating tedium: “The weather made me liverish, . . . I couldn’t get enough exercise, and the amusements of London seemed as flat as soda-water that has been standing in the sun” (7). Indeed, one of the most damaging effects of the city in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* is that it breeds a nihilism grounded in boredom which devalues the individual self’s linkage to its locale. Like the beggar he encounters on his way home – “a fellow-sufferer” (8) – boredom marks the emptiness of Hannay’s life during his time in London, a futility that leads him to make a vow at Oxford Circus: “I would give the Old Country another day to fit me into something; if nothing happened, I would take the next boat for the Cape” (8).<sup>2</sup> However, this boredom is short-lived: Scudder happens, and once Hannay learns of his murder, and subsequently realizes that, since he is in the know, he too must now go on the run, the boredom of the city evaporates: “I reminded myself that a week ago I had been finding the world dull” (24), he notes. Scudder’s termination both injects Hannay’s existence with the most primitive of meanings (to survive), and, in swapping the city for the restorative potential of the Scots moors, affords him with a rejuvenated awareness of self: “the slackness of the past months was slipping from my bones, and I stepped out like a four-year-old” (27).

That said, in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* bodies fare little better outside the city than they do within its boundaries. If at times the countryside regenerates Hannay, then at others it threatens to smother and engulf him. Looking across a vista he discerns that “at other times I would have liked the place, but now it seemed to suffocate me. The free moorlands were prison walls, and the keen hill air was the breath of a dungeon” (49). In this text, rural space endangers as much as it shelters: Hannay crashes a car on a country road and is chased by airborne spies, of which he comments: “I did not like this espionage from the air, and I began to think less well of the countryside I had chosen for a refuge” (31). During his escape from the bald archaeologist’s country mansion, Hannay is injured by the explosive he uses to blast his way out of the house: “Nausea shook me,

and a wheel in my head kept turning, while my left shoulder and arm seemed to be stricken with the palsy” (68). His limbs aching “like hell” (68), he climbs onto a dovecot where he proceeds “to go off into an old-fashioned swoon” (69). Indeed, Hannay’s injuries are worse than he at first realizes: “Those lentonite fumes had fairly poisoned me, and the baking hours on the dovecot hadn’t helped matters. I had a crushing headache, and felt as sick as a cat. Also my shoulder was in a bad way. At first I thought it was only a bruise, but it seemed to be swelling, and I had no use of my left arm” (72). No less so than the metropolitan byways, the rural is figured here as a site of jeopardy and, supplemented by automobiles, aeroplanes, and dynamite, a place of technological risk.

Consequently, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* problematises Allan Hepburn’s view that the spy thriller celebrates technology as an extension and intensification of the spy’s invincibility (15). The point to make here is not that Hannay’s capabilities are solely hampered by the various technologies he encounters, but, rather, that *The Thirty-Nine Steps* emphasizes the inseparability of prosthesis and pathology. Hepburn accurately contends that in the spy thriller “[t]echnology makes human eyes, ears, and limbs more powerful by leaving an impression of the spy’s ubiquity” (16), but if a basic consequence of bodily enhancement is an empowered self, then one of its disturbing implications is an acknowledgement of the body’s radical impermanence: bodies that can be augmented are also bodies that can putrefy and fall apart. Technological prosthesis is qualified by pathological response in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, a good example being Hannay’s “sickening plunge” (41) during his car crash: here, auto-mobility is at once auto-infirmity. Another is Hannay’s queasy reaction to the “dense and acrid fog” (67) produced during his explosive getaway. But perhaps the most interesting convergence of prosthesis and pathology in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* emerges in what is the novel’s most conspicuous, and most conspicuously nameless, form of psychological malady: paranoia. Indeed, Hannay’s paranoia is a pathology that approaches prosthesis insofar as it artificially enhances his ability to interpret the phenomenal world by attributing meaning to unconnected events.

And yet, in what sense Hannay can be thought of as paranoid is a key critical question. The evidence is ambiguous. Hannay is forced into unconsciousness by the sheer power of the dynamite he detonates at the conspirators’ headquarters (67), but in a very true sense he spends the majority of the narrative in an “unconscious” state in which private fantasy and external reality are impossible to tell apart. This “fantasy within a fantasy,” as Nicholas Hiley terms it (76), bears all the hallmarks of paranoid logic: suspicion, centrality, grandiosity, hostility, fear of loss of autonomy, projection, and delusional thinking.<sup>3</sup> This logic begins to determine Hannay’s activities after he finds Scudder’s corpse: “The men who knew that he knew what he knew had found him, and had taken the best way to make certain of his silence. Yes; but he had been in my rooms

four days [sic], and his enemies must have reckoned that he had confided in me. So I would be the next to go. It might be that very night, or next day, or the day after, but my number was up all right” (19). As Hannay leaves his apartment block he observes: “I caught sight of a policeman a hundred yards down, and a loafer shuffling past on the other side. Some impulse made me raise my eyes to the house opposite, and there at a first-floor window was a face. As the loafer passed he looked up, and I fancied a signal was exchanged” (23-24). Lacking any definitive proof that Scudder’s offing was in fact conspiratorially-organized, Hannay’s mind goes about the business of interpreting the former’s death in accordance with a larger purpose, a purpose in which Hannay is now a key player. This mindset culminates in the moment of critical paranoid vanity, when the paranoiac convinces himself of his own importance. “Here was I, a very ordinary fellow, with no particular brains, and yet I was convinced that somehow I was needed to help this business through—that without me it would all go to blazes” (86).

But just because Hannay seems paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t out to get him: there is a conspiracy at work here, and Hannay correctly identifies it from the very beginning. Having put a tablecloth over Scudder’s staring white face, Hannay reflects: “I was in the soup—that was pretty clear. Any shadow of a doubt I might have had about the truth of Scudder’s tale was now gone. The proof of it was lying under the tablecloth” (19). If Hannay is paranoid in the truest of psychological senses then he is only so in an attenuated form because his perceptions are not delusional. In David Trotter’s view this pathology represents “the ‘internalization’ of paranoia by a young man who thereby renews both himself and a ruling élite which had hitherto been sunk in complacency” (143). What Hannay does, in essence, is to reconstitute his thought patterns in accordance with Scudder’s sceptical point of view, a move he makes so fully that it enables him to make *accurate* readings of intrigue. For Trotter, this skill-set is professional. Paranoia, on this view, is an expertise that reads mess as “evidence in the visible world of an invisible but comprehensive design” (145). For Trotter, what survives in spy fiction is the belief that psychosis “may under certain circumstances prove a progressive force” (142). Furthermore, Trotter argues, the genre exploits this belief to the full in the name of national renewal.

The problem with using *The Thirty-Nine Steps* in any reading of professional identity is the unrelenting insistency with which Hannay’s paranoia is typified as *amateurish*. Professions are not absent from *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, of course, and they play a vital role. Hannay himself is a qualified engineer, for instance, and it is stated that he has had some practice of code-breaking as an “intelligence-officer at Delagoa Bay during the Boer War” (25). Moreover, the professions give Hannay various opportunities for disguise, such as when he poses as an orator (44) and when he hides as a roadman: “On I went, trundling my loads of stone, with the heavy step of the professional” (52). But

amateurism is a fundamental aspect of Hannay's character. For instance, although Hannay ultimately saves the day he is far from averse to moments of incompetence, especially in the case of car thievery: "I began to see what an ass I had been to steal the car" (40). Chance plays a significant part in Hannay's success, too. He narrowly misses death "by an ace" (42), happens upon unintentional diversions (30), coincidentally runs into an old associate (55), and admits his indebtedness to "pieces of undeserved good fortune" (57). As he puts it elsewhere: "I resolved not to puzzle my head but to take the gifts the gods had provided" (78). Without a doubt, Hannay's victory is in part enabled by outside influences. Refuge comes in the shape of an "unexpected sanctuary" (61) and the wife of a herdsman – "a true Samaritan" (73), as Hannay calls her – and there are moments where Hannay can only rationalize his hurried departures in the language of Providence (43, 54).

In spite of this, there is a sense in which Hannay's amateurism can be read as closer to the professionalism it ostensibly disallows. Reading *The Thirty-Nine Steps* with an eye to the generic history of the spy thriller, it is not hard to detect in Hannay's neophytism an abandoning of certain totemic, gentlemanly principles (such as fair play, honesty, respect for the law) in favour of the professional detachment of the secret agent. Hannay does not *become* a professional spy, but his actions begin to dismantle the values through which prior incarnations of the gentleman amateur had been articulated. Thus, while Hannay's paranoia is obviously beneficial in his own case it is less so in the case of (usually innocent) others: Hannay punches a policeman (40); he observes that "[c]ontrary to general belief, I was not a murderer, but I had become an unholy liar, a shameless impostor, and a highwayman with a marked taste for expensive motor-cars" (56); and, having been cleared of any wrongdoing by the authorities, he attacks Marmaduke Jopley, previously referred to as "an offence to creation" (55), because the latter unexpectedly stops him in the street: "a delay at that moment seemed to me unendurable, and the sight of Marmie's imbecile face was more than I could bear. I let out with my left, and had the satisfaction of seeing him measure his length in the gutter" (87). Hardly the conduct of a clubland hero.

These ambiguities over the standing of paranoia in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* are nicely mirrored in Hannay's claim that, in the special context of espionage, paranoia is not pathological so much as it is ludic and game-like. By describing his quest as a "crazy game of hide-and-seek" (57), Hannay implies that paranoid reality is a sphere governed by collective rules and achievable outputs. Scudder refers to the conspiracy as a game (12, 37), as does Walter Bullivant (83) and Hannay himself (20). Hannay notes that he has "a head for things like chess and puzzles" (25), a motif reinforced by his chess-playing with Scudder at the start of the book (16). Hannay envisages the prospect of the fugitive life as "a giddy hunt" (20), and at one stage in his getaway through Scotland he

observes: “I felt as if I were taking part in a schoolboy game of hare and hounds” (59). Elsewhere, game-playing modulates into sport: the milkman from whom Hannay borrows a uniform as disguise accepts the request as “a bit of sport” (23) and while Hannay flees uphill he sees “[a]way down the slope, a couple of miles away, several men were advancing like a row of beaters at a shoot” (49). Of course, the most important instance of sports-play comes at the end of the text in a tennis game that disguises Hannay’s enemies. “It was simply impossible to believe that these three hearty fellows were anything but what they seemed—three ordinary, game-playing, suburban Englishmen, wearisome, if you like, but sordidly innocent” (102). When Hannay breaks their camouflage, and thus undermines their dastardly schemes, he proves the extent to which paranoia functions in this text not as psychosis but as competition, not as illness but as winnable cure.

Nonetheless, if paranoia functions as some kind of completable game here it is only so in a very limited sense. If gaming implies rule-bound contest it also connotes triviality, and indeed *The Thirty-Nine Steps* signals this aspect of the “game” of paranoia by restricting its affect to a “small scale” conspiracy within a network of much larger, and more cataclysmic, machinations. In Trotter’s view, the cultural work performed by spy fiction “was to imagine a suspiciousness triggered early enough in the game to avert catastrophe” (143). In Buchan’s instance this is not quite right. For what *The Thirty-Nine Steps* depicts is a suspiciousness triggered early enough in the game to avert *one* catastrophe (the Black Stone conspiracy) but *too late* to prevent the wider catastrophe of world war. “The first thing I learned was that it was no question of preventing a war. That was coming, as sure as Christmas: had been arranged, said Scudder, ever since February 1912” (38). *The Thirty-Nine Steps* closes with Hannay defeating his enemies but also with the closing recognition that “[t]hree weeks later, as all the world knows, we went to war” (111). The notion of “internalizing” paranoia here receives a partial reprimand that both underlines the retrospective knowingness with which Buchan constructs his tale as a recapitulation of earlier spy novels, and gestures towards possibilities of a global peace that might have been but never came to pass.

It is in moments like these that we have to ask ourselves the question of to what extent *The Thirty-Nine Steps* engages with its contemporary epoch. Do we take the later Buchan at his word, when he writes in *Memory Hold-the-Door* (1940) that novels such as *The Thirty-Nine Steps* kept his “mind off too tragic realities” (195)? Or do we view Hannay’s adventures as above all *fantasies* which nonetheless contain a latent seriousness? In my view, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* speaks to certain contemporary anxieties over the emergence of new forms of espionage and surveillance, but it does so in the name of a larger interrogation of the effect of clandestinity upon modernity. As I have tried to emphasize here, this process is multi-layered and equivocal, doubling back on itself as

much it moves forward. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* grapples with the issue of whether or not pathology is a physiological or mental state, often leading to surprisingly ambiguous conclusions. And it challenges us to reflect on the nature of reality and the dream, implying that the two are anything but distinct. As Buchan himself put it in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*'s dedicatory epistle to his friend and employer Thomas Arthur Nelson, "I should like to put your name on [the novel] in memory of our long friendship, in the days when the wildest fictions are so much less improbable than the facts" (unpaginated).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a good discussion of the anti-Semitic elements of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, see Cheyette (65-67).

<sup>2</sup> See also Leithen in Buchan's *John Macnab* (1924), a character for whom, initially at least, "[e]verything seemed weary and over-familiar – the summer smell of town, the din of traffic, the panorama of faces, pretty women shopping, the occasional sight of a friend. Long ago, he reflected with disgust, there had been a time when he had enjoyed it all" (4).

<sup>3</sup> I take this list from Robins and Post (8-14).