

Longing for Statesmen: the Special Services in the Literature and Reality of Contemporary Europe

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“I am a person who does not exist and I run a service that does not exist.” Thus introduces himself Il Vecchio, as the hero created by the famous Italian writer Giancarlo Cataldo is generally known. Il Vecchio appears in two of Cataldo’s novels: his most famous *Romanzo criminale* and its sequel *Nelle mani giuste*.

The mysterious as well as ironic Il Vecchio’s introduction is, obviously, tightly connected to the Italian context. It probably alludes to the complex web of Italian law and bureaucracy in which no one can be certain of what does and doesn’t exist. It may also allude to the strange figures of the Italian politics of the 20th century, like the famous leader of the Freemason lodge P2, Licio Gelli, who at one point really could be titled “a person who does not exist.” But the last (and probably the most important) reading of Il Vecchio’s introduction represents a subtly self-ironic Cataldo’s own search for a solution as someone who perceives the crisis in the Italian state and society. Il Vecchio and his service do not exist, even though they ought to – this is the final interpretation of the introduction.

This final aspect is precisely what makes Il Vecchio an interesting character in terms of this presentation. A novelty of Cataldo’s novels is the fact that Il Vecchio is by far not a negative character. Compared to Cataldo’s works, the *Millennium Trilogy* by Stieg Larsson, which was published at the same time, appears hopelessly old-fashioned in terms of ideas. Even though

the heroine of those thrillers is a goddess of technologies and otherwise a very modern girl, the conflict of good and evil represented in the novels is a typical legacy of the 20th century. Eventually it turns out that the center of all evil is some sort of “special service within special service“, a group of very conservative (and thus evil) men who look a little bit like Il Vecchio, but lack his subtlety and ambivalence. It is more than obvious that the *Millennium Trilogy* is a feminist work, but it is a little less obvious that it is anarchist. The heroes mired in grim and rather hopeless struggle against the evil state bring to mind such classics as Boris Savinkov’s *The Pale Horse*. Stieg Larsson, who unexpectedly died in 2004, was firmly lodged in the 20th century in terms of literature as well.

Meanwhile, Cataldo’s Il Vecchio definitely belongs to the 21st century literature. While he is not a negative character, he is also not quite a positive one either. Many of Il Vecchio’s characteristics would seem rather controversial to the 20th century intellectuals: he is socially and morally conservative (even though he refers to himself as the true anarchist), he secretly develops the relationship between Italy and the USA, he collects 16th century Austrian clocks and has no qualms of using his job for that purpose. In a way, he is very reminiscent of the hero from *Cobra*, the very late Frederick Forsyth novel, whose name is also the title. Leader of a super secret CIA group, resolutely Catholic in an old-fashioned way, Cobra fails against the drug trade networks and eventually himself becomes morally failed and corrupt. In a way, *Cobra* is a symbol of the despair of Forsyth’s literary world in a collusion with Larsson’s. But that’s a different topic.

Meanwhile, Il Vecchio is not compromised. He arises as an unpleasant, but necessary figure. This is precisely the literary portrayal of the special services in the 21st century. The real contemporary person of Cataldo’s novels is the police officer Nicola Scialoja. He is the hero who loses both his idealism and his cynicism, who drowns in his own passions and does not know what to do, so he views the others, who seem to be very resolute, with envy. He understands when he is forced to face the ambivalence and unavoidability of human life itself. This is why Il Vecchio names him as his successor, but of course, this legacy presses even harder on Scialoja. Eventually reality itself plays the fatal role at the end of *Negli mani giusti*. The twisted knots of problems untwist independently of the characters, and it’s a glimpse of fatalism that is also characteristic of the 21st century literature.

If we look back at Il Vecchio, we will see that over the last decade, this type of character in political dramas has very much grown and strengthened. The fantastically mythological proto-political show *Game of Thrones* features the oddball Varys who makes the no less oddball, symbolically and mythologically charged statement: “I serve the realm. Someone must.” This position is very similar to Il Vecchio’s resolution to always resist “rascality that humanity neither wants to recognize nor acknowledge within itself.” Another “controller-anarchist” (Cataldo’s term), who exists outside the boundaries of the usual political field, appears in an entirely unsymbolic, maybe even a bit shallow American political show *Scandal*. The mysterious service B6-13 who “governs the government” and its omnipotent leader must first and foremost compensate for the “rascality” of the President of the United States.

The analysis of this “controller-anarchist” figure would not be fair without a reference to its direct source, M., James Bonds’ boss and leader of the Secret Service, created by Ian Fleming. M. was probably the first character of this type in European literature. Therefore it is worth taking at least a few sentences to describe how this figure was shaped by Fleming and what it was like.

First, I want to repeat a statement from my book *The Myth and Politics of James Bond*, that the Secret Service represented in Fleming’s novels is neither an authentic service nor a complete fiction. It is a vision of real, concrete British intelligence service as it was renewed after WWII. As Fleming himself was an important character in the world of the Western secret services, he had a clear sense of the importance of such services and managed to predict their development with reasonable accuracy.

Fleming was quite ahead of his time in representing the special service as truly special – not fitting any type or mould. The Western intellectuals of mid-20th century were particularly suspicious of the special services, presumably associated with dangerously strong power and even totalitarianism. That was around the time that Hannah Arendt wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which she revealed or even “exposed” the secret services as an essential element of a totalitarian system. However, in his Bond novels, Fleming managed to intuitively capture and develop the idea that only in a democratic regime the special service can be truly special. A totalitarian state is just one big special service. And in a democracy, a special service

becomes an exceptional thing, the compensatory mechanism for all the weaknesses in the political apparatus.

One of the main tasks of this truly special service is protecting peace. Special services permit peacekeeping by minimal operations, without starting a real war. It is very important, as democratic states in many ways are not good at making war and therefore they find it very difficult to compete with more militant enemy regimes. In this sense, the special services preserve the democracy under *real politik* conditions without losing its democratic character.

This idea is very prominent in the Bond epic. The story about how Bond prevents a big war recurs in more than one of Fleming's novels. In *Moonraker*, the secret agent has to stop a crazy nazi who essentially wants to continue WWII and avenge Germany's loss by firing a nuclear missile to London. Of course, the nazi is in league with the Soviets, and the threat of disturbing the balance of Cold War is in the air. In *Thunderball*, the dangerous SPECTRE steals two of NATO's nuclear missiles and threatens to use them against Western cities unless a large ransom is paid. Obviously, if the terrorists carried out a nuclear attack on the West, they could provoke a war.

Even though Bond himself is the main character of the Bond epic, in terms of keeping peace, M. emerges as a very significant figure who leads, motivates and decides fates. In *Moonraker*, M. says: "Lots of people on both sides of the Atlantic would be only too glad of an excuse [to start a war with the Soviets]." If this sentence sounds as a warning, as grounds for the significance and subtlety of Bond's mission to prevent the war, then it echoes both the resistance against "rascality of the humanity" of Cataldo's Il Vecchio, and the "serving the realm" of Varys from *Game of Thrones*. Fleming's M still lacks the colour, the ambivalence, the uncanny secrecy that emanates from a true instance of the "controller-anarchist", but conceptually everything begins with none other than M.

Such an impression grows even stronger if one takes into account the development of M.'s representation after Fleming, primarily in the Bond movies. There is a curious tendency: as other versions of "controller-anarchist" have emerged in the 21st century, M. himself has grown a lot. If in the earliest movies M. is a rather stock character bordering on a caricature, the contemporary M. is a very serious, dramatic figure, resolute in decision and action.

Symbolically, the tipping point in the development of M. was the first Bond movie of the 21st century, *Tomorrow Never Dies*. This movie develops the topic of peacekeeping particularly clearly. A media tycoon uses trick terrorist maneuvers and manipulations of information to cause war between UK and China. Danger, duty and self-respect require that the British navy join the battle that is almost impossible to win without destroying themselves and the world. M. is the only one who can win not by defeating the enemy but by eliminating the true cause of the war, the treacherous tycoon.

The power to stop the war automatically turns M. into a political figure. And a very paradoxical one at that. On the one hand, this figure holds in his hands the issue of war and peace, and it determines whether the peace will last. On the other hand, the figure only obtains this power under certain circumstances and for a certain period of time. M. is a sort of momentary sovereign with traces of Plato's statesman.

Plato is probably where an attempt to historically and epistemologically analyze the origin of the "controller-anarchist" figure would lead. But in this case the purpose is different. The complex question that we are trying to answer is something like this: Why is it today that the "controller-anarchist" figure emerges with such prominence, why in the 21st century, does it lose the last vestiges of negativity and become ambivalent, cross the usual political divide and even traditional definitions of good and evil, and how do these developments in literature and film are connected to the reality that surrounds us, the European migraine that we have gathered here to treat?

I believe that the prominence of the "controller-anarchist" in the 21st century literature is first and foremost an expression of longing. We, the European society, long for people who are able not just to think but also to act outside the box. We have already moved on from the ideological 20th century with its rigorous and precise convictions. Today we are like the police officer Scialoja: past both idealism and cynicism, in confusion we are surprised to discover our own ambivalence, our own passions, the disparity between our own convictions and actions. Therefore we are slightly less intimidated by people of action who feel well in the "gray zone", by Il Vecchio who uses criminals and even makes deals with them. Anarchy within us makes us empathetic towards "controller-anarchist". We begin to perceive such a figure as necessary or even inescapable.

At the same time, we begin to remember. We remember all kinds of odd-ball, controversial people who took original action to positively correct, or in their own way even save the history of the Western world and its individual states. We remember Edgar J. Hoover who at the height of crime created a police apparatus to change all the standards of the time, the FBI, and who never let go of this apparatus until his death. E. J. Hoover was an odd and unpleasant person, it has been recorded in numerous historical sources. We remember the Czech head of intelligence František Moravec who took ten of his coworkers and in 1939 brought the most important part of the service archives to Britain, thus ensuring the continuity of the special operations and effectiveness of the Czech government in exile throughout WWII. We remember probably the most important among the early leaders of the American Central Intelligence Agency, Allen Dulles, who essentially shaped the practice of the CIA special operations and thus had decisive influence on early Cold War. By the way, Dulles was a friend of Fleming and a fan of Bond, it seems like with these two men he shared not only a love of action but also a love of women.

In our empathetic reminiscences we are slowly approaching a point where we will be able to see even the Spanish general Francisco Franco's person and history. I believe that now we are beginning to see not only Franco's coup that started the civil war and his dictatorship that took hold afterwards, but also resistance to Communism and normalizing of the Spanish politics by ending the in-fighting that lasted throughout the 19th century. But along with that, we should see the officer's inner drama when he started the coup and crossed the usual boundary between the army and the civil government. If we know Franco better, then we will also know better the other great generals of European politics: Charles de Gaulle and Józef Piłsudski. Maybe we can even understand why de Gaulle believed that there is no one to talk to in the whole world except for Winston Churchill. Who, by the way, was not so kind to the Frenchman and said the opposite: "The hardest cross I have to bear is the Cross of Lorraine."

Since we're in Lithuania, we should also remember Jonas Polovinskas-Budrys, the head of the interwar Lithuanian counterintelligence, who crossed the boundaries of the usual political activity by organizing the Klaipėda uprising. It is a very Lithuanian story which may be summarized here briefly as follows: it is highly doubtful that interwar Lithuania could

have annexed Klaipėda without Budrys. He also was a contradictory or even ambivalent figure. He lived a life of adventure in every sense, from professional risk taking to family drama. To his son, a writer, Budrys always seemed overly disciplined and slightly intimidating. Algis Budrys poured out those feelings in a sci-fi novel *Who?*, wherein his father became a grim, but in a way just Soviet interrogator Anastas Azarin.

We are finally beginning to measure all these people (and we are talking about leaders of special services or at least people who were closely connected to special operations) against their true standard. We are beginning to notice that in their states, they played the role that common sense plays in our personal lives. Even though in abstract thinking we each have contradictory convictions and plans that are at odds with reality, common sense brings us to particular life situations and defines the actions that prevent our failure.

It is no coincidence that the result of many of the most threatening mental illnesses is self-destruction and suicide as its most radical form. “Controller-anarchist” is the common sense of a political community – that’s probably the definition of the idea of statesman for our time.

Such a metaphor may help us better comprehend the circumstances of the 21st century. One way or another, all Europeans today live in a human state. A state that represents a human being and resembles them in every sense. Such a state experiences violent mood swings, turbulent passions with very little cause, plans that are never really fulfilled and constantly renewed unrealistic goals that sort of resemble our own New Year resolution lists. Fleming was very apt to predict that this sort of state more than any other requires special services – as common sense that brings life to the particular and prevents self-destruction. It would be easy to argue that the development of such service in the second half of the 20th century essentially followed Fleming’s vision and that today the special services have become the most important balances in the system of checks and balances of the Western politics.

I can’t avoid the last reason of the special longing for statesmen that I see. Often migraine attacks are psychosomatic. Today Europe’s headache is also caused by the spiritual deviations or perversions of Europeans. It is more and more perceivable, but it is not named properly. We talk about populism, even though we should talk about the rebirth of puritanism,

and one might also remember even more ancient terms: let's talk about the disease of the pharisees. Let me remind you of Churchill's historical notes on puritanical government which tried to overcome human flaws with the power of the state. In Oliver Cromwell's republic, the things that were prohibited included horse racing and wrestling (not to mention gambling), fashion decorations and curse words, fornication was punishable by death. As Churchill wrote: "Christmas excited the most fervent hostility of these fanatics. Parliament was deeply concerned at the liberty which it gave to carnal and sensual delights. Soldiers were sent round London on Christmas Day before dinner-time to enter private houses without warrants and seize meat cooking in all kitchens and ovens."

I'm not saying we have already reached this meat-seizing stage. But we must clearly see the puritanical temptation in the European politics. Referring back to the metaphor of the human state, we may imagine what would happen if we turned the New Year resolutions list to a full-fledged plan for our life and introduced strict self-imposed punishments for failing to stick to this plan. Obviously, it's a way to induce more than migraine. It is a path to a mighty frustration, and possibly even to self-destruction. This is not, by the way, to say that New Year resolutions make no sense. They make sense because of paradoxical human nature that we must leave aside. Back to the main topic, it is also obvious that common sense is puritanism's greatest enemy and that this relationship is mutual.

If we look at things that way, it is not unexpected to see that the greatest enemy of the uncontested leader of the new puritans, Donald Trump, is the special services of USA and Western world in general. The spies (in the broad sense) warned about Trump even before the election. Afterwards we see that no methods of the government help Trump tame the special services. Not just FBI, but CIA too goes against him – at least as far as we can judge based on public information. But I think the true picture is even bigger: if Trump fails, it will be the victory of the whole Western intelligence community.

It is also no surprise that as soon as the Freedom Party of Austria got the chance, it began repressions against its own special services. Let us hope that the outrageous police raids at the intelligence and the homes of its leaders shocked and scared many Europeans of common sense. By the way, the Hungarian government has long ago repressed and "cleansed" its

own special services, even though it did not cause such repercussions as the Austrian case.

This struggle and the fact that it provides the opportunity to overcome, to destroy our own common sense by our own hand, is the real source of our anxiety and longing that we see reflected in literature. The fact that in the human state, the common sense may or may not win, is cause for really deep feelings in one who has the understanding. This perception stirs up an existential, even cosmic horror that is always contained within the word “failure”.

Behind all that I have discussed, I see an important question framed by Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*. The pope wrote: “Sometimes I wonder if there are people in today’s world who are really concerned about generating processes of people-building, as opposed to obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains, but do not enhance human fullness.” This presentation allows for a shorter, more particular version of the same question: are there “people who don’t exist”? Can they still do anything? And most importantly: can they withstand the greatest challenge – the dilemma of the 18th century American colonies that has returned to Europe: “Join or die”?

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