

FREDERICK FORSYTHE'S *THE DAY OF THE JACKAL* AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE THRILLER

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Abstract

The aftermath of the Second War saw the emergence of new writing practices in England. Some of these practitioners included Ian Fleming, Alistair MacLean, Desmond Bagley and others. Their novels – described loosely as ‘thrillers – enjoyed tremendous popularity and sales all over the world. Most of these works were adapted to the screen which only catapulted the writers into limelight, so much so that they were household names. However, as is well known, writing practices undergo changes and evolve, reappearing as new genres. This paper is an attempt to illustrate how the thriller that is characterized by the presence of two dominant procedures – a competitive hero and the threat of conspiracy – is displaced by another writing practice. The paper illustrates the displacement by analysing one of the early novels that show the displacement with clarity. The novel chosen for illustrate is Fredrick Forsythe's *Day of the Jackal*, which was widely read and watched in the 1970s.

Key Words/Phrases: Thriller, displacement of genre, evolution of genres, popular fiction, heroism

Few would disagree with Fredrick Forsythe's novel *Day of the Jackal* (1971) being called a thriller, in fact the publisher's blurb on the back cover of Arrow Books edition of the novel claims it to be 'one of the most celebrated thrillers ever written'. In a very loose sense of the word 'thriller', it would be difficult to dispute this. But when the novel is placed alongside the works of Ian Fleming and Alistair MacLean, two of the several writers who had started writing in the 1950s with a great deal of success, it is possible to notice that Forsythe's novel has very little in common with them. The thriller, as it emerged as a genre in the hands of these writers (i.e. Fleming, MacLean and others), conjured satisfaction which eluded readers in ordinary life and provided excitement with its fast-paced action to people who were frustrated by the complexities and anxieties prevalent in the post Second World War Britain. This paper is an attempt to present the idea that *Day of the Jackal*, far from being a thriller, is one of the first novels that effected a decisive break.

Two important characteristics may be noticed in the novels of Fleming, MacLean and Desmond Bagley – the presence of a competitive hero and the threat of a conspiracy. The heroes

of these writers are professionals who use their special skills to negate a conspiracy. And the presence of a conspiracy in a thriller apart from imbuing a dramatic quality also emphasizes the *raison d'être* for the very existence of the hero.

The Day of the Jackal is one of the early novels that reveal the displacement with clarity. The novel marks the disruption between hero and the conspiracy. The novel does not feature a single professional hero who employs his specialized skill and training to negate a conspiracy (that disrupts the world's equilibrium) engendered by someone else thereby restoring the world to its former state of equilibrium. In contrast, the hero in the novel – who does not even have a name (this may be contrasted with James Bond's famous 'I am Bond. James Bond', a practice that underlines the importance of a name for the hero in a thriller) and is called by his code-name "the Jackal" ('a professional assassin, a mercenary' (Forsythe42) – triggers off a conspiracy, ruthless and unjustified, directed at destabilising the established order. He confronts neither a faceless irruption nor bureaucratic malice as the heroes of MacLean and James Bond do, but a second hero stuck in bureaucracy: Inspector Lebel, 'a plodder, a methodical man who hate[s] publicity' (Forsythe208). The key to Jackal's popularity and its attempt at displacement may be located here. Thus, *The Day of the Jackal* has neither a hero nor a conspiracy that is central to a thriller. The novel displaces the hero and conspiracy with a conflict between two men of equal stature – both of whom are meticulous, intelligent and resourceful.

The background of the novel is the attempted assassination of de Gaulle by the French OAS (Organisation Armee Secrete or Organisation of the Secret Army). The OAS was an underground organization that was formed in the backdrop of the Algerian War (1954-1962), and whose primary aim was to prevent Algeria's independence. Also known as the French resistance, the movement gained momentum when General Charles de Gaulle's returned to power as the President of France in June 1958. The members nursed a deep resentment towards General Charles de Gaulle and swore to kill him and bring down his government (15). The bitterness stemmed from a belief that de Gaulle had betrayed France and the men who had been instrumental in bringing him back to power by yielding Algeria to the Algerian nationalists. When Lieutenant- Colonel Bastien-Thiry is executed by a firing squad (the scene with which the novel opens) for having master-minded the failed assassination attempt carried out on 22 August 1962 in the Paris suburb of Petit-Clament, the movement becomes more aggressive. Forsythe uses these well-known incidents from the modern French history to lend plausibility to the remarkably gripping tale he weaves:

The death of the officer, leader of a gang of Secret Army Organisation killers who had sought to shoot the President of France, was to have been an end – an end to further attempts on the President's life. By a quirk of fate it marked a beginning... (11).

Colonel Marc Rodin takes over the command of OAS and hires the Jackal, an Englishman. The Jackal's world is a world characterized by a high degree of professionalism, and this world does not take amateurish intrusions kindly. Thus, Colette is killed ruthlessly by the Jackal for unintentionally listening to his telephone conversation that reveals to her his true identity and purpose ('You want to kill him,' she whispered. 'You are one of them, the OAS. You want to use this [the gun] to kill de Gaulle', 349). The same is the case with the Belgian forger, Jules Bernard, who provides the Jackal with the forged identity papers and travel documents he requires to assume a new identity, but begins to blackmail (131-140). This becomes clear when these are contrasted with the Jackal's interaction with two other people: Marc Rodin, and another Belgian, M Goossens, who supplies the Jackal with an extra-ordinary rifle and ammunitions. This is how Rodin is characterized by Forsyth:

When faced with his own concept of France and the honour of Army Rodin was as bigoted as the rest, but when faced with a purely practical problem he could bring to bear a pragmatic and logical concentration that was more effective than all the volatile enthusiasm and senseless violence in the world. (33)

M Gossens, the weapon- supplier is a similar professional. The Jackal calls him ‘a craftsman’ (128) and is willing to trust him not only to the extent of accepting his suggestions with respect to the technical design of the weapon but also to the extent of revealing his (Jackal’s) ‘business’ – something that the Jackal goes great lengths to conceal (as the killing of Colette shows). In his first interaction with the Jackal, Gossens’ eyes ‘gleam with pleasure’ when the Jackal tells him of his requirement of a ‘specialist gun with certain unusual attachments’:

The Englishman nodded slowly. ‘Well, since I know what your business is, there is little reason why you should not know mine. Besides which, the weapon I need will have to be a specialist gun with certain unusual attachments. I...er...specialize in the removal of men who have powerful and wealthy enemies. Evidently, such men are wealthy and powerful themselves. It is not always easy. They can afford specialist protection. Such a job needs planning and the right weapon. I have such a job on hand at the moment. I shall need a rifle’

M Gossens again sipped his beer, nodded benignly at his guest.

‘Excellent, excellent. A specialist like myself. I think I sense a challenge. What kind of rifle had you in mind?’

‘It is not so much the type of rifle that is important. It is more a question of the limitations that are imposed by the job, and of finding a rifle which will perform satisfactorily under those limitations’.

M Gossens’ eyes gleamed with pleasure.

‘A one-off,’ he purred delightedly. ‘A gun that will be tailor-made for one man and one job under one set of circumstances, never to be repeated. You have come to the right man. I sense a challenge, my dear monsieur. I am glad that you came’.

The Englishman permitted himself a smile at the Belgian’s professorial enthusiasm. ‘So am I, monsieur’. (80-81)

M Gossens’ circumstances might be less demanding but elicits the same response: the combination of commitment, experience and flexibility. The best illustration in the novel of this capacity for abstraction from preconceptions and adaptability to changed conditions is Jacqueline Dumas, the OAS operative who is planted inside Elysee Palace as mistress to de Gaulle’s aide Raoul de St Clair. To become the elderly courtier’s mistress is an act of self-mutilation which she is prepared to undertake to avenge her brother and lover, both dead in Algeria (106-109):

Would she be prepared to undertake a special job for the Organisation? Of course. Perhaps dangerous, certainly distasteful. No matter...She knew enough about men to be able to judge the basic types of appetites. Her new lover was accustomed to easy conquests, experienced women. She played shy, attentive but chaste, reserved on the outside with just a hint now and again that her superb body was one day not be completely wasted. The bait worked... Once inside her flat, [she] glanced at her watch. She had three hours to get ready, and although she intended to be meticulous in her

preparations, two hours would suffice... She thought of the coming night and tightened with revulsion. She would, she vowed, she would go through it, no kind of loving he wanted. (110-111)

her belly matter what

The inference is clear: only professionals earn respect and survive. It is easy to notice the similarities between this professionalism and the brand found in thrillers: die-hard commitment and experience combined to generate adaptability and expertise. But the difference is that it is accompanied by a sense of coldness which in a thriller hero is absent. The Jackal kills with absolute detachment and in cold blood as much as Jacqueline's self-prostitution is. Indeed there is violence and sex in the thriller (as in Ian Fleming), but because they are associated with certain emotional qualities, the tendency of the reader to be led into unequivocal empathizing with one side or the other is strong. To put it differently, a thriller constructs binaries (hero/good versus villain/bad) which novels like *The Day of the Jackal* displace. The same reason can be adduced to account for little or no subjectivities of people involved – it may be pointed out that most thrillers are written in the first person which facilitates the identification of the reader with the characters. In *The Day of the Jackal* everything is presented as an externally observed process, carefully noted but hardly ever seen or experienced as an insider: the characteristics of a newspaper report.

The Jackal's opponent, Claude Lebel's world is a world of bureaucratic procedure. Though Lebel is depicted as a good policeman ('the best detective in France', [204]), he is the anti-thesis of a thriller hero and so could never be a hero in a thriller. This is how he is introduced in the novel:

Claude Lebel was, as he knew, a good cop. He had always been a good cop, slow, precise, methodical, painstaking. Just occasionally he had shown the flash of inspiration that is needed to turn a good cop into a remarkable detective. But he had never lost sight of the fact that in police work ninety-nine percent of the effort is routine, unspectacular enquiry, checking and double-checking, laboriously building up a web of parts until the parts became a whole, the whole becomes a net, and the net finally encloses the criminal with a case that will not just make headlines but stand up in the court. (207-208)

It is clear that the working methods are distinct. The archetypal thriller hero's methods are more direct and spectacular, even if a little less methodical:

'Provocation?' Maggie sounded sad and resigned. Maggie knew me.
'Endless. Walk, run, or stumble into everything. With both eyes tightly shut.'
'This doesn't not seem a very clever or scientific way of investigation to me,' Belinda said doubtfully. Her contrition was waning fast.
'Jimmy Duclos was clever. The cleverest we had. And scientific. He's in the city mortuary.' (MacLean33)

What stands out about Lebel is his perseverance, a type of perseverance operational in a bureaucratic framework. It is only in a technical sense that Lebel is responsible for tracking down the Jackal, in the sense that he marshals the efforts of others. To be more specific, the vital

information does not come from his efforts, but from the research carried out by the Special Branch in London. Even when he confronts the Jackal in the final pages of the novel, it is suggested more as a triumph of bureaucracy than the heroic deeds of an individual. All the elaborate planning of Lebel and his men fail to stop the Jackal from arriving at his destination, the flat overlooking de Gaulle's ceremony of honouring the war veterans on the French Liberation Day, celebrated on 25th August, but in order to get there, the Jackal has had to pretend to be an aged cripple ('a smashed-up old seagull', 397) and Valremy, the disgruntled CRS man (the riot police) who let him through remembers him:

'How long have you been here?'

'Since twelve o'clock, sir, when the street was closed'.

'Nobody been through that gap?'

'No, sir, well... only the old cripple, and he lives down there'.

'What cripple?'

'Oldish chap, sir. Looked sick as a dog. He had his ID card, and *Mutile de Guerre* (wounded soldier) card. Address given as 154 Rue de Rennes. Well, I had to let him through, sir. He looked all in, real sick. Not surprised with him in that greatcoat, and in this weather and all. Daft, really.'

'Greatcoat?'

'Yessir. Great long coat. Military like the old soldiers used to wear. Too hot for this weather, though'

'What was wrong with him?'

'Well, he was too hot, wasn't he, sir?' (405)

When the CRS man mentions the crutch and greatcoat, Lebel realizes who it is and perseveres. In a manner of speaking, the Jackal is more than a match in a personal confrontation for an elderly inspector and a young CRS man, but it is his meticulous planning that lets him down. He assumes that the only weapon he would require once he has reached his destination would be the 'one-off' rifle, which he had specifically demanded: a bolt action rifle that loads one cartridge at a time. The Jackal uses the cartridge to shoot Valremy, the young CRS man but does not have enough time to reload. Lebel gets hold of the dead CRS man's machine gun and kills the Jackal.

It may be noticed that there is an element of improvisation on Lebel's part here: the tug of the conventional notion of heroism is so strong that a personal confrontation of the traditional type is alone sufficient to provide the novel with a gripping climax. The type of man that Lebel is portrayed as, with a view to giving a contrast to provide the novel with an acceptable moral structure, would not be a match for the Jackal in hand-to-hand combat, and the Jackal has sufficient time to disarm Lebel and kill him by hand.

Generally speaking, suspense depends upon the unequivocal acceptance of the moral perspective of the person who is undertaking the series of actions described. In a thriller, typically, this involves a single perspective, the hero's. In this sense, in a novel like *The Day of the Jackal*, suspense is double, for the reader empathizes alternately with each of the protagonists (though the second one is effectively the entire bureaucratic machinery). This is possible only because each of the moral perspectives involved is ambivalent. The Jackal's perspective is rendered acceptable because of his high degree of professionalism, and also because he is, in short, an incarnation of individualistic competitiveness. Moreover, this is also due to the fact that the

reader's sympathies for the Jackal's victim (de Gaulle) are mitigated by the foreknowledge of the attempt's failure which is spelt out early in the novel:

The Jackal was perfectly aware that in 1963 General de Gaulle was not only the President of France; he was also the most closely and skilfully guarded figure in the Western world. To assassinate him, as was later proved, was considerably more difficult than to kill President John F Kennedy of the United States. Although the English killer did not know it, French security experts who had through American courtesy been given an opportunity to study the precautions taken to guard the life of President Kennedy had returned somewhat disdainful of those precautions as exercised by the American Secret Service. The French experts' rejection of the American methods were later justified when in November 1963 John Kennedy was killed in Dallas by a half-crazed and security-slack amateur *while Charles de Gaulle lived on, to retire in peace and eventually to die in his own home.* (68-69, italics added for emphasis)

The Jackal's perspective is unacceptable to the extent that his motives are dubious, because they are exclusively mercenary and his preference for things over people spills over into the cold detachment with which he kills. On both these counts, it is possible to notice the break Forsyth's hero effects from the archetypal thriller hero: for the heroes of MacLean, Fleming, Bagley and other writers, as for the knights of Heroic Romances and Gothic heroes before them, material reward is too unworthy a motive for action and cold blooded detachment is more a characteristic of the thriller villain, the thriller hero could never privilege things over people (the villain in *Puppet on a Chain*, Van Gelder remarks of the hero, Sherman : ' I know the Shermans of this world... They'd never risk hurting an innocent person...'). (MacLean 210)

In the case of Lebel, his perspective is acceptable to the extent that he is averting an unjustified murder, but dubious to extent that it represents the bureaucratic machinery tracking down an individual (the very expressions 'organized' and 'manhunt' used frequently in the novel [e.g on page 20] is clearly indicative of this). The intrinsic moral balance between the two perspectives is felicitated by the matching ruthlessness exhibited by the French security services. This claim is borne out by the abduction and torture of Kowalski, an aide of Rodin, by the security forces (171- 174). It is Kowalski, under torture that provides the breakthrough and vital information about the identity of Jackal.

It is also possible to notice that the balance between the two perspectives extends beyond the central characters involved. In the section devoted to the London Special Branch's assistance in the 'manhunt' for the Jackal, this judgment is passed:

Assistant Commissioner Dixon, whose job among other things was to keep tabs on all the weird and crazy of Britain who might think of trying to assassinate a visiting politician, not to mention the scores of embittered and cranky foreigners domiciled in the country... (241)

Underpinning this pronouncement is instinctive sympathy for the equilibrium, for the supposed stability of civilized society that is one of the foundations of thriller, and a similar perspective underlines the display of professional sympathy that all British policemen express at Label's

predicament (237-238). However, these descriptions of Rodin's views stem from an entirely different set of values:

Like most combat officers who had seen their men die and occasionally buried the hideously mutilated bodies of those unlucky enough to be taken alive, Rodin worshipped soldiers as the true salt of the earth, the men who sacrificed themselves in blood so that the bourgeoisie could live at home in comfort. To learn from the civilians of his native land after eight years of combat in the forests of Indo-China that most of them cared not a fig for soldiery... (29)

And:

Rodin genuinely grieved his dead servitor [Kowalski]. Part of the considerable reputation he had built up as a fighting soldier and commanding officer had been based on the enormous concern he showed for his men. These things are appreciated by fighting soldiers more than any military theorist can ever imagine. (228)

This can easily be identified as traditional heroism: contempt for the stability of the civil society, admiration for the dangerous and the exceptional. From the point of the view of the judgment of Dixon, Rodin and his OAS men are 'weird and crazy'. In a thriller these two sets of values are neatly integrated to generate the organizing procedure of the genre. But here, they are separated and appear to be in opposition.

The dual moral perspective is inbuilt into the narrative structure of the novel: right from the outset the reader is made aware of the plot (the Jackal's) and the counterplot (Lebel's/ security services) as they move in parallel, though in the initial chapters the focus is on the Jackal's movements and planning, the novel also allows the reader to see in these chapters Colonel Rolland (who suspects that there may be more reasons than meet the eye in Rodin and the other top OAS operatives who have inexplicably begun exercising an extraordinary amount of precaution to avoid being arrested even when there was no reason) initiating the abduction of Kowalski. The balance is restored in part two ('Anatomy of a Manhunt') of the novel and sustained for the rest of the novel.

It can be seen that though *The Day of the Jackal* deals with the same elements – professionalism, offences against natural law etc., yet these elements that form the organizing procedure of a thriller are transposed into a new context, which alters their significance.

Works-cited:

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