

# PUTTING A GUN TO MODERNITY'S HEAD: TERRORIST THRILLERS

*Exterminating Angels*, by Peter Dunant (Pluto Press, 1986)

*The Endless Game*, by Bryan Forbes (Collins, 1985). Reviewed by STEPHEN KNIGHT.

**C** rime fiction has many aspects of modernity. It is itself an inherently modern form. There were no literary detectives before the urban anonymity of great cities and industrial townships actually required specialists to track down criminals.

Spy fiction only developed as people became widely aware of the domestic threat in international conflict: in Britain that was by the end of the nineteenth century, and in the striking case of America not until the late nineteen-forties.

The same sort of social and temporal links cause changing aspects

of policing and responses to crime to be represented in changing phases of crime fiction. Science, or perhaps scientism, in Conan Doyle; psychology or an approach to it in Agatha Christie. This is not reflection, as some naive forms of social and literary commentary would have it. The role of culture in its many media is to respond to socio-historical phenomena and, especially in fictional media, to process them in an ideological framework of greater or lesser relationship to reality. Sherlock Holmes' "science" was a validation of that empirical idealism on which

contemporary bourgeois theories of knowledge were grounded. (Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* makes a good statement on this.) Agatha Christie's "psychology" was a front for practices of detection which privilege, as defence against crime, a pattern of stereotypically "feminine" skills — watching, listening, noting the positions of furniture and the details of human relationships. Both best-sellers have a complex ideology embedded in their "modernism".

It is important to recognise the tendentious character and treatment of aspects of "reality" in crime fiction (and all cultural forms, for that matter) before considering the rise of the terrorist thriller in recent years. Not that the topic itself is new. As long ago as 1907, Conrad's *The Secret Agent* explored in a liberal humanist context those who set bombs, the diplomats whose agents they are, and those other people who become enmeshed without guilt of any kind. Bombers and other terrorists crop up in early spy thrillers like William le Queux, John Buchan and E. Phillips Oppenheim. True to his antique positioning, Ian Fleming had fiendish foreigners like Ernest Stavro Blofeld planning to detonate the whole British status quo.

Recently, the convergence of European ultra-radicalism, Arab activism and other types of imitative and inspirational violence have had very wide impact, especially because they are so suitable as subjects for television news. Their effect on the thriller is clear. In *The Little Drummer Girl*, John Le Carre gave up his absorption with British moles for the P.L.O., and Frederick Forsyth turned from various types of crime verite to



*The not-so-thrilling side of terrorism: the abduction of Aldo Moro, Italy 1978.*

global ransom in *The Devil's Alternative*. And so it continues. When a form is really altering, the new structure of feeling percolates the system, offering many versions of the new topic, ways of confronting and analysing it from the varied standpoints of authors and publishers.

Bryan Forbes' new novel *The Endless Game* is being strongly boosted by Collins; he has been brought to Australia for publicity, most unusually for a thriller writer. That presumably relates to his cultural news value from films. The book itself is no great masterpiece, even within its restricted genre, but it does have interesting features.

Pierre Macherey, the only Althusserian literary critic to have had any lasting impact, says in his *Theory of Literary Production* that a work is most revealing through a study of its strains — a sort of literary geomorphology. *The Endless Game* shows two types of strain, one generic, one political. Generically speaking, it is a mole novel fallen among terrorists, a notional best-seller hedging its bets. Very close to Le Carre in its overall pattern, it has a past intelligence disaster brought under new scrutiny, ending up with the defection of the leading spychaser. That sounds like *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; but because the defection is arranged and the hero employed in a British conspiracy, the theme also uses the earlier and less simply patriotic pattern of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*.

But into this now-traditional mole-based story-shape come surging new sources of disruptive threat. There is a totally anonymous and uncatchable international terrorist who inscrutably blows up and knocks off whomever he pleases. There is also a modern Mata Hari, brisk and formidably tough like Pamela Stephenson; she brings down to frailty and death a partial Samson of the British secret service.

None of this, in summary, is more than pasteboard stuff, and Forbes' politics and style are often straight out of the British Tory dailies. But he does have a driving plot and a series of brusque and brisk events that, by being so alarming to the British authorities, create the second and more potent level of strain in the novel.

There is a sense that all this really is beyond control now, that figures like Smiley and M. are no longer credible. The final pattern, with our only living loyal man stuck in Moscow, with the new Labour prime minister under Red control, is a starkly strained cultural representation of current British disarray and distress.

If things look so bleak from the right, the view from the left is less immediately austere. Pluto Press is putting out a series of leftwing thrillers and they, too, are moving into terrorism. Peter Dunant's *Exterminating Angels* is a polished and well-constructed study of a radical group — no sign of generic strain here. An ultra-secret radical group, more white tie and tails than white collar, have been organising with great success a set of bloodless and mostly humorous actions against people responsible for ecological outrages. Safe, a bit soft, entirely successful: so much so that SIS approves of them; they do no real harm and justify SIS's own claims for more money and staff.

But the radical press grows tougher. They decide to take on the industrialists who profit from selling inadequate nutrition in third world countries. So they seize and starve in the same way members of the businessmen's families. With customary round-the-world action and technical detail (still empirical idealism by the way), the novel sets this new plot in action. But it also shows group members growing uneasy as the guiltless are enmeshed. Eventually everything goes wrong, through a mixture of human care and carelessness; the group is destroyed and their radical adventure is over.

An intriguing story. Does it mean that this sort of radical action goes too far? That seems the surface of the book, and so it is not very radical at all. Pluto have, in fact, published some left thrillers of this sort, like the stylish and essentially deflating treatment of the Spanish left in *Murder in the Central Committee* by Manuel Vazquez Montalban, or Nigel Fountain's view of spavined London radicalism in *Days Like These*. *Exterminating Angels* might be operating in the same negative way.

But it might also work differently, as a case study in failed radicalism. The

terrorist group all come essentially from the bourgeoisie: they are 1968-educated radicals. Having no history on the left, no family members dead from T.B. or silicosis, none maimed by industrial accident or rickets, they are terribly shocked at the sight of pain and blood. Whether deliberately or not, the story criticises their naive idealism, as does Raymond Williams' equally enigmatic *The Volunteers*, which also explores the process of radical practice, in his case long-term moles in the upper bureaucracy.

If Dunant's novel is finally obscure and unconfident in impact, that is no doubt because it does indeed make a serious engagement with violent ultra-radical action, instead of taking the softer option and merely uncovering conservative crimes and holding up shocked hands. Rightwing thrillers usually demonstrate with confidence the practices of conservative power — William Haggard and Anthony Price would be classic cases. But some centre-right thrillers have recently exposed the oppressive function of the modern state — what Ernest Mandel in *Delightful Murder* calls "state crimes". *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* did that, and so does Robert McCrum's *In the Secret State*, though both seem ultimately to value nothing more radical than extreme individualism.

The evolution of both the rightwing thriller and the leftwing thriller shows how political times and their refraction in crime fiction are changing. But the fullest recent treatment of the topic, with professional international terrorists and also ordinary people driven to violence by state terror, remains the powerful final novel in Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo's richly radical series of ten, simply entitled *The Terrorists*. Searching and subtle, it relates to contemporary reality in an unusually clear-eyed way. It even includes the assassination of a prime minister of Sweden. That book will take some surpassing in the emergent sub-genre of the terrorist thriller.

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