

## Art and Terror in Daniel Silva's Spy Novel *The Kill Artist*

Maria Antónia Lima

University of Évora, Évora, Portugal; University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, Lisbon, Portugal

The importance of Daniel Silva's past, close to a Portuguese cultural environment, will be relevant to understand the psychological profile of his popular protagonist and central character, Gabriel Allon, a melancholic man haunted by his past, but also someone who is a gifted art restorer, very sensitive to the values of loyalty and fidelity, which the author assumed to have inherited from his Portuguese family. Being a spy and an art expert, Allon seems to conciliate two contradictory sides of the human personality. The connection between Portuguese and American culture, in this writer's background, could have been responsible for the creation of a character who can be, at the same time, very sensitive and very violent; an assassin who is an Israeli secret agent and the world's finest restorer of the Old Masters' paintings. A perfect double who does justice to his creator's double origin, which contributed to the success of *The Kill Artist* (2000), where terror is practiced as one of the fine arts by a hero very loyal and faithful to his complex cultural origins, living in a diaspora as the eternal wandering Jew.

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With more than 50 thousand books sold in Portugal, the bestseller writer Daniel Silva, an American Jew educated and raised by a Portuguese catholic family from Azores, is nowadays among the best of the youngest American spy novelists in the rankings of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other important American newspapers. He has been a figure on *The New York Times* bestsellers list for the past eight years, with titles like *The English Assassin* (2002) and *A Death in Vienna* (2004).

Silva considers himself a writer of international intrigue genre stories and many of his reviewers compare him to Graham Greene and John le Carré, authors he regards as two literary giants and the most important novelists of the 20th century. He thinks their adventures are quite realistic, because we are going through events similar to those narrated by those two authors today. In his narratives, Silva deals with terrorism, global Islamic extremism, terrorist conspiracy, secret societies, intelligence agencies, fictional cabals, the Holocaust, the Arab-Israeli conflict, etc. His stories of spies and assassins seem to express what Gothic literature calls "the sins of the fathers", that is, whenever one tries to unbury the secret sins of the past, it allows one to perceive how they reverberate into the present. Like the masters of the "Realistic School", Conrad, Greene, and Le Carré, Silva is a writer whose narratives possess a much larger scope than the traditional spy story, because they hold a dark mirror to a wider world.

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Maria Antónia Lima, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Linguistics and Literatures, University of Évora, Évora, Portugal; ULICES, University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, Lisbon, Portugal.

loyalty and fidelity, which the author admitted to have inherited from his Portuguese family. Being a spy and an art expert, Allon seems to reconcile two contradictory sides of the human personality, which his first name symbolizes, as it is inspired by the archangel Gabriel, the defender of Israel and the angel of vengeance, who knows he is a soldier in a war without end but never loses his most important moral principles. This writer's background links Portuguese and American culture and could very well be responsible for the creation of a character who can be, at the same time, very sensitive and very violent; an assassin who is an Israeli secret agent and the world's finest restorer of the Old Masters' paintings. A perfect double who does justice to his creator's double origin, contributed to the success of *The Kill Artist* (2000), where revenge is practiced as one of the fine arts by a hero loyal and faithful to his complex cultural origins, living in a Diaspora as the eternal wandering Jew.

Symbol of a constantly threatened national identity, the secret spy Gabriel Allon is a true representative of the most sensitive people in the world regarding the diasporic experience. Travelling to every corner of the globe, he is a secret agent who fights against all enemies to defend Israel's rights to its cultural and political independence. As any other secret spy, he works abroad for the establishment of a desired order threatened by evil forces. In spite of all this, he acts according to an ethic code of responsibility in a political crisis. Like many Jews, called the helpers, Gabriel's actions are precious to Israel's Government, which has always been used to counting on several kinds of professionals, such as bankers, concierges, car rental clerks, officers, journalists, etc., working in several different countries. In his book, Daniel Silva calls them "the secret fruit of the Diaspora", which gives authenticity to his cinematic narrative of political speculation; a spy novel that investigates the perceptions of its author's political and cultural values by placing the main character in a danger zone, as Graham Greene would put it because he thought the readers' interest was always on "the dangerous edge of things" (Greene, 1971, p. 117). However, when reading *The Kill Artist*, we find danger everywhere at a global scale, which adds complexity to a plot located in many different countries at the same time. Every chapter is like a short take of a movie, where the real atmosphere of each place is depicted instantly through the narrator whose point of view shows great familiarity with all of them. Lisbon is one of these places, a fact that reveals Daniel Silva's personal knowledge of the Portuguese capital. A terrorist meeting takes place in Bairro Alto, which is compared "to Beirut in the old days" by a character involved in a secret operation (Silva, 2004, p. 274). Even Tariq—a dangerous Palestinian terrorist, who Israeli intelligence desperately needs to capture—likes and understands *Fado*, because it reminds him of his country for it is "a music devoted to suffering and pain" (Silva, 2004, p. 276).

Centred on the tragedy of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, *The Kill Artist* reveals an author who tries to be sensitive to both sides, examining the motivations of Palestinians and Israelis alike. In spite of his Jewish origins, Daniel Silva possesses a very independent point of view which the contact with other different cultures, among them the Portuguese, has helped preserve. An example of his independent spirit is the fact that he chose an art restorer as the covered job for his secret agent Gabriel Allon. In an interview, Daniel Silva stated that the CIA and Israeli Intelligence Officers are used to attracting those with artistic or creative backgrounds, such as musicians and other artists, because they are more independent people, who live, as the author observed, outside the box.

Being both artists, Daniel, the writer, and Gabriel, his character, can partake the same desires for independence and authenticity. Their artistic activities depend on their abilities to penetrate certain mysteries in a constant search for truth. Espionage is directly connected with this, which means that a secret activity is

perfectly adequate to an artist's profile. This explains why, in the past, some very famous writers such as Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlow, and even Shakespeare felt so attracted by secret activities. As Somerset Maugham states in *Ashenden*, a work based on his own career of espionage, a writer has passports—a public identity and a reason for being almost anywhere—which are very useful to a spy (Maugham, cit. G. Greene & H. Greene, 2007, p. xvii). In the introduction to *The Spy's Bedside Book*, Stella Rimington observes that "writing itself involves creating identities: one could regard it as practising a certain kind of deception" (Rimington, ed. G. Greene & H. Greene, 2007, p. xiii). Graham Greene would certainly agree, because his espionage activities gave him insight into the lives of others, a skill so necessary to a novelist. That is why Allan Hepburn, in *Espionage and Culture*, concluded that "writing overlaps with spying" (Hepburn, 2005, p. 113). In *A World of My Own*, Greene also demonstrates that spying generates paper just as novel writing does, since many acts of espionage are linked to papers: passports, a compromising letter or top secret information left open for anyone to read, and so on. In Silva's novel something similar happens, when "Gabriel transformed himself. He became Cedric, a writer for an upstart Paris cultural magazine" (Silva, 2004, p. 145). Like Graham Greene, Daniel Silva sees spies as craftsmen, figures of belief that defy political power and try to preserve their independence. As Allan Hepburn concludes: "A good spy lives by a set of standards not applicable to average citizens or to national interests. A good spy demonstrates the gaps and inconsistencies within ideology as a novelist might" (Hepburn, 2005, p. 113). This explains the tradition of using artists or individuals of intellectual superiority to play the role of spies in many famous novels, such as *The Untouchable* by John Banville, in which the spy Victor Maskell is an expert in Nicolas Poussin's paintings as well as a director of an art institute and a teacher. Similarly, Robert Redford, in *Three Days of the Condor*, plays the role of a character who works at an historical institute in Manhattan, a cover paid for by the CIA.

For these artistic and intellectual spies, their minds are the central power of their actions, as they use their thoughts to compensate a certain lack of athleticism, and their aesthetic interests to resist physical pleasures or emotional involvement. Gabriel Allon is one of these spies; he possesses a Cartesian separation of brain and heart, never allowing himself to be totally seduced by love, because romance can contribute to his downfall and compromise his political duty. Sarah Halevy, the beautiful French model whose affair with Gabriel led to the assassination of his family, is very often treated as if she were only part of the secret missions' business in which both are involved. Having a terrible difficulty in conciliating contradictory traits of his personality, Allon is a typical double-agent, who is always trying to reconstruct a fractured identity. According to John Scaggs' definition: "the double-agent, as the term suggests, is characterised not only by a sense of divided loyalties, but by a fundamental division of subjectivity" (Scaggs, 2005, p. 119). This division of personality is an important trait for a double-agent as for someone living in a Diaspora, because they both feel torn between two identities, finding it sometimes hard to reconcile their present lives and businesses with their origins or nationalities. The same happens to Gabriel Allon, a divided man who lives between two realities: the craft of restoration and the craft of killing; the desire for independence and the political missions at the service of Israel's secret police; a life in Europe and a tormented Jewish past.

Gabriel's double life as an artist and an assassin can blend a very sensitive nature with the emotional coldness of a killer. This strange combination is one of the worst dangers Gabriel faces, as the readers feel that at any moment he can lose sight of the most positive traits of his personality, turning himself into a psychotic and vengeful monster who is haunted by a guilty past he tries to exorcise at his most conscious moments of desperate confession: "I kill people for the government of Israel. I killed Abu Jihad in front of his wife and

children. I killed three people in thirteen seconds that night. The prime minister gave me a medal for it" (Silva, 2004, p. 152). Victim of a trauma created by his own memories, Gabriel is a man in conflict with himself and with his most secret and dark side. He tries to analyse his feelings of guilt when he says that:

very few people understand what it's like to shoot a man at close range. Even fewer know what it's like to place a gun against the side of his head and pull the trigger. Killing on the secret battlefield is different from killing a man on the Golan or Sinai. (Silva, 2004, p. 222)

Reviewing Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden*, D. H. Lawrence stated that: "spying is a dirty business, and Secret Service altogether is a world of under-dogs, a world in which the meanest passions are given play" (Lawrence, cit. Pristman, 2003, p. 115). This explains the attention contemporary spy stories dedicate to the study of human psychology, aiming to achieve a degree of authenticity to make them akin to human life. As Stella Rimington concludes: "the true spy story resembles real life as we actually know it—a place where it is rarely quite clear what is happening and what one ought to do" (Rimington, ed. G. Greene & H. Greene, 2007, p. xviii).

In a world of shadows and lies, intrigue, and cover-up, Gabriel can only reach truth through art and love, but even these are very deeply threatened by unforgivable acts of revenge and treason. Duplicity is everywhere and nobody can be trusted on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which in many aspects does not differ from other conflicts that shape contemporary life. Psychological disturbances caused by the war are responsible for many violent acts that only seem to be more radical when committed by a terrorist rather than by a common man, as Tariq's way of dealing with women illustrates, namely when he fires several bullets into a girl's chest, who he had been passionately kissing just seconds before. Gabriel is also a victim of this dissociation of feelings caused by his double condition, someone who uses violence as an art style capable of restoring peace and balance in a decayed and fragmented world where "devotion and hatred collides" (Silva, 2004, p. 466), like in the city of Jerusalem. Divided between someone he wants to be and what others expected him to become, Gabriel experiences an assault on his character, as every modern spy who sacrifices himself to abstract ideals and institutions does.

As Magnus Pym says in John le Carré's *A Perfect Spy*: "Violence is not only of the body. It's the ravishment that must be done to truth, friendship, etc." (Hepburn, 2005, p. 18). This is the reason why Gabriel's crimes reverberate for so long in his memory, especially the one that led him to kill Tariq's brother, making him feel forever responsible for the death of his family: "I woke him up so that he wouldn't die a peaceful death. I shot him in both eyes. Seventeen years later Tariq took revenge by blowing up my wife and son right before my eyes" (Silva, 2004, p. 223). However, the interesting fact is to know that the same man, who lives tormented by an act of revenge and who accepts a secret mission to kill the terrorist implicated in the death of his family, has the ability to conclude that: "revenge only leads to more killing and more revenge. For every terrorist we kill, there's another boy waiting to step forward and pick up the stone or the gun" (Silva, 2004, p. 83). This is a very important anti-war message Daniel Silva sends his readers. In addition, in a recent interview he declared Iraq itself has become a Ph.D. program for terrorism.

As each of his books demonstrates, Daniel Silva is very aware of the phenomena of modern terrorism, which he thinks was born with the children of the first generation of Palestinians who felt trapped between two worlds, and thus without a proper identity. Daniel Silva also thinks America should use a policy that does not produce terrorism, without inducing situations that require the use of physical and psychological pressure to

torture terrorists in America's behalf. Gabriel Allon personifies this moderate point of view and defends peaceful relationships with the Arabs. In a dialogue with Shamron, the Israeli spymaster, Gabriel refuses to believe that revenge is good, healthy, and purifying. In spite of killing his enemies efficiently to defend his country and people, he acknowledges that the war is absurd and that he is constantly part of an endless masquerade. He only wants to dedicate himself to restoration but is forced to live a double life that impels him to be someone "who restores old masters paintings by day and kills Palestinian terrorists by night" (Silva, 2004, p. 369).

Art dealings made this spy more perceptive to the human nature of his enemies and more aware of the hidden realities behind terrorism, the Israeli Secret Service and Middle Eastern politics. As the narrator concludes in *The Kill Artist*: "Restoration had taught Gabriel a valuable lesson, sometimes what appears on the surface is quite different from what is taking place just below" (2004, p. 370). The fake clues he follows during his secret mission to catch the terrorist Tariq and all the make-believe scenes he falls victim of show Gabriel that art can be the best metaphor for life because it always reveals the game of appearances that no one seems to perceive. An example of that is given when after examining a painting by Van Dyck, a piece the artist had painted for a private chapel in Genoa depicting the Assumption of Mary, Gabriel realized that the religious scene on the surface was hiding a rather ugly woman beneath. No wonder he compared the story of this painting to his own experience of being deceived by two different realities in his secret operation.

The most interesting parts of the novel are exactly these enlightening moments. For instance, when Gabriel perceives the fascinating similarities between the craft of restoration and the craft of being a spy, because he realizes the methodology is the same: "study the target, become like him, do the job, slip away without a trace. He might have been reading a scholarly piece on Francesco Vecellio instead of an Office case file on a terrorist named Yusef al-Tawfiki" (Silva, 2004, p. 98). Restoring art or killing terrorists could be equivalent activities, as both create high levels of obsession, which leads Gabriel to believe that: "only an obsessive could be a good restorer. *Or a good assassin for that matter*" (Silva, 2004, p. 94). A restorer is very much like a spy, since both have to work with the utmost secrecy, leaving no trace of their intervention so that the work of art can preserve its original value. Consequently, Gabriel's mission "was to come and go without being seen. To leave the painting as he had found it, but restored to its original glory, cleansed of impurity" (Silva, 2004, p. 95).

However, obsessive practices of persecuting and killing terrorists, inspired by the most sophisticated artistic techniques, can be dangerous and lead to Gabriel's psychic disintegration. This could happen not only because he has a damaged psyche, like all other characters in the novel, but also because he feels a terrible difficulty in conciliating art with crime, allowing his sensitiveness to be corrupted by his violent secret missions. This is in fact the danger of maintaining an illusive belief in the process of restoring peace as he restores art, that is, by simply destroying the most negative agents of destruction. Only Sarah Halevy reminds him of this danger when she observes that "the scars never go away. The restorer doesn't heal a painting. He just hides the wounds" (Silva, 2004, p. 305) and this is precisely what Gabriel should recognize. His obsession turned him into the healer, who, unfortunately, is not capable of healing himself, having spent too many years of his life fixing everything and everyone but himself. This is the paradox he will have to carry until the end of his life, if the spirit of loyalty and trustworthiness—values which Daniel Silva admitted to be his most important Portuguese inheritance, acquired from a community of Portuguese fishermen in Massachusetts—does not overcome the American Jewish reasons for war and violence in a world without solidarity and faith in God.

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