"Putting Out Fire with Gasoline": the Gothic Core of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* Trilogy

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Abstract
This essay argues that Stieg Larsson's hugely successful *Millennium* series is constructed around a Gothic core. This core relies on a structure in which the Gothic terror inflicted by the villains draws forth an anarchic response from the heroine that reflects its cause. The ensuing battle spotlights issues dealing with familial and social authority as well as their justification. The analysis is steered by the ideas Slavoj Žižek has presented about the contemporary socio-cultural situation in the West. Given that most of his examples come from popular culture, his essays foreground moments of Gothic terror in cultural products and political situations. Thus they read like analyses of Gothic cultural circumstances. This perspective fits Larsson's handling of Gothic elements, for they serve the purpose of focusing on snags and hitches in symbolic structures that cover up perverted libidinal energies.

Keywords: *Millennium trilogy, monster, Slavoj Žižek, primal father, Gothic reversal*

One trope dominates Stieg Larsson's successful *Millennium* trilogy: that of the tortured female body. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* displays mangled bodies, victims of brutal murder; in *The Girl Who Played with Fire* crooks ply a girl with drugs and alcohol, and then rape her in order to train her for prostitution, while *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* portrays manhandled victims of a trafficking business run from Sweden. Most persistently, however, this trope applies to the trilogy's female protagonist, Lisbeth Salander. On numerous occasions, she is strapped to a bed, while a controlling man either lustfully watches or sadistically rapes her. At one point Lisbeth observes that the assailant has made her "completely vulnerable" (Larsson 2008: 174). The helplessness of a trussed-up woman facing a tormentor links the terror evoked in the

trilogy with Gothic by emphasising her fragility. The Gothic nature of this situation is strengthened by the tormentor's conviction that a woman's proper place is in the grave.

The *Millennium* trilogy presents many sites of cruelty: an underground torture chamber, bedrooms, a summer cabin, but also public institutions such as a psychiatric ward. These locations are Gothic labyrinths in that they allow the tormentors to unleash excessive and irrational behaviour, which fosters the absence of reason, decency, and morality (Botting 1996: 81, 83). Again, Lisbeth provides the best guide to this chamber, for her life story is a maze of intrigue and deception. Her enemies strive to have her permanently institutionalised in order to prevent the public disclosure of gross misuses of police and state power. They see Lisbeth as a victim, when, in actual fact, she has only been waiting for a moment to strike back. Her diminutive frame hides a secretive and vengeful mind, which, coupled with extraordinary traits and capabilities, reveals an idiosyncratic perspective on the world that may be characterised as monstrous. The series thus describes the effort of "putting out fire with gasoline" (Larsson 2009: 655) by pitting a Gothic 'monster' against Gothic villains[1].

Together the trope of the tortured body and the labyrinthine chamber of horrors form what I call the Gothic core of the *Millennium* trilogy, and it takes three lengthy volumes to prize it open. In this essay I examine Larsson's handling of this Gothic core, arguing that the Gothic serves two distinct purposes. First, he uses the Gothic convention of portraying the home as the seat of threat, which serves the purpose of treating families as miniature reflections of larger social structures. Second, the genre's fascination with myths of origin (Punter 1998: 12) spotlights the father as the representative of familial and social authority. I begin by examining Larsson's authority figures and probe the cultural relevance of their mythic grounding. I then move on to discuss the character of Lisbeth, focusing on her anarchic reaction to the terror she has suffered at the Gothic villains' hands. Hence, in the trilogy violence is met with violence; and it is difficult to say whether there is a

[1] In a stolen rental car on her way to West Sweden, Lisbeth turns on the radio and hears David Bowie singing about "putting out the fire with gasoline", a line from the song *Cat People*.

definitive break with the Gothic mindset. Yet Larsson does keep with contemporary Gothic's portrayal of "monsters" as sympathetic figures – a characterisation that applies to Lisbeth. Given the fact that she has first-hand experience of torture in the Gothic chamber and is among the very few survivors, her response serves as the key in unpacking the significance of the trilogy's Gothic core.

My analysis is steered by the ideas Slavoj Žižek has presented about the contemporary socio-cultural situation in the West. Given that most of his examples come from popular culture, his essays foreground moments of Gothic terror in both cultural products and political situations. Consequently, they frequently read like analyses of Gothic cultural circumstances. These Gothic moments crystallise the psychic structures and libidinal energies subtending symbolic representations that he then treats as telling symptoms of socio-cultural conflicts (see Žižek 2005: chs. 11 and 13). This perspective fits Larsson's handling of Gothic elements, for these elements serve the purpose of focusing on snags and hitches in symbolic structures that cover up perverted libidinal energies. It should be noted at the outset that Larsson treats the political relevance of these problems as well, but here I focus solely on their Gothic dimension.

1. The Gothic core of the *Millennium* trilogy

The *Millennium* trilogy presents three parallel instances of Gothic terror that together form its Gothic core: the Vanger, Zalachenko, and the Section "cases". The first two address a family structure, while the latter, a secret intelligence agency within the security police, operates at state level. What motivates coupling them together is the twentieth-century Swedish ideal of the state as a "People's home", built on "the vision of a government as a home that protects the nation's people as much as the family's home protects each of its members" (quoted in Stenport and Alm 2009: 164). The trilogy draws on this ideological cornerstone according to which harmonious family arrangements are reflected by a parallel state organisation. Although these cases of Gothic terror are not identical, they share a similar driving force. To simplify things, I call Larsson's different Gothic villains authority figures. They are united by the following features:

1) The authority figure supports an extremist ideology: the Vangers are Nazi-minded racists; Alexander Zalachenko is a former secret agent of the Soviet Union, while the Section is founded outside parliamentary procedures supposedly in order to defend Sweden against various threats (most notably, Communism). All believe that their brand of ideology sanctions violence. These authority figures are openly misogynistic; for example, Martin Vanger describes his sister as "just an ordinary […] *cunt*" (Larsson 2008: 495, emphasis in the original), while Zalachenko thinks of his daughter as "a fucking whore" (Larsson 2009: 689).
2) The authority figure trains his successor to take over his work: Gottfried Vanger initiates his son, Martin, in ritualistic practices of incest, rape, and murder. Zalachenko teaches his son, Ronald Niedermann, to run his criminal organisation, while the Section's Evert Gullberg handpicks and trains Fredrik Clinton to be his successor. Hence each understands himself as a familial patriarch who passes on his legacy to a chosen follower.
3) The authority figure believes he is above the law, which validates his deeds. Martin Vanger enjoys "the godlike feeling of having absolute control over someone's life and death" (Larsson 2008: 489); Zalachenko thinks himself "above all normal rules" (Larsson 2011: 90); Gullberg revels in not having "to explain his actions to any living soul and [being able to] initiate investigations of anyone he chose" (Larsson 2011: 83).
4) The authority figure is unemotional, calculating, and cunning; the Vangers and Zalachenko are also "psychopath[s] on a grand scale" (Larsson 2009: 625). Gottfried molests his children besides murdering women, while Zalachenko enjoys beating up his common-law wife. Similarly, the heads of the Section, Gullberg and Clinton, do not hesitate to eliminate the Section's enemies.

It is worth noticing that the trilogy refers to various myths: Gottfried Vanger fashions his murders in accordance with the Old Testament purification laws, while the Section operatives brand themselves as part of an "exclusive club of selected warriors" (Larsson 2011: 89); moreover, there are only thirteen who know about the organisation, with the lawyer Bjurman in the Judas role (88). In each instance, this mythical grounding highlights the paternal role of the authority figure. The common denominator of these figures is that they harbour a fantasy of absolute power

over others, which they understand as being exempted from the rule of law. Punter (1998: 12) observes that Gothic fantasies and obsessions are often grounded in various myths of origin. The fantasy of being exempted from the rule of law suggests that we are dealing with the foundational myth of patriarchy – that of the primal father familiar from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. This myth supposedly describes the situation before the collective submission to the law of castration; it is a myth of origin in explaining how sexual difference was instituted. What sets the primal father apart from other men is that he is his own law: he neither knows nor has any limits whatsoever. In the context of Gothic it is significant that this myth links such limitlessness with power over the female body. The primal father possesses, controls, and has sexual relations with all women regardless of their status and age. In order to function as a system, patriarchy requires this notion that there once existed one man to whom the law of castration, including the incest taboo, did not apply. It is this fantasy that all (male) members of a community must suppress (Fink 1995: 109-12). Yet whenever there is a failure to submit to this law, the fantasy associated with the primal father is activated in some form. Žižek (1992: 124-7) observes that it lives on in the unconscious as an obscene Father-Enjoyment who revels in everything the law is designed to prohibit. His role is to split all laws into two complementary, symmetrical parts: for example, "you must submit to castration" is severed into "You must submit" and its obscene injunction "castrate!" By portraying men who torture and murder women, the *Millennium* trilogy puts this particular split into play: the sadist evades the law of castration by externalising and imposing it on a victim. Such externalisation provides the sadist a conduit from a personal level of violence to an impersonal one, which is the Father-Enjoyment's realm. Killing women serves as a gateway to this supposedly transcendental state, or, in Martin Vanger's words: "Those of us who murder for pleasure […] live a complete life" (Larsson 2008: 494).

The second common denominator of Larsson's authority figures is that each uses his role as a cover. Peter Teleborian offers a prime example. His university education, psychiatric practice, and role as a media expert on mental health issues give him powerful credentials which enable him to keep Lisbeth in a mental institution without a

proper diagnosis. Most damagingly, it is this professional standing that allows him to fulfil his paedophilic fantasies with Lisbeth. The same observation applies to Bjurman, who counts on his status as her guardian to protect him against the rape charge she might lodge against him. The mythico-patriarchal grounding of the authority figure's mindset helps us to understand the nature of the Gothic fear such characters evoke: it suggests that the fantasy of Father-Enjoyment not only motivates individuals but also infiltrates socio-political structures. Žižek links this infiltration with the crumbling of traditional patriarchal authority both within the family and society at large. The commodification of all spheres of life has carved up this authority from the inside. Contemporary societies acknowledge that all symbolic systems revolve around an emptiness, because these systems are anchored in social agreements, not in any transcendental foundation. Such self-awareness has diluted faith in the systems of representation around which society is organised. Traditional paternal authority decrees that the representatives of systems such as the law identify with the symbolic mandate of their roles for the law to speak through them. Today, however, traditional authority is increasingly replaced by manipulative authority, as positions of power are manned by people who play their roles without identifying with them. They partake in these social institutions externally, for it is only a game for them (Žižek 1991: 249-51). Larsson's authority figures manipulate their roles, cynically exploiting the credulity of the public in order to pursue their illicit goals behind the scenes.

The most frightening instance of manipulative authority is, of course, the Section, the very founding of which is based on deception. The founders use Zalachenko's defection as a pretext for creating an organisation whose ostensible goal is the global protection of Sweden's interests, yet this effective smokescreen gives them carte blanche to pursue their power games. Among their misuses of power is feeding false information to the police and the prosecutor about Lisbeth. Together the various authority figures convey the deepest fear evoked in the trilogy by suggesting that the practices of manipulative authority allow and actively encourage persistent slippage from social agreements and symbolic systems. As manipulative authority figures take over positions of power, the functioning of institutions and symbolic systems becomes unstable,

dependent on the caprice of whoever represents them. Žižek (2005: 281) maintains that cynicism imbues this form of authority, denouncing every form of authority as simply a pose. When cynicism reigns, all that remains is either brutal coercion or resigned submission for the sake of some material or personal gain. Consequently, ordinary citizens have little chance of making their cases heard. As family and social structures are flooded by perverse enjoyment, the result cannot be anything other than terror and terrorism from *within* the home and the state.

2. Lisbeth Salander as a Gothic monster

Lisbeth as the protagonist supplies the strongest reason for the trilogy's success: to cite the cover blurb of the second book, she is "one of the most startling, engaging heroines in recent memory" (Larsson 2009). Physically she is child-like, but her tattoos and piercings imply defiance. Readers infer that the dragon on her back is a private sign commemorating her survival of abuse and her determination to be avenged. Socially Lisbeth is hostile, secretive, and withdrawn. However, she has extraordinary traits and skills: she has a photographic memory, and is a talented computer hacker and a mathematical genius. Yet Lisbeth's defining feature is her unusual personal history. Having spent her life in various Gothic villains' vaults, Lisbeth is, among other things, a victim of violence and injustice. Punter characterises the Gothic as "represent[ing] a point at which […] we are left confronting the starkness of the law […] before this power". Before this power, he adds, the character progressively loses "her agential status, becomes a victim, enters into the vault" (Punter 1998: 44). We may specify Lisbeth's position by saying that she finds herself in between two deaths. Her enemies want her literally dead, while society's official representatives want her socially dead (confined in an institution). This position is underlined when Zalachenko, Lisbeth's father, and Niedermann, her stepbrother, shoot and bury her in the woods. The gravely injured Lisbeth rises from the dead, however, and this resurrection marks the beginning of her revenge.

This double association of Lisbeth with death provides the key to her structural function in the series. She not only acts from the position of death but embraces it: "the creature on the floor was

no girl, but a being from the other side of the grave who couldn't be conquered with human strength or weapons known to man" (Larsson 2009: 713-4). The superstitious Niedermann, for example, sees in Lisbeth an otherworldly reptile poised for the kill (714), while for Zalachenko she is a disgusting reject, a whorish "monster" (700). The anxiety of Teleborian and Bjurman stems from the fact that their sexual assaults on Lisbeth violate their professional codes. Given that theirs is enjoyment culled from doing what is forbidden, she functions as a threat of exposure, potentially depriving them of their privileged status. This threat makes transgressive actions all the more enjoyable for them.

While Lisbeth's enemies associate her with death, she unexpectedly strikes back. By accepting the position of death imposed upon her, she incarnates that which her enemies fear the most: she serves as a reflecting surface for their anxieties. She turns the tables on them by *embodying* the illicit enjoyment they have garnered from her. Thus she uses the position in which she has been placed in order to demonstrate the illicit pleasures of her tormentors with documented representations of their deeds. For Žižek such a strategy produces what he calls a "*Gothic reversal*" in which "what a minute ago appeared to us a dead letter [of the law] is really alive, breathing, pulsating" (Žižek 1991a: 150; emphasis added). To effect such a reversal, Lisbeth calculatingly makes concrete that which the law forbids by becoming the forbidden pleasure of her tormentors. Another way of expressing this idea is to say that she makes her body openly carry the nauseating, paedophilic enjoyment of the Gothic villains. Žižek links this moment to a specific source of angst in contemporary societies, claiming that today we fear the moment when the groundless, empty centre of our symbolic systems is suddenly and inexplicably filled in. In his words, "the terrifying object is an everyday object that has started to function, by chance, as that which fills in the hole in the Other (the symbolic order)". Further, this ordinary object is revealed as "evil incarnate" (Žižek 1991b: 145). To say that Lisbeth embraces the position of death equals saying that she willingly adopts the role of this "evil" object filling in the void at the system's centre. The clearest example of Lisbeth in this role is the moment when the tape of Bjurman's sadistic rape of her is played in court. It shows a scrap of a girl being subjected to

horrible cruelty, illustrating that the rapist's taking pleasure from his hateful way of treating his victim is what makes Lisbeth evil.

The court scene at the trilogy's conclusion is a lengthy Gothic moment in which the symbolic system becomes flooded with illicit enjoyment, whereby the infiltration of Father-Enjoyment into social systems becomes generally visible. First the court and subsequently the general public learn of the illegal manipulation that has been going on for years behind the scenes. Consequently, the villains can no longer manipulate the system. For example, the Section expects the court to sentence Lisbeth, for its members have fed the prosecutor with false information. Lisbeth's hacking, her autobiographical document, and the magazine *Millennium*'s investigative work have produced a plethora of evidence of the Section's crimes. Backed by this evidence, Lisbeth's attorney can trust the judicial system to work as it should.

Although Lisbeth wins in court, it is obvious that she represents neither a nostalgic longing for, nor a return to, traditional authority. It is typical of the Gothic that the ruthless villain is reflected by a *Doppelgänger*. On closer look, Lisbeth is Zalachenko's double – in fact, his true heir, for Niedermann is mentally too feeble to fill their father's shoes. By pitting Lisbeth as Zalachenko's double, the series asks whether there are alternatives to traditional authority backed by the myth of the patriarchal primal father.

In this context the intertext on which Lisbeth's character is based is of some significance: Astrid Lindgren's children's books about Pippi Longstocking. Larsson has frequently noted this character was his inspiration. In an interview in *The Telegraph*, for example, he observes:

> I considered Pippi Longstocking… What would she be like today? What would she be like as an adult? What would you call a person like that, a sociopath? Hyperactive? Wrong. She simply sees society in a different light. I'll make her 25 years old and an outcast. She has no friends and is deficient in social skills. That was my original thought. (Winkler 2010)

The two characters share a manifest disregard of all forms of authority and a commitment to defending the weak. Pippi's relationship to her unconventional father is based on equality, permissiveness, and joy, thanks to the fact that he does not exert

any authority whatsoever over Pippi. This intertext suggests a relaxed, even playful, relationship to authority as a viable option, but one whose significance and functioning is explored in a Gothic context.

Lisbeth has no faith in socio-symbolic systems, because she knows they are manned by cynical manipulators in whose hands power really resides. Actually, she is herself a manipulator who plays all systems to her own advantage. The most blatant example is the way she arranges Niedermann's murder, using even the police to further her ends (Larsson 2011: 560-1). Yet she plays the system differently from her enemies. Her response is to resort to practices of repetition and parody in order to survive and to attain her goals. She bases her actions on shared rules of signification but, in doing so, purposefully repeats them in a different way. Lisbeth is thoroughly a performer as regards appearance and action. For example, she dons clothes from the chain store H&M in order to blend in, but she also gets breast implants because she wants a fuller figure. Once the trial begins, she turns up in a Goth look. A character's thoughts on seeing her in Goth gear in court are instructive: "she was certainly living up to all their expectations. Then he realized that Salander was in costume [...] she had exaggerated her style to the point of parody" (Larsson 2011: 463). As is to be expected, Lisbeth puts on masterful performances. To cite just a few examples, in the mental hospital she exaggerates her responses in order to protect herself from Teleborian by vomiting her medicine, refusing eye contact, and sinking into uncommunicativeness (Larsson 2009: 452-3). When she starts working at Milton Security, she plays a simpleton (Larsson 2008: 42). When she questions a corrupt police officer, she poses as a psycho-killer (Larsson 2009: 521-31), whereas while transferring a crooked capitalist's fortune to her own bank accounts, she adopts the part of a wealthy businesswoman (Larsson 2008: 10-9).

Judith Butler suggests that parodic role playing – repeating cultural models in a skewed and exaggerated manner – presents a strategy for expressing dissent and probing possibilities for not only new modes of being but also for a different cultural order. She argues that such repetition functions to formulate the rules governing alternative identities (Butler 1999: 186-90). If one were to classify Lisbeth, she might be labelled queer thanks to her unconventional

outlook on life and her non-normative ways. She, for example, is bisexual, but it is not her sexual orientation which concerns me now, but her insistence on every individual's right to take pleasure where she finds it. On closer inspection, few principles steer Lisbeth. The primary one is that pleasure need not be curbed by any strictures other than respect for one's partner. Further rules include loyalty to friends and protecting the weak. Otherwise, Lisbeth's stance to the law, especially to moral rules, is practical. Her main guideline is risk assessment, the purpose of which is to ascertain the consequences of her actions and their possible harm to her. Risk assessment is not moral deliberation, but simply a means to minimise personal damage. Lisbeth has learnt to think of the law as something to which she must pay attention, but not submit. She has no scruples in using violence, provided that in her estimation the target deserves punishment. One thing comes forcibly across: Lisbeth does not want to be part of any organisation or state. The alternative she represents relies on a wholly private system; given its individual nature, it cannot be generalised. Even the contemporary sympathetic Gothic monster remains outside or beyond conventional authority.

In investigating the trilogy's Gothic core, the protagonists – and the reader – are increasingly led to question the notion of Sweden as a socially advanced country. All the contributors of the critical anthology *The Tattooed Girl* (Burstein, De Keijzer, Holmberg 2011) make the same point: Larsson criticises the tenets Swedes most cherish. Swedes believe their country is egalitarian, but the series shows a gap between rich and poor; while Sweden is supposedly politically neutral, Larsson unearths a fascist right; Swedes believe that the government works for their benefit, but Larsson portrays the state as an instrument of violence. The Gothic core of the series pits heinous authority figures against a rebellious individualist, and by so doing, it spotlights the relationship between symbolic systems and libidinal fantasies. Žižek observes that democracy as our most ambitious symbolic system can only work under generalisable authority. Its members, however, are also steered by libidinal enjoyment which cannot be universalised. Our idiosyncratic fantasies never coexist peacefully in some neutral medium, and yet social life necessitates the exclusion of the individual's uncurbed enjoyment. This friction creates what Žižek calls the constitutive paradox of democracy, requiring from us forgetfulness: we must accept the

symbolic fiction of democracy even though we know that it does not cover all aspects of reality. This attitude requires a fetishistic split which might be formulated in this way: "I know that democracy is spoiled by points of imbalance, but nevertheless I act as if it were possible". Žižek (1991b: 167-8) argues that democracy's strength is in its recognition of the fact that its limit lies in this internal antagonism. Larsson's Gothic villains mock and sully this faith, but Lisbeth does not provide a viable option either. Her relaxed attitude to authority and her non-normative sexuality suggest a non-patriarchal alternative, but her idiosyncratic pragmatism does not really form grounds for a generalisable social code. Thus, the trilogy's Gothic elements are used to address us readers: how should we organise and govern our societies?

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