

Puzo's Spy and Compensatory Justice

Nancy Ciccone, University of Colorado Denver

*Mario Puzo's little known spy thriller, *Six Graves to Munich*, wrestles with themes he later develops in his best seller, *The Godfather*. Among them is the exploration of commensurate and compensatory justice. Set in post-WWII, the novel dramatizes a spy's revenge against former enemies, whom the US Government now considers friendly. Focusing on issues of identity, the genre furthermore provides subtle pathways for Puzo to incorporate his Italian American heritage. Whatever its literary merits, *Six Graves* provides an apt framework for Puzo to interrogate justice in relation to criminality.*

"...extraordinary men have a right to commit any crime and to transgress the law in any way, just because they are extraordinary."

Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment, 221

Puzo's *The Godfather* persevered on the best seller list for sixty-seven weeks. It sold over twenty-one million copies. Along with translations into other languages, it has been rendered into film and video games. The novel's publication gripped the public in the late 1960s. "Ethnic" literature took a seat in American living rooms. "Consigliere" and "capo" entered our vocabulary. But it was not born whole cloth. Puzo's little known spy thriller, *Six Graves to Munich*, reveals some of the seminal themes Puzo worked through leading up to his best seller.

Puzo published *Six Graves to Munich* under an assumed name as if to distance himself from the mid-twentieth-century, sub-genre of ethnic literature.¹ Yet his assumed name is equally Italian: 'Cleri' simply replaces 'Puzo' on the cover. Partially due to the pseudonym, many of the articles and books written on Puzo do not include it among his works. Cleri was the name he adopted when he wrote for Martin Goodman's Magazine Management (Flamm). In the 1950s and 1960s, Puzo published the majority of his short stories—adventure features about WWII—in Goodman's *True Action* magazine. *Six Graves's* copyright date is 1967, two years before the publication of *The Godfather* (1969). After

his best seller and the fame it brought him, Puzo claims only "three novels": *Dark Arena*, *Fortunate Pilgrim* and *The Godfather* (*The Godfather Papers* 33). He seemingly orphans *Six Graves*, perhaps because it smacks of pulp fiction. Whatever its literary merit, though, the novel provides an apt framework for Puzo to interrogate justice in relation to criminality. In particular, Puzo foregrounds inadequacies in systems of compensatory justice, which posits various scales of reparation to right a wrong.

Six Graves to Munich

Six Graves tells the story of a WWII veteran who returns to Europe to seek revenge on the Germans who captured and tortured him. When the novel begins in 1955, the protagonist, Michael Rogan, is figuratively dead. The Nazis shot him in the back of the skull on Carnival Monday, 1945. Rogan's imprisonment occurred under German martial law and in the pointedly named Munich Palace of Justice. As chief Allied communications officer billeted just south of Paris, he was captured due to radio messages he sent on D-Day. Revenge drives Rogan to return to Europe ten years after the war and to hunt down the six men who interrogated, tortured, and shot him just before the Americans entered Munich and found him barely alive in a pile of corpses.

Michael Rogan exemplifies those Americans whom war changed. He suffers from a war injury, a damaged brain that debilitates his genetic gift of extraordinary intelligence. His memories compel and hinder his need to come to grips with his changed identity. He needs to remake himself. As a damaged and decommissioned spy, he struggles with assimilation in post-war America. He has neither friends nor family. Returning to Europe on his personal mission, he is "nervous about recognizing the [men] he was looking for" (1). Puzo introduces Rogan's American identity as intricately tied to that of his Nazi interrogators whom he must locate, recognize, and kill in order to regain himself.

Unlike Puzo's 'claimed' novels, *Six Graves* falls within the genre of the spy thriller, which affords a particular opportunity for exploring issues of right and wrong detached from routinized adjudicating institutions. The fictional spy crosses borders and boundaries. He works simultaneously as political insider and outsider. With a foot in at least two worlds, he trusts no one. A combination of cultural anxieties and fragmented identities characterize the genre. In the spy thriller, all is not what it seems. It customarily presents a banal situation—such as a judge playing chess in a local café—that hides covert threats. The distinction between good and evil, between the legal and the criminal, frequently blurs due to hidden agendas and abrupt plot reversals. Without a conventional road map for ethical actions, the genre offers pathways for exploring the tension between commensurate and compensatory justice.

Paths to The Godfather

On the surface, *Six Graves* has nothing to do with Italian Americans and scant overt connection to what became the cultural icon of *The Godfather* series of books. Yet a closer look suggests it enabled Puzo to wrestle with themes, including ones informed by his Italian American background. Puzo's experiences as the child of Neapolitan immigrants resonate throughout *Six Graves*. From his intertwined heritage stem two of the novel's central tensions: the distrust of intellectual extraordinariness and the challenge of commensurate justice.ⁱⁱ *Six Graves* reveals ways Puzo transforms his heritage. His belief that art provided a way to "understand what was happening to [him] and the people around [him]," suggests that his Italian American experiences infiltrate all of his

writing even when not its focus (*GP* 24). These influences subtly shape conflicts for Michael Rogan. They foster the novel's investigation into gaps left by public institutions, such as the church and state.

Whatever the reason for publishing under Cleri, the pseudonym is the plural form of the Italian word for clergy, *clero*. This term evokes Roman Catholicism. Among other duties, the clergy hear confessions and absolve guilt. The concept of confession provides a context in *Six Graves* for exploring the valences of justice. On one hand, Nazis incarcerate the protagonist, Michael Rogan, to elicit his confession during the war. But the Augustinian *confessio* also denotes witness, so on the other hand, the novel bears witness to Rogan's covert experiences. The Catholic clerical role includes the discernment between good and evil, between right and wrong. Appropriate punishments are parsed out to compensate for errors. For readers familiar with Puzo's work, this theme of compensatory justice is nothing new. Unlike the *lex talionis*, the commensurate idea of an eye for an eye, it is inexact. Puzo portrays its murkiness in *The Godfather*. Tom Hagen, the Don's consigliere and the only non-Italian included in the Don's circle, tries to explain why the Don assists those after partially causing their misfortune. According to Hagen, the Don does so "'not perhaps out of cunning or planning but because of his variety of interests or perhaps because of the nature of the universe, the interlinking of good and evil, natural of itself'" (392). Hagen's assessment obfuscates intentionality. Either the Don's multiple interests cause him to give with one hand and take away with the other, or the universe tends to couple good and evil. Each of Hagen's explanations side-steps issues of agency in order to emphasize a system of compensatory justice wherein good matches evil as part of a self-perpetuating, intermingled system.

Yet Hagen's concept implies an imbalance because it yokes the opposites of good and evil. They are not commensurate even if the former is intended to compensate for the latter. The loss of economic well-being, for example, might be corrected with an influx of money. To what degree, however, does money compensate for the loss of a child? The Don's assistance of those whose misfortune he partially causes follows an idiosyncratic concept of justice. It only shadows a legalistic one because decisions occur within the *famiglia* rather than before public witnesses. Likewise, the rules themselves pertain to an exclusive, particular group. They displace civic laws that secure political and national identities. The Don's diverse business interests suggest that capitalism drives his decisions within the *famiglia*, but Hagen complicates that reduction when he attributes the intermingling of good and evil to the universe and beyond human control. In contrast to Hagen's assessment, *Six Graves* begins with a clear-cut concept of justice. Rogan's experiences in the war authorize him to right a wrong. For him the categories of good and evil are distinct, not intermingled. Evil are the Nazis who tortured him, and he intends to kill them. Puzo mitigates Rogan's homicidal goals by framing them as justifiable revenge. He then complicates the concept. He introduces an international agenda, so that *Six Graves* eventually evokes the same intermingled system of good and evil Hagen describes in *The Godfather*.

Italian American inheritance

Like his protagonist in *Six Graves*, WWII changed the veteran Puzo but in a totally different way. It allowed him to escape his Italian American environment "without guilt," and so to begin his writing career (*GP* 26; Gardaphe, "I.A." 177). Puzo's need to separate from family in order to launch his writing career may simply indicate his journey toward literary maturity, but his upbringing in Hell's Kitchen in the 1920s and '30s also testifies to the impact of the Italian American *famiglia* coupled

with the pressure to adapt to American culture. Many immigrant families bring their Old World traditions with them; children who assimilate into the new culture may feel compelled to abandon their parental traditions to better socialize with their American peers. Italian American children undergo the pressure to be part of the family and accepted into their social network while undergoing daily displacement in a school that encourages individual pursuits, at least among its Anglo participants. Speaking a language at home different from those in the dominant culture strains the conflict. Such dissonance invites anxieties similar to those in the spy novel: loyalties and trust are split among discourse communities. The liminality fundamental to the spy offers an analogy for those immigrant children who experience the double perspective stemming from a social status as an insider in the immigrant community and an outsider in the dominant culture. Along with schooling, Puzo's service in the war ensures he has a foot in each world. Neapolitan immigrants, in particular, faced economic hurdles partially due to the social history of the Old Country and the judicial traditions they bring with them.

The change in social systems for the impoverished Neapolitan adjusting to American capitalism exacerbates difficulties with assimilation. Southern Italian culture instilled in the lower classes the necessity to maintain the status quo; any attempt at upward mobility could upset social stability. Puzo believes his own family "knew little more economic security than those ancient Roman slaves who might have been their ancestors" (GP 14). His "mother...wanted [him] to be a railroad clerk. And that was her *highest* ambition; she would have settled for less" (GP 15). Referring to *The Godfather*, Gardaphé notes the "solid foundations of a centuries-old social order in which fate or destiny, more often than not through birth, determined the life an individual would lead" (Signs 94). The dream of American success through education and economic improvement risks outstripping the balance of well-being that southern Italian societies have maintained for centuries. Family traditionally provides security, and it secures identity. The child of Neapolitan descent typically needs to adjust and to succeed in the new world, but with the admonishment of not crossing the street. Whereas familial and social loyalties conflict in other ethnic communities, the immigrants from southern Italy, as Puzo has represented in *The Godfather* books, marry the need for familial conformity with that of *omertà*, literally a conspiracy of silence in respect to public authorities. It entails the values of honor, duty, loyalty to the *famiglia* and its extended connections and not to those with public, political power. The social division inherent in that economic system complements *omertà*. It breeds surface and underlying realities, analogous to those in the spy thriller. Assimilation for these Italian Americans is threatening because it may lead to trusting the politically and socially untrustworthy. Courts of justice in this environment are just another arm of that authority. The Italian immigrant community tends to rely on its own members to settle conflicts as Puzo's fictional *Mafiosi* illustrate in *The Godfather*.

The distrust of public authority thus encourages an insularity protective of its *famiglia* and their extended connections. In his study of the development of Italian American narratives, Fred Gardaphé provides a biographical example of growing up in an American Little Italy. He notes the incessant communal activity. Homework, for example, occurs at the kitchen table, the center of the house full of bustle and interruptions (Gardaphé, Signs 1). The isolation needed for study and for reading "was seen as a problem," identifying him a "merican or rebel" (Gardaphé, Signs 1). Intellectual pursuits, in other words, complicate identity because they separate one from the family and from the Italian community. Puzo claims his childhood ambition was to engage in criminal

activity. But "go[ing] wrong" was an impossibility because "The Italian family structure was too formidable; [he] never came home to an empty house" (GP 17). When Puzo discovered libraries, he was smitten with the works of Dostoevski: "I wept for Pince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, I was as guilty as Raskolnikov" (GP 24). Puzo's mother, however, "looked on all this reading with a fishy Latin eye. She saw no profit in it" (GP 24). Yet he suspects she would have been the "greatest reader of us all" had she "been literate, had her daily chores been fewer (GP 24). The solitary activity of reading seemed somewhat superfluous in families struggling to survive. Belmonte notes the paucity of books in these households: the "bookish child is a pariah in both the family and the peer group," "especially if [reading] cannot help feed, house and clothe a family" (17).ⁱⁱⁱ Brawn rather than brains seemingly ensures economic survival for those struggling to find jobs. Community connections, sometimes brought from the old country, provide opportunities, including that of becoming "a railroad clerk." In effect, intellectual extraordinariness risks setting the individual apart from family and community for the children of Italian American immigrants in the first half of the twentieth century.

Intellectual extraordinariness

Puzo, along with others growing up in a Little Italy, suggests solitary, intellectual pursuits connote a suspect difference within their communities. As if mirroring such a situation, *Six Graves* differentiates Rogan from his community by gifting him with an extraordinary intelligence. Puzo sets Rogan's gift in opposition to athletic prowess. When the neighborhood children ask Rogan to play football, for example, he discovers his excellent coordination. He arrives home battered and proud. His parents subsequently forbid such activity on the basis of the gift of his intelligence. They fear damage to his brain. Unlike the scenario described in the Italian American community, Rogan's parents value his intelligence. Even though they don't quite understand it, they do all possible to procure an exclusive education for him. Seeking a balance between brawn and brains, his father then teaches Rogan to box. But his boxing lessons ultimately maintain his isolation: when thirteen years old, Rogan viciously fights his peers who threaten to remove his pants and hang them from a lamppost. Despite being outnumbered, Rogan manages to beat up the three boys who attacked him, and they all end up in the hospital. The boxing lessons stop. Growing up, Rogan misses out on team sports and male camaraderie. In other words, Puzo expresses the price of Rogan's intellectual extraordinariness in terms of social milieu. The isolation, which his intellectual gifts entail, impacts his identity and leads to the necessity of fashioning his own social rules where his skills translate to survival. Furthermore, he enjoys "the fruits of his extraordinary memory" but feels guilty because they come "without [his] having done anything to deserve them" (22). He understands his gift of extraordinary intelligence to require reciprocity—tit for tat. He fears his talent unwarranted. His parents, though, reinforce his difference. Rather than casting an obviously "fishy Latin eye," Rogan's mother insists that he protect his "extraordinary mind" because he "may someday help humanity" (21). Her form of encouragement slightly offsets the guilt his gift instills, but does little to affect his sense of not belonging and his need to live by rules different from his peers.

Rogan's gift facilitates his recruitment into American Intelligence. When the war breaks out, he agrees to serve to escape from a romantic attachment, from his mother, and from his studies rather than to express patriotic duty (24). Despite Puzo's empathy for Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, Rogan deploys his extraordinariness in service of a national need rather than a perfect crime. Writing and cracking codes, Rogan's guilt about working safely at a desk job, however, prompts his request for a field intelligence section; he desires physical activity (26), as if to compensate for its childhood

thwarting. After being rejected due to his current value in intelligence, Rogan offers his services as a "walking code switchboard to coordinate the US invasion of France from inside the country" (27). His remarkable talent enables him to achieve his goals. It also ensures the Nazis who capture him prolong his torture in order to access the codes he keeps in his mind. In effect, his extraordinary intelligence, which singles him out to serve his country, extends his suffering as the Nazis try to extract information stored in his prodigious memory. This scenario recalls the ambivalence toward intellectual endeavors described by those growing up in an American Little Italy because it validates their distrust. Extraordinary intelligence invites danger; it makes one stand out and so become a target. Puzo depicts his spy's talent as a double-edged sword that brings about both good and evil. Until D-Day, it allowed him to fulfill his mother's prophecy of helping humanity; afterward, it cost all that he cared about. His incarceration also tests the spy's ethical code of silence. Similar to *omertà*, it disallows disclosure of any intelligence to an authority that rivals the *famiglia* and its extended connections. Rogan's torture tries the values of honor, duty and loyalty to America. After the war, his traumatized mind fuels his revenge: he relives his humiliations and tortures every sleeping moment and most waking ones.

In effect, Rogan exemplifies the "already dead" spy (Hepburn *Intrigue*, 3).^{iv} When the radio messages he sends on D-Day lead to his discovery, the Nazis kill the French family hosting him; they execute Resistance members assisting him; and they arrest his pregnant wife, the daughter of the host family the Nazis killed. As Puzo depicts within the Corleone family in *The Godfather* trilogy, a single event—his one mistake—changes Rogan's life. Due to his childhood morality, Rogan's sense of justice entails reciprocity. He felt guilty because he did nothing to deserve his intelligence. As an adult, however, he suffers unwarranted cruelty. The Nazi torturers remind of the childhood bullies he hospitalized (34). His sense of justice motivates retaliation. He requires the balance of tit for tat. At another remove, however, the motivating event in Rogan's narrative invites the questioning of the culturally constructed idea of justice. Rogan undergoes unspeakable horror at a time when the traditional sanctions are suspended. War upends the usual rule of law. Undergoing institutionalized cruelty forces Rogan to radically alter quotidian notions of right and wrong action. All that remains for him is his guilt and the concept of retaliation.

What haunts Rogan is his moment of complicity in the way the Nazis "stripped him of his dignity" (34). His interrogators tell him he is to be set free, to join his wife and child, who unbeknownst to him are already dead. The Nazis give him a clean set of clothes, a tie, a fedora (31). Puzo's emphasis on dressing Rogan in street clothes challenges narrative logic. The Nazis know the Americans are on their doorstep. The Nazis plan to shoot him immediately. Why indulge in this particular charade? Puzo seemingly relies on the concept of *bella figura* to intensify the horror by emphasizing humiliation. In the Italian American community, proper clothing signifies social status and dignity that, in turn, demands communal respect. *Bella figura* is at once a public façade and a sincere self-presentation.^v The Nazis fabricate a narrative and dress Rogan to convince him of a life they secretly intend to take from him. By implication, however, Rogan's ultimate humiliation stems from self-betrayal. He allows himself to believe the lies fed to him about his wife, about his freedom. Were he Neapolitan, his belief would constitute complicity and so violate *omertà*, the internalized code that distrusts those in authority. In his weakened state, Rogan trusts the Nazis to tell the truth, to keep their promise. In doing so, he compromises his loyalty, his honor, his duty to the community of Americans that declare Nazis the enemy.

Investigating compensatory justice

Focusing on Rogan's search for his interrogators, the novel begins counter to expectations because it reverses the dominant American narrative of victory after WW II. In its place, the politically and economically defeated Nazis torturers thrive, and the American Rogan is physically, psychologically, and economically debilitated. This reversal of the dominant American narrative celebrating the success of WWII in Puzo's 'orphaned' novel reminds us that the genre of the spy novel stems from the social novel and the detective story (Boltanski, 11-12). Whereas the power of government usually wins, the narrative exploits anxieties about political, economic, and cultural realities. For the sociologist Boltanski, the "basic mechanism" of the spy thriller "consists in generating anxiety about the solidity and stability of *reality*" (121).^{vi} "Reality" refers to "a network of causalities based on pre-established formats that make action predictable" (Boltanski xvii). The undercurrent of a destabilized reality enables reversals in narrative expectations. Violent conflicts erupt, but the spy thriller is a conservative genre because the narrative ultimately stabilizes reality: the institutional, ruling authority reasserts its version to substantiate its role of protection. *Six Graves* slightly varies the paradigm by focusing on a decommissioned spy from a war that has ended. The Cold War has begun, and the CIA protects the Nazis whom Rogan seeks because they covertly assist in fighting communism. A CIA agent, named Bailey, dogs Rogan's every move. The nexus of Bailey/CIA/US government just replaces the Don in assisting those people/Nazis whom they have just helped to destroy. Both Rogan and Bailey have secret missions, but only the CIA has institutional sanction. Both agendas are hidden; they lack the witness of the American public. In effect, Puzo creates a narrative world for Rogan that reflects the one Hagan later describes in *The Godfather* wherein good and evil intertwine, as quoted earlier, due to either a "variety of interests" or "natural of itself."

Six Graves concludes with the restoration of "reality," as Boltanski defines it, because the government asserts and stabilizes its own version on the grounds of national security. The novel, however, fails to resolve the anxieties it raises once justice is divorced from law. Puzo authenticates Rogan's agenda by providing him with brutal victimization and rooting it in historical events. Rogan's revenge substantially restores balance to his personal scales of justice. His extraordinariness instills in him the right, as Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov claims, "to commit any crime" (221). Yet as in the representation of *The Godfather's* social networks, justice becomes a matter of values rather than of rights. In a court of law, for example, Rogan would have the right to pursue those who tried to kill him, but the covert circumstances of his situation preclude that right. He belongs to the exclusive community of American spies. Similarly, the perceived threat of communism justifies the agenda of the CIA because public needs ostensibly overshadow those of the individual. Bailey alerts Interpol to Rogan's agenda so as to criminalize him. Bailey's actions force the normalcy of legality to replace Rogan's moral legitimacy. They allow national security to trump his personal need for justice. In effect, Puzo highlights the cultural fantasy that institutional policy provides national security and thereby ensures safety.

It is precisely this fantasy that *The Godfather* series treats. The Don's social and cultural organization provides an alternative to institutionally sanctioned government policies. In other words, *The Godfather's* fictional Italian American community systematizes justice without recourse to a legal institution. Scaled down from national governance, it yet functions on the same idea of reciprocity and so provides a perspective on the compromises necessary for such a system to work. Whereas the spy thriller stabilizes reality in its conclusion, *The Godfather* dramatizes an economic empire

wherein no one actually wins. In *The Godfather* and in *Six Graves*, the systems of reciprocity entail loss. Legal systems attempt to repair loss, but Puzo's fiction illustrates the imbalance because it dramatizes the enactment of compensation. *The Godfather* and *Six Graves* remind us of the discontents of systematized justice. Killing the Nazis cannot erase the past, can neither bring back Rogan's family nor restore his mind. It can only destroy him. The Cold War, in its turn, does not erase the memory of WWII veterans who fought against an enemy who were afterward recruited for assistance against the Soviet threat. The novel effectively bears witness to veterans disenfranchised by the change in American policy. Given the challenge of replacing either a person or a memory, the Don, in his turn, can either throw money at the family he victimized or bring its next generation into the fold to perpetuate his organization.

Finally, Puzo's fictional Mafiosi in *The Godfather* series provide a framework for investigating commensurate justice and the compensation that replaces it. As in *Six Graves*, the narratives expose the drawbacks of the *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye. Its displacement discourages personally motivated revenge and necessitates the Western rule of a compensatory law. The change in systems trails back to the origins of the Western literary tradition. From the fifth century BCE, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, in fact, concludes with the first trial aiming to put an end to the cycle of revenge. Athena adjudicates the trial, as if only divine intervention can attempt to find a balance to right wrongs. For Aeschylus, revenge takes the form of the Furies, goddesses of maternal retaliation. Athena offers them a deal. She co-opts their revenge by transforming them into fertility goddesses of Athens: the Eumenides. In effect, Aeschylus's trilogy reminds us that compensation stabilizes a culture but requires compromise. The Furies change their name and home, and they relinquish their fury. The dramatization of the trial highlights the substitution of one thing for another as culturally foundational, because the alternative—if you kill my son, I kill yours—is worse. But what happens to unsatisfied revenge? *Six Graves*, like *The Godfather*, reminds us of the cost of both thwarting and achieving it. Unlike *The Fortunate Pilgrim* and unlike *The Godfather*, *Six Graves* does not pretend to be about a family. Yet the dynamics acted out on an international and political stage within this historical context might as well be set within the *famiglia* who cause both good and evil so that they seem interlinked and part of the universe itself.

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NOTES

ⁱ According to Tamburri, an overt exploration of ethnicity in the 1960s could result in a writer's being "cast on the margin," not one of the mainstream American writers (22).

ⁱⁱ The term "commensurate justice" derives from Dimock's literary study: "Focusing, then, on 'commensurability' as a central premise (and a central embarrassment) within the language of justice, I call attention to the porousness of that language, a porousness especially noticeable and especially worrisome when seen against the stubborn densities of human experience" (5).

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Belmonte, here, summarizes Gay Talese's essay, "Where are the Italian American Novelists?" *New York Time Book Review*. 14 March, 1993.

^{iv} Hepburn introduces his critical study of the spy thriller with the example of Jason Bourne from Ludlum's 1980 *The Bourne Identity*.

^v *Bella Figura* refers to an Italian disposition that does not translate precisely; English can merely approximate its meaning.

^{vi} Boltanski takes the Buchan's film, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, as paradigmatic of this mechanism (121).