

**Miroslav  
Petříček**

**Philosophy  
en noir**

Rethinking Philosophy  
after the Holocaust

# Philosophy en noir

Rethinking Philosophy after the Holocaust

Miroslav Petříček

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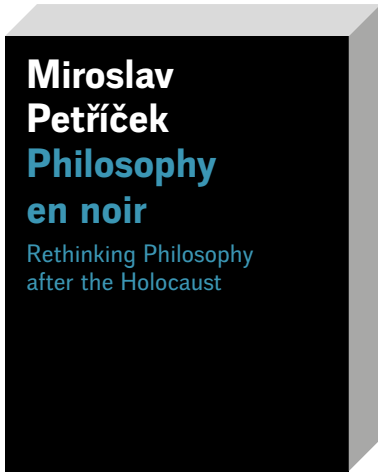
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*To Aunt Hermanová  
and Ms. Doris*





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# **PART ONE**

# **CRISIS**



# 1

Between that which is departing and that which is only now arriving, sleepwalking spirits are materialising. Fantômas, Eduard Raban, von Passenov. Perhaps the key to these ciphers might be that which we call the *event horizon*.

## 2

Every reader remembers the sentence beneath the illustration of a particularly dastardly deed in an old penny dreadful: “He rang up the Yard about an hour ago and said his chambers had been invaded by Chinamen.” Reading on we learn that the burglary had been reported using Bell’s “electrical speech machine” by no less than the inventor of the aero-torpedo, plans to which had been seized by the Chinese. A century on and the aficionado of lowbrow literature will already have realised that the book in question is *The Insidious Doctor Fu Manchu* by the English author Sax Rohmer. The book was published in 1913 and was the first in a series spread over more than thirty years, with the last published in 1959 (leaving aside various posthumous continuations). The main character is the eponymous oriental villain who heads a secret organisation of Asians. Fu Manchu’s nemesis, Nayland Smith, a colonial police commissioner with extraordinary powers of access and arrest, offers us a description of just how fiendish is Fu Manchu right at the start of the series, when he tells Dr. Petrie, his loyal companion:

“This man, whether a fanatic or a duly appointed agent, is, unquestionably, the most malign and formidable personality existing in the known world today. He is a linguist who speaks with almost equal facility in any of the civilized languages, and in most of the barbaric. He is an adept in all the arts and sciences which a great university could teach him. He also is an adept in certain obscure arts and sciences which no university of to-day can teach. He has the brains of any three men of genius. Petrie, he is a mental giant.”

“But, Smith, this is almost incredible! What perverted genius controls this awful secret movement?”

“Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire

Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government – which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man.”<sup>1</sup>

So why do I feel the need to return to what is a pretty bizarre book? In fact I was reminded of the novel, which sketches out the radical threat faced by the whole of European (Western) civilisation, while reading the last published work by Edmund Husserl entitled *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, based on the lectures he gave in Prague and Vienna entitled “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity”. In other words, I was put in mind of a classic of pulp fiction while reading a work that takes the state of emergency as its central theme. Though the crisis Husserl speaks of is manifest on the surface in the blind objectivism of science, on a deeper level it involves a forgetting of the original meaning that Western rationality was born both with and into. Interestingly, this period also saw the emergence of a new literary genre generally deemed lowbrow or trivial, and in this literature too we find what we might call a description of *crisis*, albeit a crisis refashioned into criminal and other such storylines. In the two years either side of Husserl’s lecture, two more novels were published featuring Doctor Fu Manchu: *The Trail of Fu Manchu* and *President Fu Manchu*. The thriller by Eric Ambler *The Dark Frontier* (1936) also came out, the plot of which revolves around the discovery of atomic energy being misused in order to create a weapon. The hero, who loses his memory and is only subsequently informed of the events that have taken place, is Professor Barstow, an eminent physicist and expert in atomic energy, who, under the influence of the chance discovery of a volume of pulp fiction, is mentally reincarnated as the superhero

1 Sax Rohmer, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*, Methuen, London 1913, ch. 2.

Conway Carruthers and decides to feign collaboration with the armament manufacturers in order to thwart their dastardly plans. But do not be confused by the farfetchedness of the plot – Ambler’s book is one of the first examples of the political thriller and masterfully evokes the atmosphere of living under the threat of atomic death, as well as its cultural and political backdrop. And just as Doctor Fu Manchu, though of oriental origin, is a master of Western science, so science and its soft underbelly form the theme of Ambler’s book, as is clear from the conversation Professor Barstow has with a representative of the weapon manufacturers:

“The ideals of science are constructive, not destructive,” answered the Professor stiffly. “Science in the past has been shamefully exploited. But it has learnt to protect itself.”

Simon Groom shook his head.

“No, Professor, you are wrong. While scientists are men, science cannot protect itself. The desire for supremacy which is in the hearts of all men prevents it. Even as I talk to you now, events are proving you wrong. The first atomic bomb has been made!”<sup>2</sup>

We might also note that the ominous collocation “atom bomb” first appears in literature intended for “the widest readership”, namely the novel by H.G. Wells *The World Set Free* (1914). This book not only predicts the discovery of atomic energy almost twenty years before it happened (1933), but also the industrial applications that saw nuclear power definitively replace steam in 1953. However, in the book the discovery of cheap, easily available energy (nuclear plants are not only safe but smaller than traditional plants and can be situated everywhere) causes the complete collapse of civilisation, growing unemployment, unrest, and eventually a devastating war and

<sup>2</sup> Eric Ambler, *The Dark Frontier*, Fontana Books, London 21967 (1936), ch. 1.



the dropping of an atom bomb on Berlin. The soldier in the plane carrying this new weapon,

sat with his legs spread wide over the long, coffin-shaped box which contained in its compartments the three atomic bombs, the new bombs that would continue to explode indefinitely and which no one so far had ever seen in action.<sup>3</sup>

During the mid-1920s, H.G. Wells still imagined that a devastating world war would be the first stage in the establishment of a new system in a world liberated from work in which man is transformed into artist. However, after the end of what was the First (bona fide) World War and in the period immediately preceding the Second, such a dream was scarcely any longer feasible.

Eight years after Husserl's lectures on crisis, Graham Greene, whose early novel *A Gun For Sale* came out in 1936, published the next of what he termed his "entertainments", the thriller *The Ministry of Fear*. The book depicts the atmosphere of a kind of general but now unquestionably genuine crisis, firstly by setting the events in a London exposed night after night to German bombing, and secondly by virtue of the fact that what had hitherto been deemed fiction is now undeniably real. In the following passage, the hero of Greene's novel has a dream in which he speaks with his deceased mother and attempts to describe the world in which he is obliged to live:

I'm hiding underground, and up above the Germans are methodically smashing London to bits all round me. (...) It sounds like a thriller, doesn't it, but the thrillers are like life – more like life than you are, this lawn, your sandwiches, that pine. You used to laugh at the books Miss Savage read – about spies, and murders, and wild motor-car chases, but, dear, that's real

**3** H.G. Wells, *The World Set Free. A Story of Mankind*, MacMillan, London 1914, ch. 2, sec. 3.

life: it's what we've all made of the world since you died. I'm your little Arthur who wouldn't hurt a beetle and I'm a murderer too. The world has been remade by William Le Queux. (...) Let me lend you the *History of Contemporary Society*. It's in hundreds of volumes, but most of them are sold in cheap editions: *Death in Piccadilly*, *The Ambassador's Diamonds*, *The Theft of the Naval Papers*, *Diplomacy*, *Seven Days' Leave*, *The Four Just Men*...<sup>4</sup>

The books he refers to are real and identifiable. William Le Queux is the author of exciting (albeit interminable) novels in which he gives vent to his concern for British politics with a fictional description of the invasion of Britain by the German army. His *Invasion of 1910* came out in 1906. However, in *Spies of the Kaiser* (1909), *Revelations of the Secret Service* (1911), and many other semi-fictional, pseudo-documentary books he exposed the danger to Britain of German spy rings and other forms of international conspiracy. *Death in Piccadilly* is a whodunit from 1936 written by Elliot Bailey, *Seven Day's Leave* is a film (a romantic comedy) made in 1942, and *The Four Just Men* is Edgar Wallace's first novel, written in 1905. This last is especially noteworthy for its ambivalence: the four just men of the title, while murderers of noble origin and method, only liquidate those who represent a menace to society and whom the police do not have enough proof to prosecute. And finally there is Gregory Bellairs, author of detective stories written in the 1930s and 40s, who is possibly present in Greene's novel in the guise of Mrs Bellairs, one of the conspirators.

In order to ease out the links between these sensation novels and Europe's crisis, let us remain a moment with the best known of the authors referred to, Edgar Wallace, the harbinger of this style in many respects. The blurb to the Czech translation of *The Four Just Men*, though referring to detective fiction, captures very accurately the emerging subgenre of pulp fiction, when it says of the author:

<sup>4</sup> Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, Penguin, Vintage Classics, pp. 95–96.

Edgar Wallace is an author with the mind of a genius. This novel, which displays masterly ingenuity, is a good example of his detection skills. The reader's imagination is refined and exercised by the inexhaustible combinations that pervade the complex web of intrigue. One is unable to resist the excitement of being caught up in this detective story. To turn a page of this book is to close the doors of the present and to be swept away from everyday life, to forget everything and to live with Wallace. And a moment spent in Wallace's company is simply priceless.<sup>5</sup>

The "four just men" are actually three (the fourth is hired). The novel is the first of a series. Six books in total feature the same protagonists, the last being *Again the Three Just Men* published in 1929. In the first, the quartet of conspirators attempts to dissuade a British MP from submitting a draft bill on the extradition of foreigners who are in danger of being executed by their political opponents upon returning to their home country. They begin by sending warning letters that mysteriously find their way directly to the table of their addressee. However, the MP is determined and so the subsequent warnings (always announced in advance) are more spectacular: a bomb planted in parliament, a secret visit to a newspaper editor, etc. All of this foments panic in the population at large. The perpetrators are invisible and elude capture: there is no saying where or when they will turn up next. State officials keeping their own private vigil over justice are apoplectic and sense a threat to the very foundations of civilisation itself:

"It is monstrous," said the Colonial Secretary hotly; "it is inconceivable that such a state of affairs can last. Why, it strikes at the root of everything, it unbalances every adjustment of civilisation."<sup>6</sup>

**5** Edgar Wallace, *Čtyři spravedliví* (The Four Just Men), transl. Běla Vrbová-Pavlousková, Julius Albert, Prague 1940.

**6** Edgar Wallace, *The Four Just Men*, House of Stratus, Cornwall 2001, p. 72 (ch. VIII).

The inhabitants of London are horrified by the seeming ubiquity and omnipotence of these just men (not even the police can save the life of the MP, who is electrocuted by his telephone), and the atmosphere of the city on the day of reckoning is reminiscent of a state of war or emergency.

And within an hour there was witnessed in London a scene that has no parallel in the history of the Metropolis. From every district there came a small army of policemen. They arrived by train, by tramway car, by motorbus, by every vehicle and method of traction that could be requisitioned or seized. They streamed from the stations, they poured through the thoroughfares, till London stood aghast at the realisation of the strength of her civic defences.<sup>7</sup>

Edgar Wallace undoubtedly created the prototype, though his was a very free model allowing for considerable variability within a genre it is difficult to put a name to. Perhaps this is why we speak of a “sensation” novel (even though the term was originally applied to Victorian authors), since the category of detective story would be too narrow. The sensation novel sometimes contains the seeds of a political thriller, and in this respect Eric Ambler’s precursor was H.C. McNeile (Sapper) in books featuring Bulldog Drummond (the first of which, *Bulldog Drummond: The Adventures of a Demobilised Officer Who Found Peace Dull*, was published in 1920), in which a faint echo could be heard of J. Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907. All of these books are about more than merely untangling a criminal plot. The sensationalism of their narratives was not driven simply by an attempt to attract the most readers, nor did it reflect the gradual commodification of literature, a phenomenon very visible in the serialised novels and booklets sold in railway station kiosks referred to by Walter Benjamin<sup>8</sup>. These books also act as

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98 (ch. X).

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Kriminalromane, auf Reisen”, *Gesammelte Werke* 4.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann – Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1972–1989.