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**Modern Authoritarianism, Between Media Propaganda and Literary Myth A
Comparative Analysis of *The Wizard of the Kremlin* by Giuliano da Empoli
and *Corto Maltese* by Hugo Pratt**

لاستبداد الحديث، بين الدعاية الإعلامية والأسطورة الأدبية - دراسة مقارنة لـ "ساحر الكرملين"
لجوليانو دا إمبولي و "كورتو مالتيز" لهوغوبرات

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Abstract:

This article offers a comparative study of Giuliano da Empoli's novel *Le Mage du Kremlin* and Hugo Pratt's graphic novel *Corto Maltese*, examining how these two works portray the figure of the anti-hero in relation to modern authoritarian dynamics. The aim is to show that whether as a political strategist operating in the shadows of power (Vadim Baranov) or as a libertarian sailor on the margins of ideologies (*Corto Maltese*), the anti-hero embodies an ambiguous resistance to dominant narratives. The methodology combines narratological and thematic analysis, drawing on comparative literature and semiotic approaches. Findings indicate that *Le Mage du Kremlin* highlights media and mythological manipulation as the foundation of contemporary authoritarianism, whereas *Corto Maltese* emphasizes a rejection of grand narratives of power through irony and wandering. The analysis reveals that both works converge in their ability to question the tension between individual freedom and ideological control.

Keywords: Anti-hero, Modern authoritarianism, Media manipulation, Political mythology, Comparative literature

الملخص:

يقدم هذا المقال دراسة مقارنة لرواية "ساحر الكرملين" لـجوليانو دا إம்பولي وسلسلة "كورتو مالتيز" لهوغو برات، من خلال استجواب الطريقة التي تجسد فيها هاتان العملان الأدبيان، الصادرتان عن جنسين أدبيين مختلفين، شخصية البطل المضاد في مواجهة منطق الاستبداد الحديث. يهدف البحث إلى إظهار أن البطل المضاد، سواء كان استراتيجياً سياسياً يعمل في ظلال السلطة (فاديم بارانوف) أو بحاراً ليبرالياً على هامش الأيديولوجيات (كورتو مالتيز)، يجسد مقاومة غامضة للسرديات المهيمنة: فهو يدين التلاعب بها وينخرط فيها في آن واحد. تشير النتائج إلى أن "ساحر الكرملين" يوضح التلاعب الإعلامي والأسطوري كأساس للاستبداد المعاصر، بينما تسلط "كورتو مالتيز" الضوء، من خلال السخرية والتهية، على موقف رفض السرديات الكبرى للسلطة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البطل المضاد، الاستبداد الحديث، التلاعب الإعلامي، الأسطورة السياسية، الأدب المقارن.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of contemporary literary studies, the figure of the anti-hero occupies a central position. Heir to the existential and social crises of the twentieth century, it is defined by its rejection of traditional heroic virtues and by a moral ambiguity that reflects the fragility of collective ideals. As Victor Brombert (1999) has shown, the modern anti-hero is marked by cynicism, marginality, and an ironic distance from the world, traits that translate the difficulty of adhering to grand heroic narratives. This evolution of the novelistic representation of character is situated within a broader context, where literature continually interrogates the relationships between individual, society, and power.

Yet this questioning takes on a particular acuity within the framework of modern authoritarianisms, characterized not

only by political coercion but also, and above all, by media and mythological manipulation. As Peter Pomerantsev (2014) emphasizes, post-Soviet Russia exemplifies this phenomenon in exemplary fashion: "nothing is true and everything is possible" in a public space dominated by propaganda, where spin doctors fabricate an unstable and shifting reality. Literature, as a critical mirror of societies, has seized upon these transformations to explore the fabrication of narratives and the ambiguous figures that emerge from them.

The novel *The Wizard of the Kremlin* (2022) by Giuliano da Empoli is situated precisely within this dynamic. Through the character of Vadim Baranov, inspired by the Kremlin's communication strategists, the author constructs a political fable about the role of mythological narratives in the maintenance of authoritarian power.

Baranov, a manipulative narrator and disillusioned aesthete, embodies an anti-hero who oscillates between complicity and critical distance, revealing the complexity of the relationship between individual and propaganda.

As a counterpoint, the comic book *Corto Maltese* by Hugo Pratt (1967–1990) proposes an entirely different declension of the anti-hero. A libertarian sailor and solitary traveler, Corto moves through the margins of the colonial and revolutionary world of the early twentieth century. Refusing any fixed allegiance, he embodies an ironic and skeptical posture vis-à-vis the ideologies of his time. Although his universe differs radically from that of Baranov, his marginality and individualism echo the same interrogation: how to resist dominant narratives without constituting oneself as a traditional hero?

The juxtaposition of these two works, separated by more than half a century and belonging to distinct genres, political novel on the one hand, adventure comic book on the other, finds its legitimacy within the framework of comparative literature. As Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (1998) reminds us, this discipline aims to transcend generic and cultural boundaries in order to reveal unexpected thematic convergences. It permits here the confrontation of the political universe of Putin's Russia and that, more novelistic and mythic, of the first decades of the twentieth century, so as to illuminate figures of anti-heroes who, despite their differences, share a common critical function.

This perspective is also nourished by other theoretical approaches. Steven Lukes (1973) offers a reflection on individualism, understood both as an ideal of autonomy and as a potential instrument of compromise with power. Mario Praz (1933), in his analysis of the Byronic heritage, illuminates the romantic and melancholic dimension of Corto Maltese. Finally, the work of Homi Bhabha (1994) on cultural hybridity and that of Katherine Hayles (1999) on post-humanism open additional avenues for

understanding the liminal position of these anti-heroes, caught between cultures, systems, and global narratives.

Consequently, the research problem may be formulated as follows: how can two such different works, one anchored in contemporary geopolitical actuality and the other in a colonial and romantic imaginary—represent the anti-hero as a critical figure of authoritarianism and dominant narratives?

The hypothesis of this article is that *The Wizard of the Kremlin* and *Corto Maltese* construct two complementary versions of the anti-hero:

1. Vadim Baranov illustrates a postmodern anti-hero, manipulative and cynical, who instrumentalizes the collective imaginary in order to maintain power.
2. Corto Maltese, heir to Byronic romanticism, embodies a libertarian and ethical anti-hero who resists imperial and military narratives through irony and wandering.

The objective is to demonstrate that, despite their differences in form and context, these two works converge in a shared interrogation of the tension between individual freedom and ideological constraint. By articulating the contributions of anti-hero theory (Brombert, 1999), individualism (Lukes, 1973), comparative literature (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 1998), and postmodern propaganda (Pomerantsev, 2014), this study intends to contribute to an interdisciplinary reflection on the links between narration, myth, and modern authoritarianism.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study is situated within a comparative literature approach as defined by Tötösy de Zepetnek (1998), who invites us to cross genres, contexts, and traditions in order to identify thematic and aesthetic convergences. The selected corpus brings together a contemporary novel, *The Wizard of the Kremlin* by Giuliano da Empoli (2022), and a major work of European comic art, *Corto Maltese* by Hugo Pratt (published between 1967 and 1990). This choice rests upon their staging of anti-hero figures, in the sense of Brombert (1999), who subvert

classical heroic values in order to embody moral ambiguity, ironic distance, and a tension between marginality and power.

The interest of such a confrontation lies in the distinct narrative and political contexts. In the novel, Vadim Baranov, a fictional alter ego of a Kremlin spin doctor, illustrates the role of the intellectual become shadow strategist within an authoritarian system shaped by media and mythological manipulation (Pomerantsev, 2014). Conversely, Corto Maltese moves through the unstable universe of the first decades of the twentieth century, marked by colonial empires and nascent revolutions. Through his wandering, his irony, and his libertarian detachment, he joins the tradition of the Byronic hero described by Praz (1933), rebellious and melancholic, in quest of a fragile but intransigent freedom.

The analysis proceeds through cross-readings. The novel is approached through passages where Baranov reveals his reflections on power, analyzed as paradigmatic discourse of postmodern propaganda. The comic book is examined through emblematic narratives (*The Ballad of the Salt Sea, Corto Maltese in Siberia*), where the aesthetic of a cosmopolitan and ironic anti-hero unfolds. The semiotic approach to the comic book (Groensteen, 1999) permits the articulation of the role of text and image in the construction of this anti-heroic posture.

To structure the interpretation, several theoretical grids have been mobilized: the typology of individualism proposed by Lukes (1973), useful for distinguishing Baranov's instrumental individualism from Corto's ethical individualism; the cultural hybridity of Bhabha (1994), illuminating the liminal and hybrid position of the two characters in their respective universes; and finally the post-humanism of Hayles (1999), which permits us to understand how Baranov's action is inscribed within a media and technological system that exceeds the individual.

Thus defined, the comparative approach unfolds along three axes: the characterization of the anti-heroes, their

relationship to power and individualism, and the tensions between manipulation and freedom. This analytical orientation aims to account, beyond generic and historical differences, for the deep resonances that traverse the novel and the comic book, and that reveal the critical power of the anti-hero in a world shaped by narratives of authority.

3. BARANOV AND CORTO IN THEIR CONTEXTS

In *The Wizard of the Kremlin* by Giuliano da Empoli (2022), the central character, Vadim Baranov, is presented as a shadow advisor to contemporary Russian power. Heir to a complex lineage—grandson of an aristocrat, son of a Soviet apparatchik, and himself a former man of the theater—he embodies a hybrid figure situated at the intersection of several historical and cultural narratives. The novel highlights his function as a "stage director" of power, notably when he explains: "My role was not to tell the truth, but to create a reality in which Russians could believe" (Da Empoli, 2022, p. 134). This passage illustrates his inscription within a logic of fluid propaganda, where facts matter less than the political myths constructed to legitimize authority.

The text also insists upon Baranov's solitude, which places him at a distance from the President, nicknamed "the Tsar," and from the people. This marginal position manifests itself in narrative asides where he defines himself as both "spectator and actor" in a political theater that he orchestrates without ever merging with it (Da Empoli, 2022, p. 201). The character is distinguished by a subtle irony, a distanced gaze that relativizes his own complicity with power, yet without offering him a moral escape.

In parallel, in Hugo Pratt's *Corto Maltese*, the figure of Corto appears from *The Ballad of the Salt Sea* (1967) as that of an errant sailor, ironic and individualistic, detached from any national or ideological allegiance. From his first appearance, tied to a raft, he presents himself as a marginal character, in equilibrium between danger and adventure. His posture is confirmed in *Corto Maltese in Siberia* (1974), where, immersed

in the upheavals of the Russian Revolution, he refuses to take sides and declares: "I am against those who want to impose their truth upon me" (Pratt, 1974, p. 89). This attitude translates a libertarian individualism, hostile to colonial, military, or ideological authorities.

Graphically, Pratt emphasizes this distance through framing and visual silence: Corto often appears isolated within the panel, his gaze turned toward the horizon, like a melancholic figure in quest of an elsewhere. His irony, marked by brief and off-kilter retorts, reinforces his status as a romantic anti-hero, simultaneously integrated into events and foreign to their logic.

Thus, the two works construct characters whose marginality and refusal of imposed truths constitute a common ground. However, the modalities differ: Baranov inscribes his marginality at the very heart of the power he manipulates, whereas Corto affirms his through cosmopolitan wandering and a detachment from ideological systems.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The Manipulative Anti-Hero and the Romantic Anti-Hero

The opposition between Vadim Baranov and Corto Maltese illustrates two major declensions of the modern anti-hero, as defined by Brombert (1999). Far from representing classical heroic figures, they inhabit moral ambiguity and irony, rejecting any naive adherence to collective ideals. Baranov defines himself as a "shadow machinist," asserting: "It was not a matter of telling the truth, but of fabricating illusions powerful enough to hold a people" (Da Empoli, 2022, p. 134). This confession perfectly embodies the figure of the cynical anti-hero, complicit with the power he sustains through fabricated narratives.

Corto Maltese, conversely, is situated at the opposite pole of this calculated cynicism. In *The Ballad of the Salt Sea*, he refuses to obey any camp, declaring: "Me, I always walk on the side of the losers" (Pratt, 1967, p. 45). His ironic and distanced posture illustrates what Praz (1933) describes as the Byronic hero: a solitary, rebellious, and

melancholic individual who defines himself against dominant powers, even at the price of his isolation. Where Baranov instrumentalizes his irony to manipulate, Corto uses it as a weapon of resistance and distancing.

Thus, the two characters embody two models of the anti-hero: one negotiating with power in order to become its secret architect, the other defying hegemonic structures by remaining perpetually on the margins.

4.2. Strategic Individualism and Libertarian Individualism

The distinction proposed by Lukes (1973) between forms of individualism decisively illuminates the divergence between Baranov and Corto. Baranov's individualism is profoundly strategic: he manipulates collective passions in order to reinforce an authoritarian regime. He himself acknowledges this: "I never believed in ideologies. What interested me was their power of fascination" (Da Empoli, 2022, p. 201). His personal freedom resides paradoxically in his capacity to enslave the collective imaginary, confirming Pomerantsev's (2014) analysis of the "fluid reality" fabricated by Russian spin doctors.

Corto, by contrast, practices a libertarian individualism. In *Corto Maltese in Siberia*, faced with revolutionaries who attempt to recruit him, he replies: "I do not believe in flags, only in the winds that make them flutter" (Pratt, 1974, p. 102). This retort embodies the ethical individualism described by Lukes: a fidelity not to collective causes, but to a radical autonomy. Where Baranov finds his place within the play of ideologies, Corto never ceases to detach himself from them. One is defined by the opportunistic use of the collective, the other by an obstinate flight beyond political frameworks. The confrontation of these two forms of individualism reveals the gap between calculated compromise and ethical wandering.

4.3. Cultural Hybridity and Fragmented Subjectivity

Bhabha's (1994) theory of cultural hybridity further enriches this opposition. Baranov, heir to a tsarist grandfather and a Soviet father, then artist and political advisor, embodies a shattered post-Soviet identity. He navigates between imperial, Soviet, and contemporary mythologies, reassembling them within an instrumentalized national narrative: "We resurrected the old myths to give Russians a grandeur they no longer lived" (Da Empoli, 2022, p. 178). This hybridity is not liberating but confining: it serves the machinery of power.

Corto, for his part, is himself a figure of hybridity. Born in Malta, a cosmopolitan sailor, he traverses the seas of the Pacific, Siberia, and Latin America. His encounters with colonized peoples, revolutionaries, bandits, and poets make of him a liminal figure, always between two worlds. In *The Ballad of the Salt Sea*, he is described by a companion as "a European without a homeland and a pirate without a flag" (Pratt, 1967, p. 63). His hybridity is not instrumental but existential, translating an identity quest within a fragmented world. Through Baranov and Corto, hybridity takes two directions: one oriented toward the consolidation of authoritarian power, the other toward a wandering that defies assignment.

4. Toward a Comparative Literature of Anti-Heroes

The comparative approach, as formulated by Tötösy de Zepetnek (1998), is fully justified here: it permits us to transcend boundaries between genres and epochs in order to grasp the universal scope of the anti-hero. Despite their aesthetic and contextual differences, Baranov and Corto share a constant irony, a fundamental solitude, and a radical distrust of grand narratives. Baranov illustrates the figure of the postmodern anti-hero, shaped by the media and political logics of the Putin era. Corto, conversely, actualizes the romantic and Byronic tradition inherited from the nineteenth century, but transposed into a twentieth-century comic book where adventure mingles with melancholy. Comparing a contemporary novel and a historical comic book demonstrates that the

anti-hero is a transgeneric and transhistorical figure, perpetually reinvented to reflect the tensions of a given epoch.

4.5. Limitations and Perspectives

This study nonetheless presents certain limitations. The restricted corpus, a single novel and a few albums of *Corto Maltese*, does not permit coverage of the entire spectrum of anti-hero representations in European literature or in comic art. Moreover, the contexts analyzed (contemporary Russia and the colonial worlds of the early twentieth century) are not strictly comparable, and the analogy must avoid shortcuts. However, these limitations open perspectives. An expanded comparison with other contemporary anti-heroes (for example, the protagonists of novels by Amélie Nothomb or Michel Houellebecq) would permit the exploration of other forms of individualism in a democratic context. Similarly, a parallel with other comic book figures (Tintin, Asterix, or American comic anti-heroes) would illuminate the particular place of Corto as heir to Byronic romanticism. Finally, the question of hybridity could be extended through the study of more recent postcolonial characters, inscribed within globalized and technological worlds.

5. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of *The Wizard of the Kremlin* by Giuliano da Empoli and *Corto Maltese* by Hugo Pratt has illuminated the manner in which two distinct genres, the contemporary political novel and the adventure comic book, construct figures of anti-heroes who are solitary, ambiguous, and profoundly marked by their relationship to power. In the case of Vadim Baranov, we have observed a strategic and cynical individualism placed in the service of a modern authoritarianism founded upon media manipulation and the fabrication of a shifting reality. Conversely, Corto Maltese is defined by a romantic and libertarian individualism, nourished by irony and wandering, which permits him to resist the colonial and military forces of the early twentieth century.

By mobilizing complementary theoretical frameworks, from the figure of the anti-hero (Brombert, 1999) to postmodern propaganda (Pomerantsev, 2014), from individualism (Lukes, 1973) to Byronic romanticism (Praz, 1933), not forgetting comparative literature (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 1998), this study has shown how these characters embody both products of their epoch and universal archetypes. Baranov becomes the symbol of an era where political authority is exercised through image, narrative, and staging, while Corto incarnates the persistence of the literary myth of the marginal rebel, who traverses cultural and temporal boundaries.

With regard to the chosen title, it is important to underscore two major dimensions. "Modern authoritarianism" as described by Da Empoli cannot be reduced to Putin's Russia alone; it testifies to a transnational phenomenon where media propaganda, disinformation, and manipulated narrative constitute central weapons of contemporary power, from Beijing to Ankara. Similarly, the notion of "literary myth" must be understood in its dual aspect. Corto, heir to European romanticism, illustrates the permanence of an archetype of freedom and wandering; Baranov, modern "wizard," blurs the boundary between reality and fiction, erecting political authority as a quasi-magical narrative. Novel and comic book thus participate in a shared interrogation of the power of myths in the legitimation or contestation of powers.

This study opens several perspectives. It would be fruitful to extend the comparison to other contemporary corpora, whether dystopian literature or television series, in order to examine how figures of the anti-hero adapt to new forms of mediated authoritarianism. Likewise, the exploration of the role of irony as a tool of cultural resistance would merit deeper development, in connection with post-humanist and postcolonial theories. Ultimately, through the confrontation of Baranov and Corto, two rebellious shadows who rise against oppressive worlds, literature reminds us that

power never exists without narrative, and that narrative, whether novelistic or drawn, always remains a battlefield between illusion and freedom.

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