



“He wasn’t carrion yet”,  
or the Drama of In-betweenness in *The Power and the Glory*

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"He wasn't carrion yet", or the Drama of In-betweenness  
in *The Power and the Glory*

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La structure de *The Power and the Glory* qui est à la fois celle d'un thriller, d'une parabole ou d'une allégorie, plonge ses personnages et son lecteur dans un entre-deux d'où aucun ne peut s'échapper, que ce soit du point de vue spatial, temporel ou théologique. Les lieux sont tous des lieux clos, symbolisés par la prison qui assemble le monde entier, lieux intermédiaires que personne ne parvient à quitter. La temporalité hésite entre Chronos et Aion, entre le temps historique de l'histoire et le hors-temps de l'idéal des personnages, entre le passé défini qui hante chacun d'eux et le futur indéfini porteur d'une délivrance espérée., entre finitude et infinitude, ce qui fait des personnages de véritables orphelins du temps. D'un point de vue théologique, les personnages sont les victimes d'une insoluble tension entre immanence et transcendance, abandon et salut, solitude et sentiment d'appartenance à la communauté des hommes, entre la mort comme fin et la mort comme recommencement. En ce sens, l'histoire que raconte la mère de Luis sert de remarquable contrepoint à l'histoire du prêtre, créant un entre-deux narratif dans lequel le lecteur ne peut que s'installer. La double nature de l'écriture, entre réalisme et symbolisme, métaphores et métonymies, accroît cette intermédialité de l'écriture et de la lecture qui forclôt toute interprétation finale simple, ce que Greene tente de contrebalancer par un dernier paragraphe qui oblige à reconsidérer le rôle du prêtre et de son anonymat dans tout le roman.

thriller, parabole, allégorie, transcendance, immanence, réalisme, symbolisme

Whether seen as a thriller, a parable, a morality play, a twentieth-century *Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegory or a document on the history of Mexico or even on the history of religious persecution in the world, *The Power and the Glory* combines two narrative axes, a linear, horizontal factual axis and a reflexive, albeit a little contrived, subtext which repeatedly reminds us that the text also has a vertical axis. Another way of considering this is to see the novel's structure as the interaction of a chronological ordering of events and a spatial dis-ordering of the same events, the former based on a causality chain, the latter on allegory, if not symbolism. The interplay of these two currents of meaning defines a strategy of writing obsessed with eschatology – the theological issue of the end and judgment of man, whether one refers to the ending of the story or to the end of Greene's writing itself. In other

terms, *The Power and the Glory* develops a language of immanence haunted by, and struggling with, a vision of what transcendence might eventually prove to mean<sup>1</sup>.

The hunt motif gives to the book its basic movement by setting a constant tension between its successive episodes – the pursuit of the priest, and its expected, obvious, pre-ordained end, i.e. the capture of the priest. The image of this is to be found in the gradual narrowing down of the narrative exactly like two straight lines approaching each other and forming an ever-narrowing angle from which there is no escaping. From a spatial point of view, the itineraries of the priest and of the lieutenant come closer and closer and can only meet at the exact place where the Yankee is – his name James Calver appropriately referring to the Calvary, the meeting place of Christ and his executioners. From a temporal point of view, the pace of time accelerates according to the same narrowing movement, if one bears in mind that the first part extends over a month, the second and third parts extend over a few days only and the fourth part lasts a few hours overnight. The tension, then, entirely depends on the gap between the inevitable end and the delaying of that end, a gap which is carefully maintained (and creates the suspense), so much so that, as we know, the end is not an end proper but a new beginning. In the end, then, the angle reopens, the text ‘yawns’, giving on to another abysmal, unidentified space.

## Spatial inbetweenness

In that respect, all places mentioned, from the beginning to the end of the novel, are places of transition and transitoriness. The priest can only move to, and through, the various places only to find himself in a position where he has to leave each for the next one. The movement of his flight is vain and illusory, his flight is from one closed place to another closed place, and the succession of departures in no way means a movement of opening. It is a succession of closures. The port, the capital, the villages he goes through, the banana station are all epitomized in the prison or, at best, in the chief of police’s office. Open spaces like the village square, the “dusty plaza”(58) or the Indian villages the priest goes through are like prison cells which maintain him in an intermediary place: he misses the boat which could have taken him away, of his own free will and is then cornered into staying here, with no hope of going anywhere else. The only moment when he could counter this entrapment and escape, when he stays at the Lehrs’, he decides otherwise. Paradoxically, the centrifugal itinerary of the priest proves to be irrevocably centripetal. As a consequence, he is doomed to remain here – or there, which boils down to the same thing – in total expectancy of his own fate. All places are eventually the same and situate the priest at the immobile centre of their expanding or shrinking circumferences.

The same goes for the lieutenant. Not only is he in a way forced to follow in the steps of the priest and move from one place to another, between the moment he decided to catch him and the moment he captures him, but he is also to be seen stuck in an indefinite space-time continuum between acting for, and *in view of*, the revolution and seeing it definitively completed – a space of unfulfilled desire. This is repeatedly emblemized by the square which he reigns over and is often seen crossing between his office and his lodgings, in total expectancy, too. Moreover, he depends on the priest in the same way as he depends on his own ambition to create a godless state *later*. This dependence is made ironically obvious in the two episodes when he does not recognize the priest and lets him go, in the village of the latter’s wife and daughter and at the police station: at the moment when the gap could be bridged, the gap opens again, re-opening a space of *want*. The lieutenant is always seen *in lieu of* the self he wishes he could be.

<sup>1</sup> All references given are to Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, London, Vintage (2005). With an introduction by John Updike.

The priest and the lieutenant have frequently been compared, and quite rightly too, the latter as the counterpart of the former, both kinds of mystics, loyal to their creed, dedicated to their ideal with a sacrificial spirit. Both are hunters and hunted. The priest hunts God and is hunted by the lieutenant (and to a certain extent by God, too), the lieutenant hunts the priest but, deep down, is hunted by him, too. Both walk irrepressibly away from, and towards, each other. It is not uninteresting that the last comparison used for the priest's last move before he is arrested should refer to his "walking a plank blindfold: you didn't know at what point you would step off into space for ever" (183), and that the last scene in which the lieutenant appears should show him "walking along the pavement [...] brisk and stubborn [...] as if he were saying at every step 'I have done what I have done'" (219). Both are described through a comparison, an "as if", a narratorial assumption, in other words between what they are or do, and what they might be, or do, as if they could only be seized temporarily, transitorily.

All characters are seen in relation to a kind of passivity which prevents them from leaving the place where they are, clearly trapped *in the interim*. A situation encapsulated in the first sentence of part II, chapter 2: "The young men and women walked round and round the plaza [...], the men one way, the girls another, never speaking to each other" (101). Tench and the Fellows are cases in point. Tench is tolerated by the authorities because he can cure them, and by curing them, maintains their power in spite of the pervading corruption; he is incapable of leaving the place for all that he wants to. He will never "clear out" (216), he will always want to leave - but always in the *next* boat. In the same way, the return of the Fellows in the last part of the novel corresponds to an interior exile, their being entrapped in false dreams, between the place they left and the place they come back to - the same one, of course - between Mrs Fellows' desire to return ("It will be good to go back home" [211]) and Captain Fellows' desire to stay ("I'm not going back" [212]). Undecided, incapable to decide, "deserted" - the word is used both for the Fellows (212) and for Tench (216) - these characters are left stranded in a desert, a waste land, in an in-between space, faced with the impossibility to define what they find themselves between.

This in-between space is, we know, similar to that of a prison. The town, the country, the state are a prison. In a more condensed image, the gathering of a cross-section of the whole community of men in the famous episode of the prison at the core of the novel ("This place was very like the world" [123]) is emblematic of man's predicament, waiting between walls. All places are symbolically walled-in, but the walls expand so much that man is always a prisoner, wherever he may go. This is because man is also stranded in time.

## Temporal inbetweenness

Being stranded in time implies the lack of temporal landmarks, in other words, it implies being trapped in one's own interior temporality while having to adjust to external temporality, between the time of men and the time of one's own individual consciousness. The whole novel hinges on that crucial dichotomy, which links up with what we have already noticed, the tension between opening and closure. Indeed, the crossing of space is inseparable from the precipitation of time and the sense of doom places man in an irrepressible movement of deferral: the end, of the hunt among others, is to come, but it is always already here. The allusion to Tench, "[h]e wasn't carrion yet" (3), the priest's statement, "I am meant to miss it" (11) when he misses the boat he wanted to take, to which we should add the overwhelming presence of the vultures, systematically mentioned: these are only a few of the signs of the omnipotence of devouring Chronos.

This being said, the inevitability of destructive Time is paradoxically inseparable from the deliverance which Time may achieve: the priest and the lieutenant both agree on aiming at the same goal, a moment in time when man will be freed from the shackles of time and society. This is the mainspring of their lives and actions. In that respect, the half-caste's part is clear:

he is the one who helps to speed up the coming of that moment of deliverance so much wished for by the two protagonists. The mestizo is the agent of time, the adjuvant in that medical operation of delivering, and fulfilling, desires, the catalyst of the chemical precipitation of time.

Both characters, the priest and the lieutenant, are evidently torn between their own past and the future they wish for. The priest is for ever haunted by his sinful past, whose evil he has transmitted to his daughter, the embodiment and objectification of sin which make it all the more irreversible. He lives in a kind of limbo between believing in the reality of hell and being painfully estranged from God on the one hand, and feeling contrition and humility on the other hand so deeply that he never stops longing for the forgiveness of God and reconciliation with Him. His present experience – being hunted by the police – is seen as a necessary parenthesis between a corrupt, past life and his death-transcending salvation. In the same way, but in secular terms, the lieutenant works for the materialization of his socially progressive ideas, assuming that this period is a necessary transition before the people may be freed from all kinds of oppression and destitution: “These men I shot. They were my own people. I wanted to give them the whole world” (196).

It is also essential to remark that both characters live in relation to their childhood memories as if their temporality could never be the present but a blending of past and future. For Greene emphasizes the direct link between both, when the priest remembers the false glory of his early life for example, but more especially in the lieutenant’s case. His hatred of religion derives from the deprivation and suffering he experienced when a child, feeling “horror” when remembering “the smell of incense [...] the candles and laciness of self-esteem” (17); he thus wants “to destroy everything”: “to be alone without any memories at all” (19). And even if, for him, “life began five years ago” (19), it rests upon a deeply ingrained resentment at himself. Here, the rejection of one’s past means the individual’s self-erasure in the present. The countless references to children encapsulate the omnipresent dialectical movement between the past and the future, simultaneously stressing the intermediate position of the protagonists. This twofold role played by the children clearly shows when the priest encounters Coral Fellows: not only does she reveal the priest’s own dichotomy, a man hiding like an animal, when he is on the point of being found out by the lieutenant, but she also acts as a protection of the priest from the lieutenant and through the conversation with the priest, stresses his symbolic role as a mediator for mankind, if he were to find the code which would help him bridge the gap between himself and God. Indeed, the emblematic Morse code will haunt him as the key to his ordeal right into the dream he has before being executed. The key is symbolically held in the three long taps and a short one, which the child says to him that it means “News”, a proleptic hint at the new priest’s arrival, the *second coming*. The dream emphasizes his role as an unwitting gospel-teller, an intermediary again.

Brigitta plays a similar part in the plot – she helps retain the priest in his own expectancy by saving him from the lieutenant when she ironically does not remember her, that is *his*, name. She also acts as a catalyst of the priest’s realization of, on the one hand, his own dependence on his sinful past and on the other hand his yearning for salvation. Not only a go-between, she is the embodiment of his own duality and of his position between the betrayal of his vows and the necessity to redeem himself.

The children in the street and, among them, Luis, all serve to maintain the space and time of the protagonists in this parenthesis which the narrative fills. One of the most emblematic episodes in this respect is the brief encounter of the children with the lieutenant as he crosses the plaza on his way to the police station. The lieutenant is trapped between two spaces, the world of the priest which is haunting his mind and that of the Chief of police which he knows he will have to dispose of some day, but also between the child he was and the children to

whom he wants to give a future of freedom. "It was for these he was fighting. He would eliminate from their childhood everything which had made him miserable" (54). Between the children who are playing at being what he is, and himself, his gun stands as the ambiguous, ironic, if not misunderstood, sign of power and glory – but not yet achieved. What happens between Luis and the gun, i.e. Luis's change of mind towards the lieutenant, when he spits on the gun (214), rejects the latter even more into solitude, abandonment and endless *waiting*. All the other children mentioned in the novel, whether living or dead, as with the episode of the dead Indian boy (149) or Mr. Tench's little boy (8, 42-3, 214), link up and unite with Coral, Brigitta and Luis through a kind of deep, secret bond, which escapes the priest and the lieutenant, and maintains them in an in-between space. They all mediate the two main driving forces of the novel, love and loss. Indeed, childhood itself is an intermediary period of life, as pointedly illustrated by Coral, first seen in a kind of straightforward innocence, and then seen in relation to her experience of the first signs of menstrual pain. The children thus enhance the intermediariness of the characters which they reflect.

Temporal inbetweenness is evidently marked with a sense of the persistence of things, a backcloth to man's ephemerality. The universe of the novel is inseparable from the relics from the past as if it were impossible to have fixed present landmarks at all. Ruins from the past and remains of former days reveal the impossibility of definitively erasing the past and place the protagonists in a kind of intermediary time, between Chronos and Aion. Indeed, to the secular, chronological, political time dimension, there corresponds, by sharp contrast, an unspoken but always already "present" timelessness, to immanent temporality there corresponds, intricately woven into the text, a transcendent temporality, to the knowable, countable, finite time, there corresponds an unknowable, infinite time. Man is torn between the two and finds a mirror to his predicament in the children who both escape and represent time. In any case, the present is empty, it is an illusion, man is trapped and lost between his memory, which he wishes he might dispense with, and his anticipation of a bright future. The present is perverted into a past and a future which both seem to run wild, uncontrolled by reason. In Graham Greene's terminology, this would mean the tension between history and a-history. Time has turned the characters into its orphans, who can only wait, over and over again, feeding on the illusion of an end-to-come.

## Theological inbetweenness: *deus absconditus*

The theological debate and its many paradoxes, founded on eschatological paradigms, is obviously central to the novel, and account for this sense of incompleteness and expectancy. All characters, mainly the priest and the lieutenant are the helpless, however responsible, victims of the tension between abandonment and salvation, solitude and togetherness, matter and spirit, life in this world and life in the other world, death as an end and death as a renewed beginning. Here again, the theological situation of the characters is double and divided - creatures of God abandoned by God – and their intermediariness is all the more increased, dangling as they are in total disorientation. As a matter of fact, the novel is haunted not by godlessness but by the absence of God. God is present in the erasure of the signs of His presence, as early as the first page when Mr Tench walks "past the Treasury which had once been a church" (1). In chapter 2, the police make their way "past the back wall of a ruined church" (14) and the barracks are "up the hill near what had been a cathedral" (48). Flashbacks and references to the past project the characters and the reader into a spiritual chasm between a lost continent and a promised land. Rituals and liturgical ceremonies have lost their function on account of the poor conditions in which they are performed, they are debased, symbolic functions are degraded, sacraments are simulacra of sacraments and there is no hope of crossing over to God. The priest's words no longer perform his symbolic mediation, they are *wanting*, just as he is. This also accounts for the double nature of the

priest's itinerary, seen as a reenactment of Christ's passion but in such an explicit and often contrived way that it is felt to be a desecrating pastiche, just as if Greene was undermining his own attempt at establishing a true spiritual progress. The priest's purposefulness and determination are paradoxically inseparable from his awareness of his own worthlessness and corruption, exactly as all the characters are seen caught between hope and despair, simultaneously struggling for a meaningful life and falling victim to an unstoppable process of decay. So much so that the sense of the divine and the saintly is constantly undermined by a sense of helplessness and hopelessness, two poles between which the characters try to find a way to go on living but actually err.

This theological hesitancy is exemplified by the central narrative tension between the story of the priest and the lieutenant on the one hand and the story which Luis's mother tells the children on the other hand. The latter runs through the whole text as a powerful counterpoint to the main story which we are repeatedly reminded of. This creates a complex network of echoes involving the characters, the narrator, the author and the reader, and forming a dialectical movement between, basically, two narrative stances, two trains of thought, made to hinge on a central, abysmal blank to be filled. In other words, the story of Juan, another priest, acts as a metafictional mirror to the story of the whisky priest, for all the contrasts we may establish between them. Through an almost similar series of trials and ordeals, condensed by the mother's story, Juan reaches an apotheosis of glory, he admittedly is a "hero of the faith" who can "call Viva el Cristo Rey" (218) and even leaves a relic, the exact opposite of the whisky priest. However fragmented – or precisely *because* it is fragmented – Luis's mother's text functions as a leading thread, straight, explicit, carefully framed by its own audience, the row of little girls and boys, while the main story is unframed, sinuous and even tortuous. The reading of one narrative cannot be separated from the reading of the other in a kind of dialogic relationship. This, as it is, creates a third, secret, interposed text, in between the first two, acting as a palimpsest would, unsaid, unavowed, or rather, not yet said and avowed, at equal distance between Juan's straightforward heroic walk to his death and the almost ludicrous insignificance of the priest's unheroic death. To Juan's defiant call of "Viva el Cristo Rey" (218), there corresponds in the whisky priest "nothing [...] except a word that sounded like 'Excuse'" (215). In between, there opens a space of becoming, a space which has always already been there, but actually opens at the very moment when three knocks on the door are heard by the child-reader.

The very end of the novel brings no end to this obsessive intermediariness and to the dialogism at work throughout the text. For what could have been the last word is missing, corroborating the idea that the novel fundamentally functions and revolves around a blank, leaving all episodes, facts and characters dangling in rarefied air so to speak. The lack of the priest's name, or rather the reduction of his identity to his function ("My name is Father –", 220), a function spontaneously acknowledged by Luis who rushes to kiss his hand, indicates the erasure of individuality and finiteness, and the opening of another space, limitless, spaceless, timeless, a space of becoming.

Not a single page is devoid of this radical, almost magnetic pull which keeps away from the two extremities seen as two kinds of refuge in given certainties. The whole of the writing maintains at a distance the terms of the various tensions at work. Its strategy is to strike a balance between fiction and historicity and, as such, it rhetorically develops between the profusion of metaphors and comparisons on the one hand, and the profusion of metonymies on the other hand<sup>2</sup>. The characters are so heavily stereotyped that they can be reduced to concise images frequently repeated, such as the glint of a holster (the lieutenant), carious teeth (Mr Tench), a brandy bottle (the priest) and snake-like fangs (the half-caste) – all metonymies

<sup>2</sup> This issue is enlighteningly analyzed in Christian Gutleben, *Graham Greene: The Power and the Glory*, Paris, Atlande (2007), 111-125.

– but these are associated with expanding images or metaphors, supported by hypallages – the blending of categories – again in a twofold movement, both centrifugal and centripetal. Greene does not privilege one or the other and this creates a certain ontological confusion. As a matter of fact, there emerges between concreteness and abstraction an undecidable space of writing and, as a consequence, of meaning. Meaning is constantly suspended between these two poles, metonymy and metaphor, realism and symbolism, mimetism and fictionalism. This is why discontinuity rules supreme and the actual reading can only take place in the various interstices and intervals somewhere between the three narratives, that of the whisky priest, that of little Juan and that of Greene writing, at the intersection of a process aiming at coherence, a constructive process, and a deeper process, a quest, thriving on fragmentation.

“I am meant to miss it” (11), says the priest about the ship he could have taken to escape if a small boy had not asked him to come and see his sick mother. Paradoxically, we are informed a little later that he would have been caught aboard the ship where he was expected, he would have been caught anyway. Can the priest ever escape the situation he is thrown into, between an “I” and an “it”, between being a subject and becoming an object? Can he escape his status of “being meant” and enter the status of “meaning”? What is that force which seems to act between the lines of the text? God? Fate? Chance? The expected intervention of God’s grace or mercy after one has proved to be worthy of it? Are we not all in a position to have to choose between the power and the glory or are the two terms synonymous? Or between the visibility of our actions and the invisibility of what we aim for? Biographers would say that this is also Greene’s own personal situation in his attempt to find justification for, and solid evidence of, his conversion.

The drama of inbetweenness is the drama of writing: no final interpretation is allowed, since this would be illusory. It is the drama of the elusiveness of the final word, for ever unattainable but always to be aimed at in constant self-questioning. The drama of writing rests upon its inevitably incomplete power and its pretentious, pretended glory.

## About the last paragraph of the novel

“Yes”, he said gently. “My name is Father –” But the boy had already swung the door open and put his lips to his hand before the other could give himself a name. (p.220)

The anonymity of the second priest – which duplicates that of the whisky-priest – has been much commented upon, but one of its main functions is thrown into light by the structure of the last paragraph. Indeed, the paragraph develops between the dash which follows the word “Father” and emphasizes the absence of a word, and the very last word of the novel, which is the noun ‘name’, which ironically and emphatically highlights what has just been missing in the text. The lack of a (Christian?) name means that the priest is seen not as an individual, but in his institutional function, and that his name is irrelevant when considered beside the role and status he has in the world. Identity is immaterial especially in this God-forsaken world; what counts is the priest as a signifier.

This is the reason why, at the moment he is just about to give his name and become an individual, expatiating upon what he had started to say, “I am a priest”, he is interrupted by Luis’s spontaneous recognition of *what* - not *who* - he is, the young boy’s mysterious, *immediate* realization of his function. The boy immediately grasps the significance, the meaning of the man he is suddenly facing, regardless of any identity or name he might have. The concessive connective “but” clearly reveals that any name given would be useless, if not a debasement of the function. What matters is that he is a Father, full stop.

This, as a matter of fact, most closely ties in with the problematics of rituals and liturgical ceremonies as presented by Greene in the whole novel. It appears that, however maimed the rites might be, however corrupted, insufficient and adulterated the ritual symbolic objects for



the communion, confession and mass might prove to be (the wine, the bread, the holy books), what matters is the persistence of the *forms* and the *formal* quality of the rites. Indeed, when the priest says to Maria: "You mustn't be superstitious. That was simply - wine. There's nothing sacred in wine" (76), it means that the value of the ritual has nothing to do with the materiality and essence and even the symbolism of the wine *as such* and that that value rests upon the effectuation, the practice, the performance of the rituals, based as they are on the doctrine and dogma which found them. Hence, in this perspective, the necessary, symbolic anonymity of the performer of the ritual, whose identity would almost work as a screen to his performative quality and thus can easily be erased. This is what young Luis, who felt so bored when having to listen to the oversimple and religious story of Juan, spontaneously understands when he rushes to kiss the priest's hand.