



The “Law of Flight” –
Escapology versus Eschatology in *The Power and the Glory*
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The "Law of Flight" - Escapology versus Eschatology in *The Power and the Glory*

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Cet article cherche à montrer la prégnance du motif de la fuite dans *The Power and the Glory*. Parallèlement à l'intrigue policière et morale, Graham Greene décline la fuite sous tous aspects sémantiques, de l'écoulement des humeurs à la dissipation du sens, en passant par la porosité de l'espace. La fuite fait littéralement avancer le récit, elle en est son principe directeur, sa loi. L'esquisse d'une eschatologie à la fin du roman peut se lire comme une tentative pour mettre un terme à cette dérive généralisée. Toutefois, la *fugitivité* du texte l'emporte face à toute résorption du sens de la fuite en un point de fuite totalisant.

fuite, eschatologie, spatialité, dislocation

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter [...]

Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*

Graham Greene's obsessions are many. David Lodge, among others, provides a useful enumeration in his Columbia essay on Greene: among the typically depressing Greeneian themes and motifs, such as death, sin, seediness, treachery, etc, "there is his obsession with the theme of pursuit, of the relationship between hunter and hunted [...]" (Lodge, 9-10). And yet, despite the proliferation of obsessions that underlie Greene's œuvre, we can find a great thematic unity or semantic coherence: every theme (using the term in the rather loose sense Lodge gives to it) is somehow related to the other, so that Greeneland is essentially made of "associative clusters" (Watts, 153). Yet, depending on the critical angle adopted (Greene as religious novelist, Greene as writer of thrillers, Greene as moralist...), some obsessions will be stressed at the expense of others; similarly, one dimension of a reciprocal theme like "the pursuit" will prevail according to focalization. In fact, Greene's own study of a theme is never wholly, let alone equally, dual as he always privileges one viewpoint over others. Reciprocity might be handy when it comes to describing Greene's work systematically but it fails to be exact as far as individual texts are concerned. Genericity naturally plays a part in Greene's choices: thus a detective novel will side with the "hunter" (as is partly the case with *Brighton Rock* where Ida Arnold plays the role of the detective) whereas a work like *The Power and the Glory* written in the wake of the religious persecutions in Mexico by a Catholic author is expected to follow the viewpoint of the "hunted". Unsurprisingly, the inspiration for the book may have come from the actual flight of a priest who managed to escape detection by the authorities: "Every priest was hunted down or shot, except one who existed for ten years in the forests and the swamps, venturing out only at nights" (*The Lawless Roads*, 102). For all the reasons aforementioned, not to mention the fact that Greene, whether in life or art, seems to show a stronger preference for strategies of evasion than of pursuit (the title of his second autobiographical volume, *Ways of Escape* is a real give-away), it seems that *flight* rather than *pursuit* dictates *The Power and the Glory*, while "the relationship between hunter and hunted"

appears as a minor aspect of the theme. This relationship illustrated by the various encounters with the mestizo and the lieutenant momentarily holds in check the priest's escape, with the exception of the last episode in Chiapas where the priest agrees to follow the mestizo in order to give Calver the last rites. As for the few passages centred on the lieutenant or the mestizo in the absence of the priest, they cannot act as balanced, reversed images of the priest's escape: they are just glimpses of the theme of pursuit. At best the relationship between hunter and hunted puts the flight into a biblical, psychological or ideological perspective (although one might find this aspect of the novel a bit too explanatory or didactic). But it does not sustain the narrative or the writing as the *motif* (that which imparts motion) of *flight* does. Escape almost literally propels the novel along. Against this general drift, this narrative racing out which affects all areas of experience, including language, the novel tries several types of arrest, either provided by the plot or by the composition itself. For the art of escape or escapology in *The Power and the Glory* inevitably raises the question of finality.

Flight as Narrative Mainspring

Many characters in Greene's novel are on the run. When he is not running away from the authorities, the Greeneian character is a "creature of flight", marked by distance or disappearance. Hence, the Western man in *The Power and the Glory* does not depart from the archetypal white man of colonial novels: he is an uprooted creature who has fled from his country of origin to seek fortune (Tench, Captain Fellows) or to escape military service (Mr Lehr). The main protagonist alone summarizes all the semantic implications of *flight*: an exile in his own country, separated from his diverse families (Carmen, Concepción, the village, i.e. respectively, his birthplace, his parish and the place where his daughter Brigitta lives), "divided" between two languages (Spanish and English), the priest spends most of his time fleeing. The opening *in medias res* which exposes him in the act of escaping is, of course, justified by the preexistence of repressive laws in force in Tabasco. As such, the starting point of the plot appears as the continuation of a series of flights started five or six years before the story begins (see "his periodic attempts at escape" [57]). While the Mexican revolution is almost finished (historians usually date its end from 1929, i.e., the end of the Cristero wars) at the time when Greene's fictional story begins, the governor of Tabasco, Garrido Canabal, continues the religious persecutions started under Calles' presidency in 1924. From 1931 to 1935 when he was himself driven into exile, Canabal's militia men burnt down the churches, pursued and executed every churchman in town. In the fictional version of Tabasco, the prohibition of alcohol adds further to anticlericalism, which makes the whisky priest doubly guilty in the eyes of the law. Some narrative developments build on this twofold criminality. In part II, chapter 2 the priest travelling under cover is arrested for illegal possession of *spirits* (the narrator uses the pun over and over again with relish). Greene's literary skill consists in making use of history (here Canabal's prohibition) for the purpose of entertainment, in which the reader's expectancies must be confounded in order to maintain the suspense of the hunt. Thus, alcohol condemns *and* saves the priest from the police. Wine or whisky unmasks the priest ("He was a bad priest, he knew it. They had a word for his kind - a whisky priest" [57]) as it conceals him from the authorities. Yet, Greene transcends the paradox as the priest, at least in this passage, is not guilty of intemperance: he has come to the state capital only to carry on with his office and his quest for alcohol is solely motivated by the sacerdotal needs of the Eucharist: "what he wanted now was wine. Without it he was useless" (80). Despite the elliptical, ambivalent phrasing (these could be the words of a drunkard – which, ironically, they are), the priest is not guilty of indulgence, as opposed to other times in the narrative when he yields to alcohol (part I, chapters 1, 3; part III, chapters 1, 2, 4). Here, the priest's actions result from circumstances outside his will: his purchase has led him right into the lion's den, where the very people who should act as censors (the governor's cousin and the

jefe) turn out to be irresistible tempters. So alcohol is something which both inhibits and triggers evasion in the novel.

If one examines the main phases of the storyline (initial situation, problem, rising action, climax, denouement), one notices that flight is the principal motor of narrative: first, flight impels the plot (the priest originally plans to escape aboard the General Obregon), then the priest's departure from the port justifies the deferring of flight (Luis's family summons the priest to their place under a false pretext in order to save him from arrest on the boat), and finally, the hope of escaping persecution sends the priest on the lawless roads of Tabasco and Chiapas. The priest's several attempts at evasion are sanctioned by two arrests and a final execution, in other words by that "law of flight" (48) which, Luis tells his father, inevitably sentences fugitives to death. Like other episodes involving Luis's pious family, the boy's account of his children's war games has a definitive metatextual ring to it. The return to a final state of equilibrium in the denouement appears quite precarious as another priest, also visibly on the run, takes over. The narrative logic based on flight undoubtedly underlines the novel's affinities with detective or spy fiction.

While structuring the narrative and conferring pace to it, flight also helps to define a semiotic approach to the story. The latter can be reduced to the quest for an object (the freedom to officiate) by a subject (the priest). The obstacles inherent in any quest are constituted by opponents (the Red Shirts, the lieutenant, the jefe, the mestizo or natural elements such as the rain, the marshes, or even sin) that the subject fights with helpers (Mr Tench, Luis's family, the Fellows, the Lehrs, the villagers). The origin of the quest (the sender) and its goal concern the subject, if not other *actants* - Coral, Tench, Luis have been somehow converted by the priest. At this point, however, the reduction of the story and its characters to a semiotic model poses some difficulties. If pursuit is substituted for flight as a narrative programme, the identity of senders and receivers is rather clear: the governor, through the jefe, is the sender of the quest destined to the Revolution at large and the Indians in particular. However, in the reversed programme, the origin and the destination of the quest remain open. These remain a mystery – no doubt a religious mystery as strongly suggested by the text - reinforced by the numerous ellipses in the narrative. For whom and to what does the priest escape? That is the text's fundamental interrogation, beyond the priest's Hamlettian question (*to flee or not to flee*). The moral significance of the priest's flight follows on from this interrogation and the possible answers to it: is the priest a coward, like the runaway soldier who deserts his post? Or does flight correspond to a moral imperative (God condemns suicide) and / or to a missionary duty (the Church needs representatives on earth, etc.) from which the priest cannot escape? The identity of the receivers is as uncertain: does the priest's death serve a purpose? And if it does, which one? "Somebody had determined that from now on, he would be left alone" (146).

Before examining the teleological dimension of the narrative, we would like to point out, once more, the narrative fertility of the motif, its omnipresence which sometimes carries the logic, the law of flight, to absurd extremes. Thus, instead of interrupting the flight, obstacles become its best auxiliary as in the aborted evasion by boat. Elsewhere, the direction of flight becomes inverted, turning the pursued into a pursuer. This type of reversal is common and partly explains the strange loop drawn by the trajectory of the runaway. In order to evade his enemies and cover his tracks, the priest turns back and follows the soldiers in part II, chapter 1: "he was travelling in the actual track of the police" (80). If God is the object of all pursuits (that of believers and revolutionaries), a theological reading of the novel makes him the great pursuer who drives the sinner back to grace and redemption, as in Francis Thompson's religious poem, 'The Hound of Heaven'. The title (*The Labyrinthine Ways*) under which *The Power and the Glory* first appeared in the United States is a direct quote from Thompson's verse and indirectly points to the fugitive quality of the priest's journey ('The Hound of

Heaven', written from the viewpoint of the pursued, describes a long desperate flight). Yet, the strangest inflections in the logic of flight occur in part II, chapter 4. Back at the Fellows' plantation to find food and shelter, the priest surprises an Indian woman and its dead baby. Starting with a comment from the priest on the nomadism of Indians ("these more or less savage encampments were temporary only" [148]) and the apparent disorder of their flight ("this was more like flight, from force or disease" [*ibid.*]), the text stages a strange ballet in which the two characters play hide and seek, dodging and chasing each other by turns: "she fled [...] towards the forest [...] he made no movement to follow her [...] she was following him at distance [...] he walked on [...] he saw the woman making back towards the forest" (*ibid.*). In fact, the spinning out of control of flight may be seen as the result of a larger fugitivity at work in the diegesis.

The Flight of Signifiers

If the motif of flight "escapes" the frame of the plot and becomes a leitmotif, the fault partly lies with God. "Abandonment", the forsaking of men by God, is the metaphysical equivalent, the divine translation, of flight as a narrative mainspring. God has fled Tabasco ("the godless state", as Greene calls it in *The Lawless Roads*); similarly, men have retreated from him (Padre José, the lieutenant). God's absence has repercussions on the very functioning of language. Basically, his withdrawal means the end of referentiality. Since the revolution, language like the peso has become a devalued currency (43). Prayers no longer mean anything (150) and all references to religion have become empty formulas (3 and *passim*). The word "catholic" is now but "an expression" (4) whose meaning ("universal, all-embracing") precisely underlines the ineffectuality of language when faced with a lack of precise reference. Some words lose their capacity for meaning either because of too much figurativity or, on the contrary, too much literalism (see, for instance, the examples of *father* and *grace* [73, 75, 78, 93]). Misunderstandings based on *double entendre* blur communication (as in Mr Tench and the priest's exchange in part I, chapter 1) and contribute to language's inadequacy. The loss of linguistic harmony also affects the narrator's language, as in the litany-wise repetitions which tend to anaesthetize meaning instead of revealing it. Another form of linguistic dissipation lies in Greene's taste for the simile and the syllepsis, and their incrementing, adjunctive effect, although as Christian Gutleben convincingly argues, they aim at opposite textual strategies (Gutleben, 2007 b.). Language in *The Power and the Glory* is like a gigantic, useless leak as suggested by the triple comparison between the mestizo's unstoppable speech, an "oil-gusher" and the "religious sense in man": "a black fountain spouting out of the marshy useless soil and flowing away to waste" (94).

Space also bears the marks of such dereliction; traces of the former world are progressively eaten away by the "progress" of historical time: "the last survivors of a world which was dying out" (152). The carious mouths and "horrors and degradations" (8) depicted in the inaugural chapter show a world ruled by entropy. Flight is not just a defining motion in the narrative but the main attribute, the principal condition of Greeneland. It is a disease, the symptom of a forsaken world. From Mr Tench's memories which vanish in the chloroformed clouds of forgetfulness (2) to the hope of little Anita's family at the cemetery "peter[ing] out" after José's refusal to say a prayer (45), to the indifference of Luis's father (48), all human emotions undergo a slow erosion. The particle *out* added to verbs such as *peter*, *drain*, *die* underlines the mixing in of flight at all textual levels. There is a dissolution, almost a liquefaction of the human in the face of godlessness: "the routine of his life was like a dam cracked and forgetfulness came dribbling through, wiping out this and that" (57). Leakage or porosity may be the key feature of Greeneian seediness. Indeed, space is fundamentally porous in *The Power and the Glory*. Gaps, holes prevent hermetic sealing between the inside and the outside, as in the roofs which cannot stop the rain (151); frontiers are erased: "there

was no visible boundaries between one state and another" (152); the blurred contours between the private and the public spheres exemplify unwholesome oozings. Thus, the village and more generally the novel's narrative space function like panopticons in which the priest's sinful intimacy is laid bare at all times. The body also appears as a space without clear limits: toes protrude from worn canvas shoes, teeth fall, breaths exhale spirits, blood escapes from Coral's pubescent belly (50). Menses obviously connote the sacrifice of Christ, so that the choice of Coral as the sacrificed innocent virgin to play the role of intercessor in the priest's dream is highly suggestive. Actually, haemorrhaging can be read as a positive sign of the governor's failure to eradicate Catholicism. Despite the flight of the clergy to Chiapas and Mexico City, the priest still performs his office and manages to "contaminate" the sceptics and the atheists by his sheer obstinacy. When flight designates the escape of a fluid from confinement (whether literally or figuratively) rather than the action of fleeing or disappearing, the idea of communication, of passage, of uniting rather than dispersing sometimes prevails. If one leaves aside the nature of the priestly office (which participates in the *binding* work of religion), this is exactly what the priest -that all-purpose clad man, now dressed in a city suit, now in peon's clothes -achieves. Within the narration, the idea of smuggling, of travelling unnoticed is illustrated by the various apparitions of the priest externally focalized. "[A] voice", "a stranger", "the man in the drill suit", etc. form as many go-betweens, handovers, transitional points from one scene to another in the fragmentary montage of the narrative. These anonymous markers may also be seen as tentative breakaways from the divine panopticon and the eschatological discourse to which the narrative appears to be anchored.

Vanishing Points and Lines of Flight

To Marie-Françoise Allain, Greene confided that he had to substitute the first personal pronoun for the impersonal pronoun in which he had initially written his autobiographical volume, *Ways of Escape* (1980), admitting that this was "a way of escaping from myself" (Allain, 21). This "escaping from oneself" is immediately associated by Allain to a propensity for dissimulation, which Greene partly tempers with his desire for privacy. The link between escape and camouflage is visible in *The Power and the Glory*. His change of clothes allows the priest to travel without arousing suspicion. Naturally, he will have to give up his borrowed garments and more generally his mortal skin to become a saint. Clothes are not the only refuge, the only "escape hatch" at the protagonist's disposal. The bottle of whisky forms another way out. The priest takes flight in alcohol as Mr Tench uses ether, mainly to assuage physical and moral suffering, that "little additional pain" recurring at regular intervals in the text. At the same time, alcohol occupies an ambivalent position in the novel, as it both leads the priest off the straight and narrow and is necessary for his office. Moreover, if alcohol provides the priest with a cheap artificial paradise, it also clings to him: hence the difficulty to escape from oneself through that which condemns you back to it. Here lies perhaps the deeper meaning of the daring comparison between brandy and damnation (173). Intoxication is not the only form of escapism in the text. Reading and dreaming also create motionless escapes. The hagiographic account of Juan's martyr embodies the Mexican "opium of the people" which puts consciences and little children to sleep. Literature also constitutes an evasion from the prison of the real. Thus Tennyson's poem, 'The Brook', extracted from Coral's anthology of English poetry, promises, like books in general, a better world: "It was almost like a promise [...] of better things to come" (144). Its beautiful imagery admittedly contrasts with the atmosphere of heat and death in the narrative. Yet, the aesthetic escapade made up by this antinomic *mise en abyme* (Gutleben, 2007 a., 115) is rejected by the priest as a dead end: "It was a very obscure poem, full of words which were like Esperanto. He thought: So this is English poetry: how odd [...] The triteness and untruth of "for ever" shocked him a little"

(145). The priest certainly cannot conceive of a nature empty of God's presence and untainted by original sin (Gutleben, 2007 a., 116).

In fact, the only possible and acceptable way out resides in salvation, which itself can only occur in death as the priest's premonitory dream intimates through the pun on "Morse" (part III, chapter 4). If he wants to escape, the priest must give in to grace. For that, he has to take off the "cape" which conceals him from others (the verb "escape" comes from the Old French "chappe" for mantle); he must take off the fugitive dress but also unfrock, that is leave the comfortable Pharisaic priestly habit to put on the martyr's dress. The priest's incursion into Chiapas constitutes a sort of preliminary step to his existential skin-shedding, the religious *kenosis* evoked by Catherine Lanone (although she reserves the term of *kenosis* for the prison scene [Lanone, 85-86]). Flight becomes synonymous of the effacement of geographical (154) and human landmarks: "he has escaped too completely from men now" (156). Only divine intervention, a providential stroke of lightning can put a stop to the drift of sin.

The *coup de grâce* (a pun which was probably at the back of Greene's mind) is finally brought about by the fugitive execution of the priest. This ultimate episode in the priest's career can be seen as the vanishing point where all the parallel lines formed by the destinies of the bystanders converge in the last two chapters. As in classical perspective, the geometry of the narrative seems to result in the production of an image built according to a central perspective. Central perspective is characterized by the existence of a vanishing point, that is a point of convergence where parallel lines meet across the picture plane, which is itself the product of a pyramidal projection from a visual, organizing centre situated outside the painting. This analogy between Greene's text and classical painting is fruitful in many respects. First, it underlines the artificial construction of teleology in the novel: in the same way as artificial perspective (*perspectiva artificialis*) (re)produces an idealised image of vision, *The Power and the Glory* aims at a divine, eschatological vision but in a constrained way, which betrays Greene's loathing of didacticism. Unlike Juan's story, his *martyrology* is far from triumphant. However, the redirection of flight towards spiritual closure may be seen as an attempt to achieve what language has so far failed to do: the adequacy with a stable referent, the production of univocal meaning. So that in retrospect escapology in *The Power and the Glory* could be read as secretly governed by eschatology. The messianic coda added to the end of the priest's journey through the parousic manifestation of another priest would only highlight this eschatological dimension.

The externality of the main viewer in artificial perspective has an equivalent in the absence of God from the diegesis, which justifies the combination of divine omniscience and seeming indifference at work in the novel. These variations in scale relative to the viewer's position are best exemplified in the alternation of distant, "estranged" focalization (*the man in the drill suit*) and intimacy with the focalized (*the priest said, he thought*), which illustrate God's aloofness and sympathy for mankind. Similarly, only a "divine" arranger could embrace the "architectural duality" (Gutleben, 2007 b., 61) of the novel's composition (choral narration in part I and part IV versus solo narration in part II and part III). However, the reader should remain alert to the existence of other forces running opposite theological resolution which turn flight into a pursuit and life into martyrdom. To take up the analogy with painting, the composition of the text as a triptych slightly disturbs an eschatologically vectorized reading. Indeed, the central panel is the one where the "real action" is supposed to take place, as opposed to the smaller side-panels which flank it. The absence of closure which characterizes the trajectories of the bystanders contributes to displacing the end, in the same way as the succinct, almost offhand riddance of the priest somehow reduces its import. As for the seriously parodic second coming of the last page, it is riddled with the ambiguity of repetitions and rehearsals, in which the origin seems irretrievably lost. Beware of the "night thief" as the Gospel says.

Does that mean that closure occurs elsewhere, preferably at the centre of the triptych? The scene on the empty plateau scattered with primitive crosses, at the foot of which the Indian woman lays her dead child, is an implicit rewriting of the Golgotha. It also evokes the last judgement at the end of times “when the graves open[ed] and the dead walk[ed]” (153). But no miracles occur, as the priest remarks disappointingly. The “short cut to the dark magical heart of the faith” is short-lived. The deterritorialized scene of Passion and eschatology escapes any attempt at reterritorialization (see also Lanone for her stimulating Deleuzian reading of the passage [Lanone 104-6]). Whereas the priest's flight threatens to sink back into a familiar, theological pattern, the Indian embodies the flight without reconfiguring it. Although the figure of the Indian in the text appears as a clichéd, colonial construct, it gathers many of the features associated by Deleuze with the “line of flight”: Indians behave unexpectedly (“You could never tell with Indians” [147]), constantly slip out of your grasp (“creatures who looked as if they had come out of the Stone Age, who withdrew again quickly” [*ibid.*]), they wear “evasive faces” (*ibid.*), have “something animal or bird-like” (*ibid.*) about them. Since the European invasion and the introduction of alien diseases, their flight has been rendered impossible, as they now carry “the sickness with them” (148). However, their (limited) nomadism proves to be the best illustration of the line of flight. To flee is not exactly to travel or to move, says Deleuze in *Dialogues*. The Nomads are not migrants nor travellers but follow an on-the-spot line of flight [Deleuze, 49]. The nomadic Indian plagued by sickness can be seen as a counterpart of the escapee plagued by sin, but contrary to him, this flight escapes the cartography of theology as well as of revolution (the Indians remain in the background of a revolution which was initially meant for them). As such the Indian is a true Deleuzian hero, whose line of flight makes the systems leak. The culmination of the central panel in Greene's triptych certainly resides in this encounter with the Indian and provides, in place of a vanishing point, an interesting line of flight in a novel torn between meaningless persecution and meaningful sacrifice.

As we have just seen, the text is reluctant to suspend flight and to resorb it into a vanishing point. As for the line of flight, it not only creates open deviations in the path of the fugitive but also helps dis-locate the end. So the “law of flight” which rules *The Power and the Glory* is anything but an eschatology. Escapology does not finish with eschatology. It is somehow tautological: flight leads to flight and the points of departure (persecution) and arrival (martyrdom) of the protagonist's flight become contingent in the face of the text's overall fugitivism. All that seems to matter for a writer for whom literature was “the escaper's royal road” (Allain, 25) is the flight. In retrospect, the epigraph's stress on the pursuit is misleading : it is the flight, not the chase one should celebrate, as the Anglican Panther says to the Catholic Hind: “And whate'er tales of Peter's chair you tell,/ Yet, saving reverence of the miracle, The better luck was yours to 'scape so well” (Dryden, 1687, Part 2, l. 10-17)

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