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The Not So Abject Bestiary? A Study of Animals in *The Power and the Glory*

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On associerait volontiers la présence animale dans *The Power and the Glory* à la notion de Greeneland, à l'ombre de la mort et à l'abjection. Toutefois la récurrence obstinée des références animales et le décalage marqué avec leur traitement au sein de *The Lawless Roads* suggère d'autres interprétations. Non seulement les animaux jouent un rôle structurant dans l'économie du roman mais ils l'ancrent dans une riche intertextualité biblique. Par son ambivalence symbolique et au travers d'une forme de clair-obscur sémiotique, le bestiaire greenien fait écho à la thématique de la Création et à sa place dans le mystère catholique de la Rédemption.

bestiaire, Greeneland, abjection, intertextualité biblique, Rédemption

"… [T]he contradictions of our contemporary philosophy do perhaps coincide with those of our body, irreducibly partaking of and divided between animality and humanity" (Agamben, 25). The opening commentary of Giorgio Agamben's essay on the place of animals in our post-modern society highlights the centrality of a theme, which is currently placed in focus by a number of publications, exhibitions and a general awareness of the frailty of the environment[1]. In this respect, reading the bestiary in *The Power and the Glory* raises the issue of reception. Indeed, compared to the late thirties, our tewenty-first century is most probably characterised by a greater alienation from the world of animals, at least in the western world. The very fact that the autumn 2007 exhibition at the Halle de la Villette in Paris, "Of Beasts and Men", chose as one of its main headings to state that "animals are aliens to men"[2] is representative of this growing estrangement in which our relation to animals is increasingly mediated by machines, art or circuits of consumption. It is doubtful however that Greene would have had the same relationship to animals. A close reading of the bestiary in *The Power and the Glory* must take into account the specific historical and ideological context of animal representation to uncover the relevant plane or planes of interpretation.

A feat of local colour?

Undeniably, the evocation of animal life contributes together with landscaping to create an "effet de réel". This would have been further substantiated in the readers' minds by the proximity between this novel and Greene's previous travelogue, *The Lawless Roads*. A number of animal scenes were inspired by Greene's travelogue through Mexico, mostly the journey on mule back (TLR 158), the scene of the old man and the rats in the maize store hut

[1] In addition to Agamben (2002), one may cite the works of B. Cyrulnik dir., *Si les lions pouvaient parler. Essais sur la condition animale* (1998), of Françoise Burgat, *Animal, mon prochain* (1997), J.-Y. Goffi, *Le Philosophe et ses animaux. Du statut éthique de l'animal* (1994), Dominique Lestel, *L'Animalité. Essai sur le statut de l'humain* (1996), Müller & Poltier dir., *La Dignité de l'animal. Quel statut pour les animaux à l'heure des technosciences* (2000) ou J. Proust, *Comment l'esprit vient aux bêtes. Essai sur la représentation* (1997).

[2] The exhibition is entitled in French « Bêtes et Hommes » and its sub-section "L'animal est un étranger pour l'homme."

(TLR 131), beetles swarming the hotel before the storm (TLR 26), the presence of vultures on roofs (TLR 143), sharks in the river (TLR 120). Some of the quotations are strikingly similar such as the comparison between the ubiquitous mosquitoes and sewing machines (TLR 121).[3]

But the abundance of animal life suggests more than just background sketching: animal characters appear more than sixty times in the span of the novel, thus on average every four pages, to be compared with less than thirty occurrences for 271 pages in the travelogue. Some prominent animals in *The Lawless Roads*, such as chicken and turkeys, are clearly less in focus in the novel and striking animal scenes featuring in *The Lawless Roads* (the freak show, the zoo, the flea travesties) are left out entirely.

References to animal characters in *The Power and the Glory*

Mules	13 quotes	10; 13; 49; 56; 58; 80; 82; 83; 85; 95; 99;158; 172
Vultures	11 quotes	1;3;6;11; 14; 29; 44; 73; 81; 142; 215
Mosquitoes	8 quotes	65; 85; 86; 88; 89; 120; 127; 167
Beetles	7 quotes	19; 23; 47; 104; 111; 113; 167
Rats	6 quotes	28; 29; 37; 38; 39; 40
Dogs	5 quotes	16; 60; 140; 148; 172
Pigs	3 quotes	37; 71; 75
Monkeys	3 quotes	26; 85; 156
Alligators	2 quotes	26; 49
Snakes	2 quotes	156; 160
Horse	2 quote	70
Jaguar	1 quote	85
Shark	1 quote	2

Moving from travelogue to fiction usually entails some editing of the material and most notably a rewriting of characters, men or beasts. But one cannot help but notice the un-Mexican character of Greene's bestiary. He chose to focus on mules, mosquitoes, beetles and vultures but these are common in every tropical country and may also be found in Europe, together with pigs and dogs. In very few instances does he refer in the novel to specifically South American animals: a jaguar is quoted once (85), monkeys twice (85, 156) like alligators (26, 49), snakes twice (156, 160). Greene doesn't even refer to the emblems of Mexico, the serpent and the eagle, contrary for instance to Lawrence in *The Plumed Serpent*, which he had read (Sherry, 662). He seems intent to avoid erring on the exotic side, clearly linked in his mind to the escapist attitude of tourists and Americans, which he condemns in *The Lawless Roads* (103, 266). Most animals in *The Power and the Glory* are referred to by generic, English language terms and thereby incorporated into a western point of view. One may argue that Greene strove here to present us with descriptions that were readable, understandable and acceptable to a British audience, capitalizing on the balance between local colour and immediate recognition by his readership, thereby creating a form of westernized, smoothed-out "effet de réel". Such an interpretation is corroborated by the German siblings' attitude towards Mexico:

> The day before he had asked apprehensively, 'Are there no snakes?' and Mr Lehr had grunted contemptuously that if there were any snakes, they'd pretty soon get out of the way. Mr Lehr and his sister had combined to drive out savagery by simply ignoring anything that conflicted with an ordinary Greman-American homestead. (TPTG, 160)

Though superficially present, the exoticism of "Greeneland" is contradicted by the number of discrepancies. What of its seediness?

[3] Reference to page numbers will appear as TLR 20 for page 20 of *The Lawless Roads* and TPTG 20 for page 20 of *The Power and the Glory*.

From seedy to symbolic: the beetle enigma

The novel features more than seven beetle scenes and beetles are also recurring elements in *The Lawless Roads*. Insects are commonly associated with filth, decay, fear and disgust. But, interestingly enough, cockroaches are not mentioned in the novel whereas they people the travelogue and the insect behaviour Greene describes is not coherent, especially in terms of house invasion and light avoidance. The travelogue also mentions various moths, flies, fireflies and worms, as well as cockchafers which is a geographical aberration, cockchafers being a European species (by now extinct). It appears therefore that our beetles more or less conflate a number of insects, creating a category of their own. Greene was certainly no trained entomologist but his choice of reducing the variety of insects he encountered to one genus must be significant.

Catherine Lanone convincingly points out the intertextual quality of the beetle scenes, with echoes of Stein's collection of insects in *Lord Jim*, "a metaphor for his ability to classify people, as he knows the two extremes of humanity, man as a butterfly and man as a beetle", and as a parallel to "Conrad's technique of portraying key secondary characters as beetles" (Lanone, 54). In this line of interpretation, the presence of insects underlines the physical and moral seediness of the jefe or the mestizo.

But the meaning of beetles is not as clear-cut as it seems. For instance they are equated in the travelogue with teeming life, what Greene describes as "the horrifying abundance of just life" (TLR, 143), which is a rather more subtle characterisation than just associating them with decay and filth. Moreover he endows them with more abstract semiotic value, as seen in the following quotation: "one night at a Mexican hotel is enough for them – the dingy room, the symbolic dead beetle, and the smell of urine" (TLR, 40). This sentence is a clear incentive to move beyond the literal, referential meaning of the bestiary toward a wider interpretation of the bestiary.

Animals as narrative operators

Opening up our reading of the bestiary, we may turn to their role in the narrative. Catherine Lanone points out their effectiveness in creating "a dynamic sound effect which may be considered as the specific tune of the novel, a staccato rhythm foreshadowing the rifles of the soldiers. Thus they are part of the sound track of the novel, to use a cinematic metaphor, a constant aggression to the senses, reminding the reader of the underlying violence of the world" (Lanone, 28).

Animal characters also enable Greene to give structural rhythm to his narrative, inasmuch as they punctuate a number of crucial scenes, both framing them and dissecting them into separate moments, much like cinema sequences. Again comparing *The Power and the Glory* to *The Lawless Roads* is instructive. For instance the meeting between the priest and the old man in the village (TPTG 38-40) echoes a real-life encounter, which struck Greene as one of the rare positive features of his journey.

> And the luck of the road was not so bad… the rats were there, of course, for the old man's hut was a storehouse for corn, but it contained what you seldom find in Mexico, the feel of human goodness […] The fanged mestizo slipped away – reading out the President's message – all the blarney and the evil will of Mexican townsmen, the decaying church, the vultures, the rubble in Villahermosa, 'we die like dogs'; all that was left was an old man on the edge of starvation living in a hut with the rats, welcoming the strangers without a word of payment, gossiping gently in the dark. I felt myself back with the population of heaven. (TLR, 196). And the luck of the road was not so bad… the rats were there, of course, for the old man's hut was a storehouse for corn, but it contained what you seldom find in Mexico, the feel of human goodness […] The fanged mestizo slipped away – reading out the President's message – all the blarney and the evil will of Mexican townsmen, the

> decaying church, the vultures, the rubble in Villahermosa, 'we die like dogs'; all that was left was an old man on the edge of starvation living in a hut with the rats, welcoming the strangers without a word of payment, gossiping gently in the dark. I felt myself back with the population of heaven. (TLR, 196).

In the novel the scene is extended over three pages and serves as the first example of the strain imposed on the priest and the villagers by anti-Catholic persecution. The passage underlines the moral ambiguities forced upon the characters by the situation – such as having to barter for sacraments – and the emotional confusion between exhaustion and fear on the one side, trust, human contact and fulfilment of one's role on the other. As shown in the following table, not only do rats accompany the unfolding of successive moments of the scene, via the sounds they make, they are also given the role of onlookers and are established as protagonists *per se*, on a par with human beings[4].

1. The priest arrives at the village. p.38	"…in the last unruined hut where maize was stored, an old man and a boy and a tribe of rats."
2. The priest moves into the hut. p.39	"The place was half-filled by a stack of maize, and rats rustled among the dry outer leaves."
3. Waking up after falling asleep. p.39	"He lay on his side perfectly still: a rat watched him from the maize."
4. Beginning of a conversation with the old man. p.39	"The priest began to cough, and the rat moved quickly like the shadow of a hand in the stack."
5. The barter: confession against clothes. p.40	" 'Very well. Begin. I will hear your confession.' The rats scuffled in the maize. 'Go on then.' "
6. Beginning of the confession. p.40	"The priest leant against the wall with his legs drawn up beneath him, and the rats accustomed to the voices moved again in the maize."

The same narrative strategy operates at the hotel where the priest in disguise is seeking wine, but with beetles. Animal presence frames the episode, at its opening (104) and its close (113); it punctuates the setting of the stage (104-105). Beetles reappear at the turning point of the dialogue, when the drama of the wine-drinking scene gives way to the announcement of a manhunt (111). Again we can check their role in the extended scene of the novel against the much shorter relevant mentions in the travelogue. For instance in Villahermosa:

> […] and when the lights come out, so do the beetles: the pavement by the green sour riverside is black with them; you kill them on your bedroom floor, and by morning, as I have said, they have been drained away by more life – the hordes of ants which come up between the tiles at the scent of death or sweetness." (TLR, 144)

As structural rhythm operators, animals repeatedly contribute to the dramatization of the novel. Their narrative function and their association with the theme of destiny suggest further historical and metaphorical value.

The immediate historical context

The experience of a psychoanalytical cure and elements of contemporary Mexican history may indeed have borne upon Greene's relationship to animals. In his biography, Sherry recalls a set of episodes during the anti-Catholic persecutions in Mexico when Catholic governor Canabal "commanded an army of 6 000 men, the Red Shirts, who went burning statues, destroying gravestones, renaming beasts ('a bull would be named God, a donkey Christ, a pig the Pope and the Virgin of Guadalupe represented by a cow')" (Sherry, 706).

[4] Their role as structural rhythm operators finds an interesting echo in the prosody of the text and its poetic potential, as shown by Catherine Pesso-Miquel "The paradoxical poetry of Graham Greene's imagery in *The Power and the Glory*", in *Plus sur Greene*, Paris: Atlande, 2007, 24.

Greene would certainly have heard of such spectacular carnavalesque[5] practices in the course of his investigation. He also was haunted by the conversation he had with a pious Mexican lady just before leaving for the persecuted States, and her statement "We die like dogs" recurs three times in *The Lawless Roads* (131, 196).

This may have inspired the extended confrontation between the whisky priest and the dying mongrel bitch (TPTG 140, 142) in which the frontiers between animality and humanity are crossed several times. Patterns of behaviour are reversed as the dog is ascribed feelings and thoughts ("One associates a dog with action, but this creature, like any crippled human being, could only think. You could see the thoughts – hunger and hope and hatred – stuck on the eyeballs") whereas the priest is reduced to fighting over a bone. The difference in status between man and animal is abolished when the bitch is referred to by the personal pronoun "she" and the priest is driven to negotiate with her. One may also note how both share the same plight of abandonment and repeated trials and how both wish "the old world back". This scene derives much of its dramatic intensity and some of its political and religious meaning from the deliberate blurring of the frontier between man and animal.

Such a complex interplay between man and animal would have been coherent with Greene's experience of psychoanalysis and dream interpretation. Following his six-month cure with a Jungian practitioner in 1920, Greene would have been aware of the function animals often play in dreams as displaced images of relatives or human beings. The boy's dream of a basket of bleeding fish in association with the death of the priest on the last page of the novel is therefore not only an allusion to Christ's miracle of the bread and fishes but also to the sufferings of the faithful, i.e. the Mexican people. But can we assume, based on this example, that the function of animals throughout the novel is consistently allegorical?

Medieval intertextuality: the model of the fable?

Since Greene himself linked *The Power and the Glory* to medieval morality plays, echoes of the medieval Christian bestiaries are plausible. Animals played a considerable role in Christian instruction in the Middle Ages, be it in the form of sculptures on the pillars of churches or through fables. In the "Fable" article of the Encyclopaedia Universalis, Marc Soriano underlines their educational value: "Throughout the medieval period, animal tales served a dual purpose. People still told them in their original form at countryside vigils but Christianised versions, on the model of the parabola, appeared to back preaches with exempla".[6] However the pedagogical and moral value of animals in the fables is not entirely coherent with Greene's approach since one could hardly find moral epilogues to the animal episodes in *The Power and the Glory*, nor a clear interpretation of their meaning. The complexity of the spiritual journey undertaken by the priest, the ambiguities of the main characters and Greene's emphasis on the limitations of a cheap and simple moralising reading of man's destiny, such as hagiographies and bedtime stories, run contrary to the fable model.

It might be worth turning to Françoise Armengaud's description of the semiotic value of medieval bestiaries:

> The medieval bestiary operates like a language For instance the representation of Christ's baptism in the Jordan River would be juxtaposed to the image of a deer drinking at a fountain and to that of an eagle plunging into water in the Germanic countries. Every animal species may stand either for Christ or Satan, for Good or Evil, by virtue of one of its biographical features or via its properties, be they real or

[5] Such a statement finds an echo in *The Lawless Roads*, together with mentions of the travesty: "The vultures group themselves on the roofs like pigeons: tiny moron heads, long necks, faces like Carnival masks, and dusty plumages, peering this way and that attentively for a death. I counted twenty on one roof. They looked domesticated, as if they were going to lay an egg" (TLR, 143).

[6] "Dans leur forme originale, ils continuent à être racontés aux veillées dans les campagnes ; christianisés, dans le sillage des paraboles, ils se transforment en *exempla*, à l'appui des prêches."

> marvellous. The Tetramorph stands out as a stable compound (as defined in Ezekiel and the Book of Revelations), in a world of never ending emblematic shifts. Animal figures will either point to what is super-human, the divine, or to what is inhuman, the demonic elements being an inversion of the divine. Allegories, which substitute animals to men or to moral entities, appear then to function as a restriction of a wider range of symbolic meaning. The two main features of the medieval bestiary would be its width – since it spans the whole range of animal species – and its fundamental ambivalence – the semantics of each term being equivocal and related to the animal which is its object, be it actual or imaginary, in a wide variety of ways. It would therefore be vain to try to uncover a univocal meaning for a given term out of context".[7]

Ambivalent semantics and constant shifts in man's relation to animals are interesting features of the medieval bestiary that clearly find an echo in *The Power and the Glory*; they also point to the centrality of Biblical imagery.

Biblical intertextuality

Aside from a number of clear-cut references to the Calvary and the New Testament, such as the crowing of cocks before the execution or the journey on a mule, the background for animal symbolism throughout the novel may lie rather with the Old Testament. A number of prominent animal figures in the novel are characterized by their ambivalence in the Bible: the vulture, the mule and the beetle all bear relation to the figure of Christ while also connoting baseness and decay. The beetle is a creeping creature and therefore an abomination (*Leviticus* 11) but stands also as an emblem of resurrection, under the form of the scarab in Egyptian mythology. The mule epitomizes humility and suffering but is also the chosen mount of the great kings of Israel, such as Solomon, whose heir is the Christ. In *Zechariah* 9. 9-10 mules or asses form a diptych with horses, the former representing the victory of peace and the latter the defeat of war: this is consistent with the contrasting figures of the priest, riding on a mule, and the lieutenant, riding on a horse. And while the vulture is unclean since it feeds on carrion, the reference to its keen sight serves to enhance the power of God's vision (*Job* 28.7-10). The ambivalent quality of such animals therefore point to another plane of interpretation, going beyond the moral and allegorical readings to anagogical signification[8]. Within the bounds of Christian exegesis, these are interpreted as signs of the mystery of redemption, in which the glory of God is revealed through suffering and debasement. This reading is substantiated by consultation of Cruden's *Concordance* in which animal references lead us to two texts in particular: chapter 12 in the *Book of Job* and Psalm 22. Both have a thematic similitude with *The Power and the Glory*, i.e. the trials and tribulations of the faithful under the eye of God.

In Psalm 22, animal comparisons contribute to the vividness of the religious narrative, a frequent device throughout the Old Testament. This psalm is usually read as a prophecy of Christ's Calvary and forms a diptych with Psalm 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd…"). Its first part focuses on the state of abjection and animality to which the protagonist has been reduced by hardships and misery: "But I am a worm and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people" (Verse 6). Interestingly, this may apply both to the priest, confronted to God's silence and the persecutions, but also to the mestizo. With its snake-like fangs, the half-caste is reminiscent of the snake as the embodiment of sin and temptation; his grub-like toe links him on the other hand to the figure of the psalmist ("a worm and no man"), who stands as a mirror image of Christ. Other animal images throughout Psalm 22 emphasize the intensity of persecution:

[7] Author's translation from French.

[8] These were common categories of religious exegesis (as found in Scot Erigenus or Saint Thomas Aquinas), summed up in a medieval saying: "the letter teaches history, the allegorical meaning what we must believe, the moral meaning what we must do and the anagogical meaning what we must hope."

> 12. Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round.
> 13. They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and roaring lion. […]
> 16. For dogs have compassed me; the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.

The *Book of Job* also dwells on the theme of persecution and on the trials of faith. In chapter 12, Job underlines God's overwhelming responsibility and calls upon animals to bear witness to his power:

> But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air and they shall teach thee. Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this? In whose hands is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind. (Verses 7-10)

This is preliminary to the evocation of God's power of retribution and punishment (Verses 23-5), which clearly echoes the fate of the whisky priest, but would also be relevant to the character of the lieutenant and to contemporary Mexican governors:

> He increaseth the nations and destroyeth them: he enlargeth the nations and straiteneth them again. He taketh away the heart of the chief of the people of the earth, and causeth them to wander in a wilderness where there is no way. They grope in the dark without light and he maketh them to stagger like a drunken man.

In *The Book of Job*, animals bear witness to the mystery of God's acceptance of evil and hardships, much as vultures, rats and beetles bear testimony to the spiritual tribulations of the whisky priest. Moreover its complex theological debate finds closure in a tribute to Creation, God's answer to Job's plea, and the Book of Job features one whole chapter (39) devoted to the place of animals, listing wild goats, asses, unicorns, peacocks, ostriches, horses and grasshoppers, hawks and eagles.

Elements of Biblical intertextuality therefore point to a very different frame of interpretation from the strict human/animal divide which has been prevalent in France since Descartes and his description of animals as machines. The closely interwoven links between animals and men, both in similes and in narratives, throughout the Old Testament, are to be understood within the mystery of Redemption, in which the whole Creation, men and animals together, suffers and aspires to salvation. Such an interpretation is reinforced in the New Testament, namely in Romans 8, Verses 22-24: "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. For we are saved by hope…"

Building a semiotic chiaroscuro

From characterization to elements of local colour, from rhythm operators to ambivalent symbols and Biblical intertextuality, animals do play a rich and complex partition in *The Power and the Glory*. Maybe the most striking feature of the bestiary would be its extreme versatility, combining elements of the carnavalesque and the grotesque (Father José as a pig or the soldiers as poultry), counterpoints (the rats) and mirror images (the dying bitch), oblique commentaries (stumbling mules) and icons of fate (the vultures). Being alternatively agonists and protagonists, companions, onlookers and enemies, emblems and tokens of the "effet de réel", they set in motion oscillating interpretations and thereby enrich a novel that might have otherwise appeared as a somewhat formulaic parabola of the persecution of Christ. Their shifting shadows, persistently accompanying the main characters, introduce a form of semiotic chiaroscuro through which the drama of Creation and its Redemption unfolds. This would be entirely coherent with the Catholic notion of mystery[9], hinting at a

[9] "To understand mysteries one needs to acknowledge that, underneath the apparent simplicity of the letter, lies a whole range of spiritual meanings ». Edouard Jeauneau, « Mystère », *Encyclopedia Universalis*, version 12, 2007.

wider truth, only accessible to divine intelligence and partially revealed to our senses through a plurality of interpretations.

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