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The time that remains in The Power and the Glory

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Graham Greene situe son roman *The Power and the Glory* (1940) dans la décennie qui suit la révolution mexicaine alors que le dernier prêtre est pourchassé par la police. Cet article s'intéresse à la quête intérieure du prêtre dont les circonstances sont intimement liées au contexte historique de la révolution, tandis que ses états d'âme et son statut de prêtre déterminent une autre temporalité, qui est celle de la foi. La lecture de l'ouvrage de Giorgio Agamben, *Le Temps qui Reste* (Corti, 2000), permet de définir ce temps que dessine le récit de Greene comme une représentation du temps messianique et de proposer ainsi une interprétation de la fin du roman.

contexte historique, temporalité, foi, Agamben, temps messianique

As Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory* opens, and Mr Tench steps onto the plaza, the reader is introduced to far more than just the "blazing Mexican sun and the bleaching dust" (1). Mr Tench's heart is here astir with a "faint feeling of rebellion" (1) contrasting absurdly with the description of radical revolution described subsequently. The narrative emphatically unfolds a tension between a gruesome future for Mr Tench ("he wasn't carrion yet") (1) and allusions to a past which has been radically erased and of which there are no more traces, as the threatening vulture rises and flies "over the tiny plaza, over the bust of an ex-president, ex-general, ex-human being" (1). The "shabby indifference" with which the vulture looks down on Mr Tench is remarkable, not so much because of the disdainful way in which it gazes at the dentist, but rather because it foreshadows the arrival of the stranger, "a small man dressed in a shabby dark city suit" (3) a couple of pages later. The stranger, later better known as the whisky priest, is the last priest to have survived the Mexican revolution. The reader soon learns that he is on the run and that the police have pledged to catch him as soon as possible. It is clear from the very first chapter of the novel, that his arrest and his execution are bound to happen. The suspense that ensues is clearly not "is he going to be caught", but: "when is he going to be arrested and executed?". Hence, although the sentence "he was not carrion yet" is linked to Mr Tench, it sounds premonitory for the protagonist as well. The time in question is the time that remains before the whisky priest is caught and killed. The "yet", is not only premonitory in the story, but it also characterizes the quintessence of the question of time in *The Power and the Glory*. No ether could possibly heal the physical and mental pain and the anguish which almost never leave the whisky priest throughout the novel. When at last he is caught, executed and left on the floor in 'a small heap, the narrative closes on the boy Luis opening the door to a "new" priest: "'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" (220). How could the reappearance of a priest minutes after the whisky priest was executed be interpreted? Hardly one sentence into the novel and time seems to have contracted into the adverb "yet". What is already essential at such an early stage in the narrative is the time that remains until the priest is caught and killed and another priest steps in at dawn. Is it a new cycle beginning? Is the idea of revolution yet again under

way? I will first focus on the idea that the Mexican revolution has thrust the time of history, that of the "world", onto front-stage and that the timeline is represented very much in binary terms with severe lapses of memory as far as the past is concerned. And yet, there are very strong shortcomings in the pre-eminence of historical time. As he attempts to live by the sacraments while escaping the police, the priest makes his way into a sort of no man's time and sometimes no man's land that could be qualified as the time and place of conversion. The mental and physical pain that he experiences throughout his journey can be read as the concrete sign that he experiences two simultaneous timelines: one is at once past, present and future and linked to the priest's faith in the fulfilment of redemption mediated through the sacraments; the other timeline is historical, intertwined with the first one through all its painful contradictions and paradoxes. In his book *The Time that Remains*, Giorgio Agamben analyses and comments on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans, emphasizing how messianic time prevails for those who believe in God. The arrival of a new priest at the end of the novel might then be read, as in Paul's letter, as the literary inscription that messianic time fulfils[1] historical time.

Chronological time

The time of revolution is the time of history. Therefore as the narrative unveils the fact that a revolution has taken place, time is emphasized in terms of chronology. Greene's purpose is not to relate the chronology of events building up to the revolution and its aftermath. The narrative focuses on the consequences of the revolution as the last priest is contemplating escaping on a ship ironically named after General Obregon, the Mexican general who had struck the first blows of the revolution. Time seems to be strangely divided into a binary structure with references to a past period opposed to the present time in which the religious symbols reminiscent of the past are shattered. Whereas the prison building is three hundred years old, the church is in ruins: "the prison – a low white colonnaded building which dated back three hundred years – and then the steep street down past the back wall of a ruined church" (14). A little later in the novel the soldiers are described returning to their barracks "up the hill near what had once been the cathedral" (48). The boy called Luis, who is read edifying martyrs' lives by his mother throughout the novel, and whose reaction is sceptical to say the least, watches the scene "with excited and hopeful eyes" (48). Interestingly, this sentence clearly sets both the reader and Luis as witnesses of the new military order. But paradoxically, the soldiers passing by are no pictures of military glory or valour: "they looked undernourished, they hadn't yet made much of war. They passed lethargically by in the dark street" (48). The narrator presents a world in which religious symbols have been devastated while the military revolutionary forces have gained a mitigated power. This is corroborated by the lieutenant's dreams of power and his determination to erase the past and empty the new world of all its past history: "He would eliminate from their childhood everything which had made him miserable, all that was poor, superstitious, and corrupt. They deserved nothing less than the truth - a vacant universe and a cooling world" (54). In the novel, children represent the future and are therefore endowed with more life than adults. There is the priest's seven-year-old child Brigitta in whose eyes he sees a mature woman, but also Luis, who opens the door to a new priest at the end of the novel, as well as Coral, who hides the priest one night, without letting her parents know: "She was independent of both of them [her parents]: they belonged together in the past. In forty years' time they would be dead as last year's dog" (32).

[1] The verb "to fulfil" refers here to the notion of 'fulfilment' ('accomplissement' in French), meaning that for Christians, the time of faith - messianic time- develops within historical time and thereby gives it all its meaning. For other occurrences of the verb, see: Moule, C. F. D. 'Fulfilment-Words in the New Testament' *New testament Studies 14* (1967): 293-320 and O' Rourke, J.J. 'The Fulfilment Texts in Matthew' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly 24* (1962): 394-403.

Coral's parents clearly belong to a world of the past and are compared to a dog. The description foreshadows the priest's meeting with the mongrel dog as he later comes back, starving, to Coral's place which is then deserted, and comes face to face with their abandoned famished dog. The narrative links the priest with the mongrel dog semantically: "she had been abandoned" and the parallel is unbearable: "The priest could bear it no longer. He knew what it meant: he might as well let his eyes see. He came out into the yard and the animal turned awkwardly - the parody of a watchdog - and began to bark at him. It wasn't anybody she wanted: she wanted what she was used to: she wanted the old world back" (140). The radical binary division of time between the old world and the new world is echoed in the geographical border: "'It is a fine state over the border,' a woman said. 'They've still got churches there'" (140). The priest's aim once he has missed the boat is to go over the border. His trek through the forest and over the mountains as he tries to escape the police is punctuated by several attempts to keep track of time. His memory of the past is quite precise. He remembers the origin of his daughter's conception: "for five minutes seven years ago they had been lovers" (65) and the distance until he reaches Carmen is in fact a very precise count-down: "if you want to reach Carmen before three, you will have to beat the mule [...] after five minutes he was bleeding" (85). A little later, the progress with the Indian woman is also alluded to with a reference to time: "for the last thirty hours they had only had sugar to eat – large brown lumps of it the size of a baby's skull" (152). The association between sugar and the skull hints at the scene in which the famished priest will eat the lump of sugar which the Indian woman has deposited beside her dead child's mouth. It is a dying world in which chronology tries to set proper landmarks: "'It's not such a bad life, Trixy. Is it now? Not a bad life?'", asks Mr Fellows to his wife. But he could feel her stiffen: the word "life" was taboo: it reminded you of death" (34). And yet, chronology cannot be always relied upon. The lieutenant wants to give the children new memories. But the general atmosphere of forgetting can be read as the sign that the old times are gone, as days blend into one another: "the door opened again: he could see another day drawn across like a grey slate outside" (68).

The story is definitely based on historical time and the consequences of the Mexican revolution. Attempts at defining a chronology in this binary post-revolutionary world abound. However, lapses of memory are recurrent, stressing the complex relationship that links both the present time and the past. The representation of space corroborates the ambivalent perception of time. Mr Tench has forgotten everything about his children and the priest has lost track of the date while he tries to escape the police, paradoxically progressing in the tracks they have left as they chase him. The word "surrender" is used both to describe his random changes of direction and to qualify the religious rituals that were at the core of his life before the revolution:

> In any case, even if he could have gone south and avoided the village, it was only one more surrender. The years behind him were littered with similar surrenders - feast days and fast days and days of abstinence had been the first to go: then he had ceased to trouble more than occasionally about his breviary - and finally he had left it behind altogether at the port in one of his periodic attempts at escape ... the routine of his life like a dam was cracked and forgetfulness came dribbling through, wiping out this and that. (57)

Giorgio Agamben develops the idea that what is forgotten should not be necessarily remembered and that the fact that it is not remembered is linked to messianic time:

> This does not simply mean that something forgotten should now reappear in our memory and be remembered. Exigency does not properly concern that which has not been remembered; it concerns that which remains unforgettable. (Agamben 39)

Indeed, as forgetfulness dribbles through, it becomes the symptom that the priest's time does not correspond simply to the time of the world, that is to say, to a worldly way of living the time of history. The border which separates him from Carmen and Las Casas, towns in which Masses are said and churches tolerated, is not a clear-cut line which remains to be

crossed in the general landscape. The zone around the border is a blurred one and it illustrates the present time of the priest in the novel: “he had nearly reached the state of permanency too, but he carried about with him the scars of time - the damaged shoes implied a different past, the lines of his face suggested hopes and fears of the future” (38). The “scars of time” betray the pain that dominates the priest's life as he progresses one side or another of the border, but also the fact that the past has left its print on him and that even what has been forgotten remains within him. The phrase “state of permanency” suggests that the time in which the priest lives is a complex notion. Once he has crossed the border and celebrated the Eucharist as well as given the Sacrament of Reconciliation[2] to several people, the priest feels “the old life hardening round him like a habit, a stony cast which held his head high and dictated the way he walked, and even formed his words” (39). This feeling can hardly be called a feeling of freedom. At this point, the priest is trying to reconnect himself with his past. But as he chooses to turn back and follow the mestizo to what he has guessed is his certain death, paradoxically, the priest feels happier. Although he is haunted by pain and forgetfulness, as he walks and sways to his almost certain death, the priest's present time is a time of conversion.

The time of conversion

The time of conversion is a subtle one. It is hinted at by Greene's writing rather than explicitly stated. The priest is mostly seen as characteristically standing “on the edge”: “he sat on the very edge of the rocking-chair, with his small attaché case balanced on his knee” (8) and the text draws a parallel between the priest and the lieutenant, emphasizing the priest's hesitating posture. Both are compared to question marks, but while the stranger is said to be sitting there “like a black question mark, ready to go, ready to stay, poised on his chair” (9), the lieutenant “stood there like a little dark menacing question-mark in the sun” (30). The lieutenant's posture is threatening and determined, strongly set in the shape of a typographical sign with a hyphen linking the two words, while the syntax used to describe the priest is also hesitating, with a looser link between the words and a series of three commas to punctuate the sentence. Just like Mrs Fellows is seen balancing in a rocking-chair, rocking “backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards” (48), the priest is described swaying (12) as he leaves the port on his mule and heads towards the swamp. The rocking to and fro and the “slight swaying” (12) become a leitmotiv as the priest progresses and the novel develops: “even in danger and misery the pendulum swings” (56). Only when he has turned back on his tracks, choosing to follow the mestizo he knows is a traitor and will hand him to the police, do the words of faith begin to taste and sound differently. The way back across the border with the mestizo is a true path of conversion; nor is it deprived of doubt, fear and pain, but as he walks on, not knowing on which side of the border he stands and not caring, for all he knows, gradually, the priest is able to endow those feelings with a more genuine faith. Throughout, Greene's writing hints at the human ambivalence of the priest. His status as a priest and his power to celebrate the sacraments do not keep him from the doubts which assail any believer as death approaches. This is the story of the last priest in Mexico, but above all, this is the story of a man who knows he is condemned and is going to die very soon. Even after he has willingly joined the mestizo, the whisky priest is haunted by the weight of his sins. Doubt and the passing of time torture his soul until the very end. This is illustrated by the confused perception of time stopping brutally now and then “like a broken clock” (71) reaching a climax when the priest is in prison surrounded by darkness and he thinks about the passing of time: “all night he had been realizing that time depends on clocks and the passage of light.

[2] The Catholic Sacrament of Reconciliation is also known as the Sacrament of Confession or the Sacrament of Penance. It is one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church along with Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders and the Anointing of the Sick (also called Extreme Unction or Last Rites). (http://www.americancatholic.org/Features/Sacraments/default.asp).

There were no clocks and the light wouldn't change" (131). The confusion in the perception of time pervades other categories in the priest's understanding. In the same way as Coral's teaching of the Morse code is ironically associated with saying one's prayers in the narrative, it is tempting to compare sacraments with superstition. The border between categories is blurred and the priest stands on the edge of this border as well. Just one page after a woman has praised the "fine state over the border" (77) saying that a cousin of hers had "heard a Mass – in a house, with a proper altar, and the priest all dressed up like in the olds days" (77), the priest becomes "aware of faith dying out between the bed and the door – the Mass would soon mean no more to anyone than a black cat crossing the path" (77). Another example can be found as the body of the Indian child is compared to an object and the description follows directly a reference to the Host in the text: "He could feel no meaning any longer in prayers like these. The Host was different: to lay that between a dying man's lips was to lay God" (150). It seems cynical to almost juxtapose a reference to the Host with the description of moving a child's body: "it seemed a waste of time to have taken it out, like a chair you carry out into the garden and back again because the grass is wet" (150). But it also reaffirms the essential function attributed by the priest to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, even in his moments of doubt.

The consequence of this blurring of categories can be read in the sometimes conflicting notions, of abandonment and surrender[3]. The recurrence of those two words in the text is striking, but it does not always cover exactly the same notions. The feeling of abandonment that the Fellows or Mr Tench experience is close to the notion of estrangement and is definitely matched by the "huge abandonment" the priest experiences from the beginning of the novel to the end: "he looked as if he had abandoned everything and been abandoned" (204). The word "abandonment" is also used by the narrator to describe sexual pleasure as he discusses the concept of sin in the prison. Surprisingly, it is then not referred to in any disapproving way, any more than other sins: "somewhere across the huddle of dark shapes the woman cried again - that finished cry of protest and abandonment and pleasure" (121). It is as if the priest gradually accepted the idea of abandonment. The narrative mentions over and over again the fact that the priest is abandoned as if he were growing into a deeper form of abandonment: "since that hot and crowded night in the cell he had passed into a region of abandonment" (146). The limbo inside which he then progresses, is a space in which the notion of "surrender" can begin to take on a meaning. It is not surrendering in the sense of giving up arms, since this meaning of surrendering is very much present from the beginning of the novel when the priest silently prays "let me be caught soon" (13). The notion of "surrender" takes on its full meaning when the priest refuses to give up for the first time: "he wasn't ready yet for the final surrender" (80). Later, he willingly decides to let go of the ball of paper which contains the evidence of his past as a priest. Interestingly, he does not "surrender" by giving himself up and letting himself be caught. The verb "surrender" here means that he is deliberately abandoning his past: "He let his fist open and dropped by Padre José's wall a little ball of paper: it was like the final surrender of a whole past. He knew it was the beginning of the end – after all these years" (116). The bodily posture that matches this state of mind is that of prostration. The priest is very often described as a prostrated little figure. From one of the first descriptions when he is sitting in Mr Tench's room and somebody knocks at the door: "looking round he saw the stranger crouched in the rocking-chair, gazing with an effect of prayer, entreaty ..." (10), to the end when the lieutenant tells him that Padre José will not come: "a little bunched figure in the darkness was the priest*"* (204) and up to the moment just before he is killed ("he crouched on the floor" [208]), and finally to "the routine

[3] For a complete analysis of the notion of abandonment see David Lodge.

heap beside the wall" (215). In this world of forgetfulness, crouching and surrendering, amidst a general feeling of abandonment, the common denominator that surfaces is pain.

One of the first things the dentist Mr Tench realizes about the priest is the poor quality of his teeth: "one canine had gone, and the front teeth were yellow with tartar and carious" (8). When, at the end of the novel, he realizes that he knows the "little man" who is going to be executed, it is also his teeth he remembers him by, as the reader learns when the dentist looks into the jefe's mouth: "I've never seen a mouth as bad as yours - except once" (214). Not only does the narrative link the jefe and the priest through the bad state of their dentition just minutes before the priest is executed, but pain, death and teeth[4] are linked once more at the very end of the novel as they have been all along. Pain reminds the characters, in particular the priest, of death. But pain is also the only thing that remains once everything else has been shed and forgotten. When dawn breaks in the prison cell and the priest has remarked that the only "punctuation of the night was the sound of urination" (131), the narrative links pain, death and teeth in a very short but illuminating explanatory passage:

> … all night he had been realizing that time depends on clocks and the passage of light. There were no clocks and the light wouldn't change. Nobody really knew how long a second of pain could be. It might last a whole purgatory - or for ever. For some reason he thought of a man he had once shrived who was on the point of death with cancer - his relatives had had to bandage their faces, the smell of the rotting interior was so appalling. He wasn't a saint. Nothing in life was as ugly as death. (131-132)

Teeth could be meant to symbolize the immortality of the soul, remaining even once the body has completed its decomposition. Moreover, teeth are situated inside the body, but in a liminal zone, on the edge between the interior and the exterior. Therefore they have this fascinating function of giving the shrewd observer an insight into what is happening inside. They might then be read as a symbol of the state of decay of the soul, with the decaying process hinting at time passing, while foreshadowing death. The open mouth of the woman sleeping in prison shows "strong teeth like tombs" (131). Teeth therefore stand as a *memento mori* to those who see them and sins, like teeth, have an ambivalent status in the novel. "Our sins have so much beauty" (129) the priest exclaims to the pious woman, trying to explain to her how to look at things with a saint's eye: "Saints talk about the beauty of suffering" (129). The reversibility of the way one looks at pain was something the priest had very often touched upon in his preaching before the revolution, and again when he is back in his village and reciting, he feels inadequate: "he felt his own unworthiness like a weight at the back of the tongue" (66). The sort of speeches he could deliver unflinchingly before the revolution, sound false once he is the last remaining priest laden with his sins. And yet, once he has stepped willingly behind the mestizo and surrendered his past, he steps inside a time of conversion, which, subtle as it is, nevertheless changes the priest's vision of the elements of his faith and the meaning of sacraments in particular. Although the priest is haunted until the end by doubts and pain, the narrative gradually inscribes a literary time which could be called the time of faith and fulfilment.

[4] The Irish author Flann O'Brien's second novel, *The Third Policeman* published in 1940, the same year as *The Power and the Glory,* was immediately censored and only published posthumously in 1967. Interestingly, it associates bad teeth with a reflection on death and its representation. The narrator wanders in a nonsensical universe peopled with policemen with bad teeth and bicycles with autonomous cogwheels and there are several surprising common points between the two novels. For more details on teeth and policemen in *The Third Policeman*, see Mianowski, Marie. 'Jeux de miroirs et bicyclettes : ré-création littéraire dans *At Swim-Two-Birds* et *The Third Policeman* de Flann O'Brien". *Tropismes n°11, "Que Fait la Fiction?*', Centre de Recherches anglo-américaines : Université de Nanterre Paris X (2003) : 183-197.

Fulfilment as the contraction of time

The end of the novel superimposes the lieutenant's dreams, the priest's dreams and Luis's dreams as if to separate the different levels of time and distinguish the level of dream from that of death and resurrection: "soon he wouldn't even be a memory*"* (209). In his book *The Time that Remains*, Giorgio Agamben analyses Saint Paul's Epistles to the Romans and in particular the way messianic time fulfils historical time. Interestingly, like Graham Greene, Paul had been converted to believe in Jesus-Christ and the resurrection. And Graham Greene at the time of his conversion was said to have read many theological works. He had been critical of the Catholic dogma, but he deeply hoped in the possibility of faith as he wrote in *Journey without Maps* (1936): "I had not been converted to a religious faith. I had been convinced of the probability of its creed" (Gallix 51). In *The Power and the Glory*, the narrative creates the literary possibility of the time of faith, what Agamben defines as messianic time. As Bernard Weill explains in his work[5] on Saint Paul's Epistles and messianic time, "messianic time does not refer to the passing of time and could not be measured like historical time. Messianic time is a type of existence, a way of being and living opposed to the way of being and living in the profane world (αιων, the present age) which is inscribed within historical time[6]" (Weill 18). In this respect, messianic time runs through the narrative of *The Power and the Glory* in, for example, the various references to the priest's power of living by the sacraments. Even Padre José is described very early on in the novel as still having "the power" of "turning the wafer into the flesh and blood of God" (23-24). In the same way, the whisky priest knows that despite all his sins and feelings of unfaithfulness, he cannot renounce his faith. As Coral tests him, asking him to renounce his faith, he answers: "'It's impossible. There's no way. I'm a priest. It's out of my power'" (36). His power to live by and celebrate the sacraments is recurrently reaffirmed through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Eucharist and the Celebration of Mass, as well as the Last Rituals as he turns to hear the Yankee's last wishes. The power he is thus endowed with and the glory onto which this power opens out, are landmarks throughout the narrative as if to point out there is another way of being, another type of time, which matches Paul's messianic time. In his book, Agamben thus comments on the verses in Saint Paul's Epistle 1 Co7, 29-31:

> But this I say, brethren, time contracted itself, the rest is, that even those having wives may be as not having, and those weeping as not weeping, and those rejoicing as not rejoicing, and those buying as not possessing, and those using the world as not using it up. For passing away is the figure of this world. But I wish you to be without care. (Agamben 23)

He describes this time as "the prototypical description of messianic time according to Paul: life in this 'contracted' time is a life disconnected with regard to the profane world because it is a life *'*in Christ*'* and not one in the profane or chronological time which flows just as the profane world passes by (v.31)" (Agamben 219-220):

> This ulterior time, nevertheless, is not another chronological time. Rather, it is something like a time within time - not ulterior but interior - which only measures my disconnection with regard to it, my being out of synch and in no coincidence with regard to my representation of time, but because of this, allows for the possibility of my achieving and taking hold of it. (Agamben 67)

The contraction of time is clearly visible in different instances of Greene's text, in particular in the characters of the children. Coral Fellows is described as more mature than one could assume from her age, but more strikingly, Brigitta, the whisky priest's seven-year-old daughter is described with the queer compound adjective "young-old": "it was again as if

[5] Weill, Bernard. 'Plénitude et Finitude chez Saint Paul: une herméneutique de l'accomplissement'. Thèse de doctorat de théologie. Paris: Université Catholique de Paris, 2006 (à paraître. Paris: Cerf, 2008).

[6] The translation is mine.

a grown woman was there before her time, making her plans, aware of far too much" (64); and a little bit further on: "the seven-year-old body was like a dwarf's: it disguised an ugly maturity" (65). In front of his daughter, the priest finds himself face to face with one of his biggest sins. And yet he discovers in the feeling he has for her, the true love that he knows he should feel for all his fellow human beings and which he tries to experience in his relationship with the mestizo first, then the Yankee and finally with the pious woman in the prison cell. The "*young-old*" child contributes to changing the priest's understanding of his fellow human beings and of his own faith and human limitations.

However, on the eve of his execution, the whisky priest is far from peaceful. This leads to a double paradox and absurdity. On the one hand, the priest is often a whisky priest, drunk and giddy. Because of his sins, the other characters' and his own expectations of what he ought to do "in memory of Jesus-Christ" sound absurd. On the other hand, some of the world's affairs and language seem to him disconnected with regard to the messianic time he lives in when he yearns for the sacraments or is ready to risk his life to give the last sacraments to the dying Yankee. This double paradox leads to very often absurd situations rendered by the priest's giggles. For all the pain, doubts and anguish the priest experiences throughout his journey towards death, he actually giggles and even laughs quite a number of times. These giggles show that his own perception of existence often does not correspond to the perception of the others – and this disruption is not always due to whisky: "The woman said suddenly, 'Think. We have a martyr here...'. The priest giggled: he couldn't stop himself. He said, 'I don't think martyrs are like this'" (124-125). There a more than fifteen instances of the priest giggling and it would be interesting to study those instances more closely, but it is not the purpose of this study. As the end approaches though, and there is "nothing left except pain" (185), the narrative stops describing the priest's giggles. Only when the priest meets the lieutenant for the last time, do his giggles resume: "'You'll know all there is to know about me at this rate' the priest said, with a nervous giggle, 'by the time I get to, well, prison'" (195). Throughout the novel, the priest's faith is tested, questioned and it oscillates between the two poles of his understanding of time. On the one hand, he perceives time as eventually coming to an end: "It comes suddenly on one in a screeching brake or a whistle in the air, the knowledge that time moves and comes to an end" (131). And on the other hand he mentions the word "existence" in a way that matches Agamben's definition of messianic time: "He had come to the very edge of time: so there would be no tomorrow and no yesterday, just existence going on forever" (183). But, it seems that he is shown making a mistake about the meaning of his mission as a priest who, like every Christian believer, is called to sainthood. As his last day closes in on him, the narrative shows the priest regretting not to have shown more self-restraint or courage to come closer to sainthood and his greatest disappointment is to have to go to God "empty-handed with nothing done at all" (209). It seems that at this point in the narrative, Greene emphasizes the priest's difficulty to escape from his "old life hardening round him like a habit", and enter messianic time.

At the very end of the novel, as all the "bystanders" gather in town as the priest is eventually executed, there is a sense of fulfilment which could be read as the sign that messianic time literally fulfils historical time. The morning he is killed, the preparation of his execution creates a great deal of commotion in the town: "not a revolution?" asks Trixie Fellows; "not another revolution?" asks Mr Tench. The chorus of questions is answered univocally. It is not a revolution, nor is it the repetition of a cycle. But as the priest they have all met is finally killed, it seems that the time of the narrative has come to a sort of resolution: Mr Tench recovers his memory and is able to communicate with his wife again. The jefe has his teeth cured at last and the Fellows prepare for their final departure, while Luis's mother completes her reading of the martyrs' lives, concluding that the priest who has been executed might well be a new martyr. The novel ends on many questions: the priest knows he is not a

saint while Luis's mother wonders if he might not be one and finally a new priest steps inside Luis's house. Giorgio Agamben explains the tension between the past and the present and its relation with messianic time in a way that gives an illuminating meaning to the end of Greene's novel:

> Paul defines this innermost relation of messianic time to chronological time, that is to the time spanning from creation to resurrection, via two fundamental notions. The first is that of typos, meaning figure and prefiguration, or foreshadowing. [...] What matters to us here is not the fact that each event of the past - once it becomes figure - announces a future event and is fulfilled in it, but it is the transformation of time implied by this typological relation. [...] Once again, for Paul, the messianic is not a third eon situated between two times; but rather it is a caesura that divides the division between times and introduces a remnant, a zone of undecidability, in which the past is dislocated into the present and the present is extended into the past. (Agamben 73-74)

The reappearance of the mysterious new priest who does not have time enough to utter his name could be read as the literary inscription of the "remnant", the "zone of undecidability" which was prefigured symbolically in the blurred geographical frontier between the two states, while leaving open the mystery of faith.

Graham Greene's ending not only preserves the mysterious quality of faith but it concludes on its universality. As the desperate priest accompanies the Indian woman carrying her dead child, the narrative insists on the communion that seems to seize the priest as he catches a glimpse of the “heart of the faith”. It is the end of their second day together and they reach a "grove of crosses". The crosses are human constructs and yet the text presents them as if they had grown naturally: “They were like trees that had been left to seed” (153). The border between nature and culture, the public and the private is confused and because there are crosses, the priest feels he has arrived in a public space. The narrator specifies that “the strange rough group” (153) is as far from a priest's world as could be imagined:

> It was the work of Indians and had nothing in common with the tidy vestments of the Mass and the elaborately worked out symbols of the liturgy. It was like a short cut to the dark and magical heart of the faith - to the night when the graves opened and the dead walked. (153)

The supernatural allusion to the fantastic world of death is less relevant here than what makes the priest so singular: his will to hold on to the “heart of the faith” even as he is stripped of the liturgical vestments and religious requirements of the Catholic dogma. Throughout the novel, beyond the priest's doubts and hesitations, the narrative actualizes the priest's adhesion not only to faith, but to the universal consequences of the glorious fulfilment of historical time within messianic time through its power of transformation.

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