



## The saint and the hero in *The Power and the Glory*

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# EPI-REVEL

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## The saint and the hero in *The Power and the Glory*

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Christian Gutleben started his academic career with a thesis on the English campus novel, a thesis which he published under the Lodgean title : '*Un tout petit monde*': le roman universitaire anglais (1954-1994) (Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 1996). He broadened then his research field to examine the complex and paradoxical relationships between postmodernism and Victorianism in a book published by Rodopi in 2001: *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*. Having become a Professor at the university of Strasbourg, he published with Susana Onega a study of the phenomenon of contemporary recycling of the canon: *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film* (Rodopi, 2004). He recently wrote a study of Greene's catholic novel (*Graham Greene, The Power and the Glory*, Paris: Atlande, 2007), which explains that now, after having moved to the university of Nice Sophia Antipolis, he collaborates to the edition of this collection of papers on the same novel by Graham Greene. Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis

Dans *The Power and the Glory*, le protagoniste n'est pas présenté sous des traits héroïques mais il finit par devenir une figure de saint tandis que le deutéragoniste n'est jamais présenté comme une figure de saint bien qu'il soit doté de traits héroïques. Il n'y a donc pas coïncidence entre la figure du saint et celle du héros et, puisque cette coïncidence constitue l'une des caractéristiques de l'hagiographie, le récit du prêtre anonyme ne ressortit pas à l'hagiographie ; or, si *The Power and the Glory* n'est pas une hagiographie bien que décrivant l'itinéraire d'un saint, c'est bien que le roman de Greene entend se montrer séditieux envers les métarécits canoniques. De fait, l'hagiographie enchâssée fait l'objet d'une mise en texte caricaturale et de fait, le héros contrevient à toutes les typologies du héros classique tel qu'il est défini par Baudoin, Campbell ou Sellier. Si Greene s'efforce de mettre en cause les acceptions et les conceptions conventionnelles des concepts de saint et de héros, c'est pour signaler son hétérodoxie fondamentale tant sur le plan théologique que romanesque. Dans l'axiologie idiosyncrasique de Greene, le protagoniste tire sa sainteté de son avilissement et le héros romanesque est à la fois un anti-héros et un héros qui échappe aux classifications génériques. En redéfinissant et reconfigurant le saint et le héros par un processus d'hybridation, Greene souligne donc son horreur de l'orthodoxie que ce soit dans le domaine religieux ou dans le domaine littéraire.

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"[H]e is a saint [...] one of the heroes of the faith" (218), says Luis's mother of the whisky priest after his execution, thus establishing a simple link of equivalence between the saint and the hero. Yet, since this character represents a form of Pharisee piety on which the whole novelistic apparatus strives to throw discredit, the relationships she establishes and the definitions she provides have to be taken with a pinch of cautious salt. And indeed, in Greene's novel saints and heroes are certainly not only linked by one single type of relation, be it only because the intradiegetic hagiography and the extradiegetic narration stage distinct, and even opposed, figures of heroes.

If the specialists of the question of the hero have often noted a lack of consistency in the usage of the term (Hamon 1984, Queffelec 1991) and have sometimes called it an indefinable notion (Fuzier 1982, 36), it is because the term has two fields of application and two levels of meaning, one mythical and one fictional, one literal and one literary. The nuances and tensions existing within these two definitional paradigms explain the complexity of the topic within a novelistic framework. Does *The Power and the Glory* suggest a contiguity or even a continuity between saints and heroes, as it is the case in the framed hagiography? In other words, is the conjunction, the saint AND the hero possible? Is the novel built on the hagiographic model? Are the sacred and profane fields compatible in Greene's eschatological universe? An analysis of these questions will reveal that the concepts at stake here are blurred and reconsidered and that this reconsideration affects the whole novelistic undertaking, not only from a religious or ideological point of view but also from a generic or architextual point of view. The first stage of the analysis consists in underlining the novel's structure of oppositions which explains and justifies the divergence of the concepts.

## Saints and heroes: a juxtaposition but not a combination

In classical hagiography there is a straightforward collusion between the hero and the saint. The hero is the main character and the main object of focalisation, the constancy of the narrative point of view reflecting the constancy of the hero himself. The equivalence between the hero and the saint is a given, an initial ethos, which means, from a structural point of view, that there is no real evolution, rather a succession of representative episodes marking an iterative logic, a repetitive pattern. The end is known right from the beginning, as in a tragedy, except that the goal, the telos, is not the fall of the hero but the triumph of the saint. The hagiography of Juan complies with these canonical rules: it is on the recurrent notability of his behaviour that the text insists - not on a putative evolution. Juan's sainthood corresponds to a permanent state, an almost immanent postulate. It is in the epilogue, through Juan's attitude in front of death, that the coincidence between the hero and the saint finds its crystallisation - following in that also the laws of the genre. His courage when he faces the firing squad singles him out as a profane hero, his unwavering faith and the pardon he grants his executioners single him out as sacred hero, i.e. as a saint.

Such a continuous correspondence between the hero and the saint is absent from the narrative of the whisky priest. The only common point between the priest and Juan can be traced in the act of forgiveness. Both his traitor and his executioner, i.e. both the half-caste and the lieutenant, are absolved by the anonymous priest who becomes, when he prays for his Judas, a saintly Christ-like figure, not unlike Juan. In the prosaic fields of pain and physical death, on the other hand, the extradiegetic protagonist is treated as the antithesis of a hero. The insistence on the materiality of the victim's cowardly reactions before and during the execution (his alcoholic precautions, his shaking knees, his jerking arms) and the reification of his corpse ("a routine heap beside the wall" [215]), go against the grain of any notion of heroism. This denial of heroism is emphatically voiced at the end of the protagonist's route, it seems then to constitute its finality and outcome. If the sinful priest does not reach a heroic dimension even when he acquires a saintly dimension through his pardon and sacrifice, he cannot *a fortiori* have access to the status of a hero before his final sanctification. Not only is the last evocation of the priest placed under the aegis of fear, but so is also the first in terms of diegetic chronology: in one of the rare analepses which deals with the protagonist's childhood, it is clearly stated that "he had been afraid of too many things" (64). So, the life of the novel's main character is literally framed by the ideas of fear and cowardice which appear antithetical to the notion of heroism. At no point in the narrative then does the protagonist's final sainthood merge or coincide with the stuff of a hero.

If the protagonist cannot embody the combination of the saint and the hero, what about his counterpart, the deuteragonist? Because of the altruistic nature of his motive (“[t]here was something disinterested in his ambition” [17], “[h]e was indifferent to his personal future” [52]), the lieutenant appears in the light of a heroic leader. When the narrative voice reveals that “[h]e would eliminate from their childhood everything which had made him miserable, [...] [h]e wanted to begin the world again” (54), the globalising metonymies (“everything”, “the world”) show that the deuteragonist’s ambition is not material nor personal but idealistic and universal, a heroic ambition. That these heroic features are severed from any idea of sainthood is almost self-evident in view of the lieutenant’s antagonism towards religion. The same is true on the referential level for the figures of historical heroes such as Villa, Zapata or Madero, whose warring feats and features immediately set them apart from the category of the saints.

Examining what precedes on the subject of the embedding narrative one notices a chiasmatic logic according to which the figure of the saint is dissociated from the figure of the hero and the figures of the hero are dissociated from the figures of the saint, so much so that it becomes manifest that the saint and the hero are treated like divergent, or even incompatible, notions. If the saint does not coincide with the hero (and vice versa), this clearly means that *The Power and the Glory* is not a hagiography and if *The Power and the Glory* is not a hagiography although it presents the itinerary of a saint, then it clearly means that Greene’s novel is deliberately seditious towards canonical notions and genres.

## The challenging of metanarratives

Hagiography as a genre is a metanarrative of sainthood, the canonical version of the life of a saint – who is also, as illustrated previously, treated as a hero. Now this orthodox version of sainthood and this glorification of Christian virtues are here presented under the guise of caricature. The commonplaces, stereotypes and clichés that punctuate the account of Juan’s vocation must be read as so many expressions of the rigidity of the hagiographic codes such as they are conceived by Greene. The very excess of signs of sainthood transforms the glorification into satire, or at least into disapproval. If Greene introduces an orthodox version of sainthood in such a negative fashion, it is to signify and stress his heterodoxy. Inasmuch as he condemns this conventional representation of a saint, it could even be argued that Greene is almost literally an iconoclast. An iconoclastic catholic writer, such is the anticonventional position of the author of *The Power and the Glory*. And if the whisky priest can be considered as Greene’s mouthpiece in the theological field, then the claim of literal iconoclasm is confirmed in the priest’s following remarks: “They were extraordinarily foolish over pictures. Why not burn them? One didn’t need a picture” (125).

Greene’s indictment of the orthodox conception of sainthood is not isolated but repeated, almost hammered home, through several means. First, the hagiographic narrative is carefully scattered throughout the framing narrative so that the recurrence of stereotypical actions and expressions provokes an effect of saturation – and possibly of condemnation. Then, the system of enunciation reinforces or mimics the inadequacy of the hagiographic narrative. Both the speaker and the addressees make a naïve reading and interpretation of Juan’s story, confusing ontological categories (“[t]his was life” [21], remarks one of the little girls on the subject of play-acting) and reducing notions to an extreme simplification, as when the mother associates her little girls’ docility with sainthood: “They are two little saints already” (22). In the hostile description of the Pharisee in the prison can be found another instance of the novel’s disparagement of all defenders of the letter rather than the spirit of the Holy Book, another example which adds up with the other arguments to highlight the fact that, in Greene’s conception of a saint, any form of conformism is rejected in favour of an opposite axiology.

What is true for Greene's idea of the saint is also true for the hero, its profane counterpart. In that respect too, it is a heterodox vision that is suggested. The hagiographic hero is the first conventional figure that is discredited. Because Juan is presented as cut off from the harsh referential reality of Mexico and is therefore separated from human suffering, that is from passion in its religious understanding, he cannot take part in, and even less alleviate, the overwhelming sense of dereliction and he therefore cannot be a hero for his people. His disconnection from the real can be traced in his play-acting, his favourite activity and most memorable triumphs. In his theatrical roles should be seen the metaphor of his immersion in fiction rather than dereliction, his taste for games rather than life, his quiddity as the simulacrum of a hero rather than an authentic one. Just as he is false Nero he is a false hero. His action is then ineffectual, an action with no other results than a few relics which appear as objects of superstition and not proofs of heroism.

In the main narrative, the dual division of the main roles with a clear opposition between the protagonist and the antagonist leaves no place for a canonical hero (such as defined by Campbell, Baudoin or Sellier) because the lieutenant who bears the marks of heroism is not treated like a hero and the whisky priest who is treated like a hero does not bear the marks of heroism. Let me explain. In addition to his altruistic ambition, his ascetic life, his readiness for any sacrifice, a detail seems to signal out the lieutenant as the stereotypical champion of justice: at each of his appearance, the narrative instance focalises on his shimmering revolver, holster, gaiters or boots. If one remembers with François Gallix that "a detail that is stressed in a text is the equivalent of a close-up in the cinema"<sup>1</sup> (2006, 63), then one understands that these highlighted accessories are meant to emphasise the lieutenant's main characteristics. Nevertheless, two novelistic devices clearly deny the lieutenant the status of a hero: the system of focalisation and his structural evolution. Because of the scarcity of passages in internal focalisation the reader has little access to the lieutenant's inner life and the indispensable transfer of affects cannot take place. Besides, the lieutenant vanishes progressively from the narrative: his undertakings are proven vain, which means that he does not become a political hero, and he is absent from the diegetic climax, which means that he cannot be the hero from a literary point of view.

The anonymous priest on the other hand cannot and does not lay claim on heroism because of his already mentioned cowardice and of his vices, which his nickname, the whisky priest, indicates by metonymy. And yet, from a novelistic point of view, the priest is in effect the hero. It is around him that the whole narrative apparatus is built: because the priest is the main character presented in internal focalisation, his conscience is laid bare in front of the reader and this conscience is characterised by its doubts, misgivings and regrets, it is the conscience of a weak man. Now, according to Baudrillard (1979), it is weakness and frailty, and not strength or might, which induce seduction, and in effect it is the whisky priest's lapses which are likely to win over the reader's sympathy - if not empathy. He is indeed, as Lise Queffelec argues, the privileged locus of the reader's emotional investment<sup>2</sup> (1991, 244).

The whisky priest is not only the main focus of the narrative instance, he is also the main subject of the other characters' discourse in the chapters or passages in which he does not appear as an actor, so much so that he is at the centre and the periphery of the narrative, an omnipresent figure, the figure of a hero. So both in the religious sphere and in the literary sphere, for the concept of the saint and for the concept of the hero, Greene challenges the canonical acceptations and conceptions of the terms. What remains to be seen is that this labour of dissension is accompanied by a labour of personal repositioning and recombinations.

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<sup>1</sup> « Un détail mis en relief dans un texte est l'équivalent d'un gros plan cinématographique » (our translation).

<sup>2</sup> The hero is, in Queffelec's terms, « le lieu d'investissement privilégié pour le lecteur ».

## Idiosyncratic choices

The influence of Maritain's Christian humanism on *The Power and the Glory* cannot be overemphasised (Gutleben 2007). By introducing human reality at the core of its theological system, Christian humanism suggests a new perspective from which are dislodged the cult of the Virgin and, crucially for our purpose, the cult of the saints. It is this modern ideology which Greene espouses and develops in his Mexican novel. For Greene man is fundamentally dual, both an image of God and an incarnation of sin, both a divine and a fallen creature. Following Péguy, one of his main Catholic influences, Greene sets out to prove that's is not through "our poor virtues" that we can reach holy grace but through "the weight of our sins" (Péguy 1913). If one remembers this other quotation by Péguy in which he condemns honest people with no apparent blemishes because they do not possess the access to sin constituted by sin (Péguy 1914), then it should be clear that in Greene's theology Juan cannot have the indispensable weaknesses to reach saintly grace. So Greene defends the paradoxical vision of a saintly sinner or of a sinful saint and in that respect the whisky priest is evidently an ideal mouthpiece. His sainthood stems from the transcendence of his vices, from his nobility in spite of or because of his vileness. It is not through the celebration of the glory of Christ that he becomes a saint but through an act of fraternity (a key notion in Christian humanism) when he tries to save the gringo, a brother in indignity, a brother in God. To show the sainthood of a drinking and fornicating priest such is Greene's singular and courageous demonstration.

In this exaltation of weakness can be perceived a link with the novelistic choice of an unattractive hero and this link between the religious and literary projects ought to be stressed. Littleness, from a social and from a moral point of view, is indeed one of the characteristics of this hero who is not a hero. Humble and frail such is the protagonist and it is clearly the dignity of the weak which Greene intends to underline, as can be noticed in the description of the deprived Indians who are compared to "the population of heaven" (68). In their accepted pain and resigned suffering, the Indians are some of the tiny heroes of whom the text offers a glimpse.

Smallness is also one of the literal features of the priest, one of the very first mentioned (3) and one that is often repeated. This epithet must of course be read as a syllepsis indicating his popular origins and representativeness. If one adds to his insignificant character the litany of his vices and humiliations (such as his grotesque struggle with a bitch or his supplications for alcohol), one cannot deny that this protagonist has, apparently, none of the features of a hero, which is why Roston called the whisky priest the first anti-hero of the literature of the twentieth-century (2006, 15). It is precisely on the basis of Greene's protagonists (among others) that O'Faolain coined the phrase "the vanishing hero" (1957), a phrase which suits the whisky priest just as suits Montalbetti's phrase "the exhausted hero" (2003, 16-17). If the anonymous priest is not an exemplary hero, in Vincent Jouve's classification he would be "a concave protagonist-cum-hero" (1995, 254)<sup>3</sup>, it is also because he is initially a non-hero. In the whole first part, the perspectives, the settings and the characters are diversified and the reader is at pains to find the hero. Through this outstanding absence, it is the main novelistic convention which is lacking in the opening section, which thus signals its determination to reconsider the fictional codes. Not only the character of the hero is difficult to grasp in this first part, but also the notion of the hero, which, in the image of the heterogeneity of the opening chapters, may have to be considered in a form of plurality.

If the hero is indefinable and slippery, it is also and perhaps mainly in the architextual field. To what kind of literary genre does the hero of *The Power and the Glory* belong? Is he a

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<sup>3</sup> Here is Jouve's definition of « un héros concave protagoniste » : « sa conduite est loin d'être exemplaire, mais il est le sujet d'une histoire qui, elle, est porteuse de leçons. En outre, comme il occupe le devant de la scène, c'est sur lui que se focalise l'attention du lecteur » (254).

tragic hero, as the epigraph seems to suggest? His fate is admittedly tragic, but the account of his fate does not follow the structure of a tragedy inasmuch as the novel's last part introduces new situations, changing or departing characters and above all a process of initiation which eschews the indispensable process of catharsis. The hero himself is deprived of the tragic hero's greatness (as we have seen in his sylleptic smallness), he is as innocent as he is guilty and he spends his time in unheroic giggles. Is the fugitive priest then a picaresque hero, as R.W.B. Lewis suggests (1960)? The perspective of the poor sinner who comes from below but looks and aims upwards, who condemns the worldly corruption of the elite and struggles for the spiritual salvation of the humble, does indeed retrieve the perspective of the pioneering picaresque novels, but the fact that the narrative is never autobiographical and presents various other ideological points of view fundamentally diverges from the picaresque codes. The outlaw priest could also be identified as the hero of a thriller since the novel relies on the motif of the manhunt and on a structure of opposition between pursuer and pursued, but the priest himself kills the atmosphere of suspense when he decides to surrender in the middle of the third part thus deviating the end of the narrative from the path of the thriller. Finally, the possibility that the fugitive priest might be considered as the hero of an adventure story is also limited because of the protagonist's passivity and of the primacy of his spiritual worries over his earthly concerns.

So the protagonist of *The Power and the Glory* is not the hero of a canonical genre, he is the hero of a blended genre, Greene's specific genre where the notion of heroism and the architextual conventions are reconsidered through a process of hybridisation. In the same way as the notion of the saint appears heterodox because it bears the seal of sin, the hero is presented in unconventional light because he appears as an unheroic hero, an anti-hero and a multigeneric hero. What constitutes the crucial link between the saint and the hero is then the idea of unorthodoxy, an idea which unites Greene's Christian ideology and his novelistic project.

In the final analysis, if the conjunction between the saint and the hero remains problematic for the characters in *The Power and the Glory*, it is because the synthesis between the two cannot, according to Greene's religious logic, be operated in the human sphere. To a certain extent, *The Power and the Glory* is a demonstration of the impossibility, or rather of the futility, of human heroism. If man can and must aim at sainthood as the condemned priest recognises in the end ("there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint" [209]), to be a hero is never presented as an axiological priority – which may explain why there is no hero properly speaking in the novel. The saint and the hero are not hyphenated in the diegetic world because the union between the two can only be achieved by Christ, as indicated by the title and its multiple levels of meaning. Only Christ can combine the power and the glory; only Christ can be a saint and a hero. Human power and heroism are pointless because they are severed from Glory, which is the splendour of the face of God and which has therefore nothing to do with human affairs. The power and the glory, the saint and the hero, are redundant associations for Christ and oxymoronic conjunctions for man.

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