



Thy Kingdom Gone? – Crying in the Wilderness, or Preaching on the Mount in *The Power and the Glory*

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*Thy Kingdom Gone? – Crying in the Wilderness, or Preaching
on the Mount in The Power and the Glory*

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Le titre du roman de Graham Greene, *La Puissance et la Gloire* est la citation volontairement tronquée issue de "Le Royaume, la Puissance et la Gloire" extraite de la fin du Notre Père. Cet article cherche à découvrir où est passé "le Royaume". Est-il parti irrémédiablement ou le lecteur va-t-il être le témoin de son retour à la fin du roman ? Il s'agit également de montrer comment les Béatitudes semblent illustrer le récit jusque dans la ponctuation du texte. La réponse à ces questions permet également d'éclairer les problèmes de foi et de spiritualité de Greene au moment de l'écriture du roman.

spiritualité, eschatologie, catholicisme, Béatitudes

First impressions are interesting, particularly when looking back upon them after acquiring so many others. On first seeing the title *The Power and the Glory* back in high school, I was reminded of the compound, binary titles of other successful novels: *The Beautiful and Damned*, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, or of tales such as *Beauty and the Beast*. Then I realized, of course, Greene's title is only artificially binary and is, in fact, a truncated ternary for the expression "The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory". The question then arose: where has the Kingdom gone? ... and is it gone for good? Or will it one day return? ... and possibly by the end of the novel ? As with all fine tales of suspense, there is a grain, or kernel in the title that acts as a charm, drawing the reader in and leading him on through many dark hearts and dismal parts toward the light. Greene can, and does so well, keep the reader hanging on a literary cross of sorts ... but where will the reader find himself when once released?

The phrase "The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory" is an excerpt from the conclusion of the *Lord's Prayer* as it is transcribed in the King James and other versions of the New Testament. It is the prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples, and is the principle prayer used by all Christians in common worship. The word "Kingdom" in the conclusion echoes that in the body of the prayer: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done...". The prayer appears in two forms in the *New Testament* – a shorter version in Luke 11: 2-4, ending: "But deliver us from evil", with no mention of "Kingdom, Power or Glory"; and then a longer version in Matthew 6: 9-13 ending "For Thine is the Kingdom, the Power and the Glory". Many scholars believe the version in Luke to be closer to the original – the concluding doxology in Matthew and used in the Protestant version having probably been added in the early Christian era, since it occurs in some early manuscripts of the gospels. In 1969, the Catholic church did, however, re-insert this addition – "The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory" – to be taken up by

the congregation after a forty-word invocation by the priest. This speech, or sermon – an oral text – occurs just after Jesus's baptism by John, and his fasting forty days and nights in the desert - which concludes with his temptation by Satan. The first shadows of danger, pursuit and eventual man-hunt appear in the text when Jesus hears that John the Baptist has been imprisoned: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent : for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4: 17). The Sermon on the Mount re-interprets the laws of the *Old Testament* in light of Christian doctrine and contains two of the central statements of Christian ethics. First, the *Beatitudes* express a promise of blessings to come – often, albeit, through suffering. These sayings take the rhetorical form of anaphora, repeating the opening words "Blessed are...". And secondly, involved in the sermon is the 'Lord's Prayer', an apostrophe directed to "Our Father who art in heaven".

The questions at hand then became: why did Greene look to, and evoke, the *Beatitudes* for his novel? And in what ways did the *Beatitudes* inform, guide and help to illustrate the narrative? How did Greene make use of Christian and/or pagan symbolism? And reading through the novel and between the lines, can we come to any awareness of Greene's own faith, or spirituality, at the time of his writing?

Greene's rapport with Catholicism over the years can seem ambiguous, to say the least. At one point later in life he described himself as a "Catholic agnostic". John Updike refers to him as "a problematic believer". Greene, in an essay entitled 'The Virtue of Disloyalty' (1969), defends the writer's right to changeability in matters both spiritual and temporal : "Isn't it the story-teller's task to act as the devil's advocate, to elicit sympathy and a measure of understanding for those who lie outside the boundaries of State approval? The writer is driven by his own vocation to be a Protestant in a Catholic society, a Catholic in a Protestant one, to see the virtues of the Capitalist in a Communist society, of the Communist in a Capitalist state. Thomas Paine wrote, 'We must guard even our enemies against injustice'".

"If only writers could maintain that one virtue of disloyalty - so much more important than chastity – unspotted from the world... The writer should always be ready to change sides at the drop of a hat. He stands for the victims and the victims change... Loyalty forbids you to comprehend sympathetically your dissident fellows; but disloyalty encourages you to roam through any human mind : it gives the novelist an extra dimension of understanding" (*Reflections*, 268).

Coming from someone with a mind and a range like Greene's, it recalls a quote from *The Crack-Up* (1936) by F.S. Fitzgerald: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function". From an early age, Greene was clearly able to distinguish "the man" from "the office", as he described in *England Made Me* (1935, 39). Even his conversion to Catholicism in 1926 left him with more than mixed feelings, as he recorded in *A Sort of Life* (1971): "I remember very clearly the nature of my emotion as I walked away from the cathedral: there was no joy in it at all, only a somber apprehension" (122); and this feeling again seems to be expressed in *Brighton Rock* when the priest speaks of the "appalling ... strangeness of the mercy of God" (268).

Ten years later, whatever the state of his faith, Greene got the opportunity to travel to Mexico where "the fiercest persecution of religion anywhere since the reign of Elizabeth had been taking place" (*The Lawless Roads*, 19). And from this experience came *The Power and the Glory*, his only novel written to a thesis - which was: that despite the tales of corruption that were supposed to justify the persecution of the church in Mexico, Greene was an eye-witness to the devotion of the peasants to the clandestine masses, and could gauge the extent of their faith and fervor. Those people he saw in Mexico, and the characters he drew from them in his novel share with those addressed in the *Beatitudes* the fact that they are all in dire straits - in a physical, social, spiritual or existential predicament: Tench, the whisky priest, the Lieutenant, Father José, Coral and Brigitta.

The *Beatitudes* promise that the path to redemption, to salvation, to the light lies through that very adversity and persecution. They constitute a message of hope for those in distress, to persist and not succumb to the world. Religions tend to thrive through persecution; but when left to the devices and desires of their members, they can lose fervor, and often degenerate into outright corruption. It is the persecution that makes the whisky priest a true priest. Fallen in the eyes of the world, he has risen from the ring-kissing idolatry which Christ had come to destroy. He had been comfortable and well-fed, but spiritually dead. Persecution had brought him to life. As Christ's passion redeemed humanity from sin, so the whisky priest, as a Christ figure without knowing it, could enable people to receive redemption through the office of his ministry of the sacraments.

One problem I did have with the text, as did others to whom I've spoken, is the relentless onslaught in detail, description and dramatic situation of the sordid, of squalor, of seediness - the cumulative effect of this "fascination of the abomination" being a kind of hopelessness, leading to the sin of all sins : despair. But then, this is only one aspect of "Greeneland", and it may just be the rug the author will later pull out from under us. Greene uses the sordid to engage the reader with the novel - physically - in hand-to-hand combat, or "in dubious battle", as the whisky priest engages with both the powers that be and with his own inner demons. For the priest's call was to live in the midst of squalor, and there to do Christ's redeeming work.

Greene had to make the novel artistically squalid because he saw there the dramatic possibilities for the Christian story. Akin to Dante's *Inferno*, he describes a world of sin without the notion of redemption. Using the "splinter of ice" he claimed to have in his heart, Greene has found a way to put across the reality of sin and evil in literature - to make the reader "see", in the words of Joseph Conrad. It is repellent, but it hooks you - a fine artistic achievement. The whisky priest, by fulfilling his priestly office, redeems the sordidness - whereas Father José has succumbed to the world. José sinks in the swamp of hopelessness, but the whisky priest rises above it through his own human weaknesses, and does become the very "salt of the earth"¹.

Another element of the *Beatitudes* which Greene adopts and makes ample use of is the punctuation, and most particularly the colon: a break within the sentence, which doesn't interrupt the flow, but which can, in fact, enhance it. Either as a confirmation of the first statement, or a justification, it is a honing in, or focusing on one specific aspect of the more general first statement, or a fulfillment of its promise. In the *Beatitudes*, it is the dramatic pause leading to the longed-for consolation. At the transition point of the sentence, it is a border to a welcoming, safe land; for example, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"; "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"; and the conclusion of *The Lord's Prayer*: "But deliver us from evil: for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory". In the *Beatitudes*, the colon is the symbol of promise, of strength, and of hope. Greene's use of the colon, however, introduces a very different mood and dramatic tempo as he creates suspense by breaking the sentence up, and thus further accentuating the disarray of the character, or the sordid horror of the scene described. Typographically a balance seems implied - there is a symmetrical impression of solidity when, in fact, the situation is anything but that, as seen in this example: "He put the Host hurriedly into his mouth and drank the wine: one had to avoid profanation: the cloth was whipped away from the packing case" (69). Examples abound throughout the novel, of these back-firing, reverse "beatitudes", some sentences using up to five colons

In plying his craft, the writer is limited to the letters of the alphabet, and spaces. But punctuation marks can serve to illustrate the narrative in a more than subliminal way. Here, the omnipresence of rifles and firing squad executions may be suggested or illustrated by the accumulation of colons. Gradually they come to resemble gunsights - the two points down the gun barrel used for taking aim. Or, when superimposed with a cross, the colon can suggest the cross-hairs in the reticle of the rifle lens as it sweeps, or pans, across the battlefield of the printed page (+). The word "punctuation" occurs only once in the text, in the prison cell scene on page 131: "The only punctuation of the night was the sound of urination". One wouldn't put it past Greene to consider the colon an appropriate symbol for that, as well.

Greene's choice of words, and of proper nouns, merits examination, for he seems thereby to be inserting and amplifying Christian spiritual, or mystical, asides into his text. The word "whisky" is present throughout the novel, but there's never a drop to drink, in fact: all is brandy, wine or beer. Even the commonest of Mexican spirits - tequila - is absent. "A whisky priest" is a term which Greene picked up from a Dr. Roberto Fitzpatrick in the course of his travels in Mexico. As it is currently used in England and Ireland, the term does not have all the moral opprobrium with which Greene has invested it - it merely describes a man of the cloth with an over-fondness for drink, and can even indicate a certain generosity of the spirit. In Mexico at the time, the repression of spirits - that which elevates the soul far beyond the powers of the "gazeosa" - denied solace to the needy, and was one half of the state's double-barrelled attack of religious persecution and alcohol prohibition. The word "whisky" is from the Irish "uisque beatha", or "usque baugh", meaning "water of life". Its prohibition represents one more physical joy of life "spirited" away by the state, along with so many

¹ Grateful acknowledgement to Adrian Grafe (Paris-4) and George Packard (Sherkin island, Ireland) for their enlightening suggestions.

gospel references to the “living water”, and the waters that flowed from Christ’s side (John 19: 34; John 4: 10). The whisky symbol can also be seen as the obverse of baptism, the Holy Spirit water.

Among other names in the novel, “Coral” indicates lightness and purification; and “Brigitta”, from Bridget, a patron saint of Ireland, is also a reference to the pre-Christian Celtic fire goddess of the same name.

To conclude, one major key to the novel, and a possible insight into Greene’s Catholic spirituality at this time in his life, and his take on the *Beatitudes* of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, may be found on the novel’s final page in the dream of the boy just prior to being awakened by the knocking at the gate and the apparition / appearance of the new priest, again nameless: “the boy sat beside the bed and his mother read out of a very long book all about how the priest had acted in front of the bishop the part of Julius Caesar: there was a fish basket at her feet, and the fish were bleeding, wrapped in her handkerchief. He was very bored and very tired and someone was hammering nails into a coffin in the passage. Suddenly the dead priest winked at him - an unmistakable flicker of the eyelid, just like that”. The fish has been a major Christian symbol, along with the cross, the lamb and the chalice. But the fish was used as a symbol of Christ by the early persecuted Christians in need of a secret code vital to their survival. For the letters of the Greek word “Ichthus” formed an acronym of the initial letters of the words “Jesous Christos, Theou Uious, Soter” – Jesus Christ, son of God, Saviour. With this image, Greene closes the circle which he began to draw in the very first words of the novel. In getting a feel for how Greene casts his spells and engages the reader, it is wise to leave no stone unturned, for his work can be as coded as the pronouncements of the early Christians. Consulting the dictionary, one finds the word “tench”, defined as “an edible Eurasian fresh water fish ; in Latin, ‘tinca tinca’; having small scales and two barbels near the mouth”. The fish image thus is sustained and seems to circumscribe the novel, and could be read as both a symbol of faith, hope and charity surviving under a relentless persecution, and a testimony to Greene’s concern with the transforming power of illusion and of love.

For ultimately *The Power and the Glory*, I believe, is not as much about power, or glory, or the state, or the church as it is about love – “supreme” – and the often catastrophically sudden discovery of one’s infinite capacity for love. Even the zealot Lieutenant seems to be feeling the worm turn after his encounter with the whisky priest. Even the mestizo traitor reveals a kind of loving admiration for the priest who was possibly the only human in the world who had paid any real attention to him. And the boy, once cynical and blasé, when roused from slumber to confront the stranger at the gates, seems to experience the Easter-like thrill of the Resurrection. The whisky priest was killed, but his spirit has returned: “le roi est mort: vive le roi” resounds in the cry “Viva el Cristo Rey”: the “gone” kingdom has been revived, and revived.

Greene, having circled his way back beyond the heavy edifice and empire of the established church of Augustine and St. Paul with *The Power and the Glory*, was able to examine and reflect upon the spirit and simplicity of the Sermon on the Mount, and its message of hope to all who await comfort and release. And Greene, even when describing himself as an “agnostic”, couldn’t have helped being intrigued by the fact that the Spanish verb “esperar” means both “to wait”, and “to hope”.

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