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Cet article se divise en quatre parties intitulées 'Préambule', 'Paradoxes', 'Plaisirs du Texte' et 'Comédie'. Le thème fédérateur part de l'hypothèse que The Power and the Glory, aussi bien dans sa structure globale que selon une approche microscopique, est un roman plus paradoxal et plus éternel qu'il n'y paraît. Il est donc possible de le considérer comme un texte janiforme, son dieu tutélaire étant Janus, le dieu au double visage dont le regard est tourné dans deux directions opposées. L'un des paradoxes de sa réception par la jeune génération est qu'un roman considéré comme catholique puisse plaire au sceptique autant qu'au lecteur chrétien.

Preamble

Recently, having agreed to lecture on *The Power and the Glory* at the annual Graham Greene Festival at Berkhamsted, I re-read the novel in some trepidation. David Lodge once suggested that it did not sustain re-reading.[1] I had long regarded it as Greene's most brilliant novel; and numerous critics treat it as the best of Greene's fictional works. *The Power and the Glory* was first published in 1940, and won the Hawthornden Prize. When I re-read it, the reason for my trepidation was obvious. I thought: surely, by now, it will seem dated. The prose will seem old-fashioned. Its dilemmas will belong to the past. The Roman Catholic Church today is not the Church that Greene knew in the 1930s: its doctrines and rituals have variously been modified. Many of today's British students regard as natural and proper a secular materialistic outlook. The conflict of Marxism with Catholicism, which greatly preoccupied Greene, has dwindled. Today, it is not Marxism which looms ominously on the political horizon. It is Islamism.

Hence my trepidation when re-reading *The Power and the Glory*; but, to my relief, it seemed better than ever. It revealed subtleties that I had missed at previous readings. This novel is concise, vivid, elegantly structured, sharply intelligent, thematically rich, philosophically and theologically searching, and emotionally moving. It is a "chase novel", a page-turning suspense thriller, and it is also a thought-provoking study of persecution. The prose is still fresh, clear, surprising, distinctive and engaging, with no fat or vapidity. The intelligence is often heterodox, seeking to challenge conventional attitudes. Ironies interlace the narrative. And its paradoxes, large, medium and small, operate through the mind and the senses.

1 David Lodge: *Graham Greene* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 27.

The Paradoxes of *The Power and the Glory*

A paradox is an apparent contradiction which yields a truth or part-truth; it resembles a discord resolvable as harmony. Here follows a small (but expanding) paradox. The main character is called "the whisky priest". He calls himself that; others call him that; and it's what the academic commentators call him. "The whisky priest". And now, your attention having been thus solicited, you may already have noticed what is odd about that term. Throughout the novel, that priest never touches a drop of whisky. Oh yes, he drinks brandy, wine and beer, and more brandy. But not whisky. There is a mismatch. It seems deliberate. If so, why? Probably because it provides a little clue to what happens extensively in this novel. Repeatedly there is a mismatch between seeming and being, between label and reality. For instance: the jacket of a romantic novel conceals the priest's Latin breviary. But the romantic novel is called *La Eterna Mártir*: the Eternal Martyr: so the mismatch indicates a truth: martyrdom continues. The novel's ending, in which the protagonist is executed but is replaced, is here adroitly anticipated. Again: the priest drunkenly baptises a boy with a girl's name, Brigitta: a farcical mismatch; but a man comments: "It's a good saint's name": it still does a Christian job. But why "Brigitta"? Much later, we learn that it's because the priest was thinking of his daughter, and that is *her* name. (When making the nomenclatural choice, he may aptly have invoked Saint Brigitta of Ireland, for she was generous to the poor.)

Of course, a *big* paradox in this series is that while the central character, that anonymous priest, increasingly regards himself as a great mismatch (a religious failure, a disgrace to his faith), we increasingly realise that he is a saint in the making.

His grounds for seeing himself as a failure are obvious. He is a semi-alcoholic; he has known despair; he has fathered an illegitimate child, and he finds that his love for that child prevents him from being properly penitent for his sexual sin. He recalls that once, when he led a comfortable life, he was proud and complacent. He then stays on in a dangerous region of Mexico (a Mexican state in which religion is forbidden and priests may be shot), so that he can minister to the ordinary people. Surely that entails moral courage? The priest himself denies it. Near the end, he says this: "It would have been much better, I think, if I had gone [...]." (By "gone", he means "fled from the region".) He continues:

> Because pride was at work all the time. Not love of God [...]. Pride's the worst thing of all. I thought I was a fine fellow to have stayed when the others had gone. And then I thought I was so grand I could make my own rules. I gave up fasting, daily Mass. I neglected my prayers – and one day because I was drunk and lonely – well, you know how it was, I got a child. It was all pride. Just pride because I'd stayed [...]. I'd got so that I didn't have a hundred communicants a month. If I'd gone I'd have given God to twelve times that number. (196) [2]

And when the Marxist lieutenant says: "Well, you're going to be a martyr", the priest replies, "Oh no. Martyrs are not like me. They don't think all the time – if I had drunk more brandy I shouldn't be so afraid." So our priest is apparently condemned out of his own mouth. On the morning of his execution he feels "only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all". He had expected, and still expects, damnation for himself. Indeed, like such later Greenian protagonists as Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, Sarah in *The End of the Affair*, and Father Callifer in *The Potting Shed*, he tries to make a substitutive bargain with God. (A whole book could be written on this preoccupation of Greene's.) The priest's bargain involves his illegitimate child, who is depicted as having fallen from innocence into tainting experience. He says: "O God, help her. Damn me, I deserve it, but let her live for ever." Nevertheless, as he prepares for death, he reflects that he has been so useless that perhaps he is not even "Hell-worthy". Greene was potently influenced by T. S. Eliot's notorious essay on Baudelaire, which declares: "The worst that can be said of most of our malefactors, from statesmen to thieves, is that they are not men enough to be damned. Baudelaire was man enough for damnation."[3]So *one* half of the paradox of the whisky priest is that he is a disgrace to the church, a semi-alcoholic with an illegitimate child; a man who, if he is to be believed, has been motivated largely by pride and is a complete failure. He doesn't even look like a hero: he is small, with

2 All quotations from *The Power and the Glory* are from the Vintage edition (2005).

3 T. S. Eliot: 'Baudelaire': *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 429. Greene quotes this passage with approval in his essay 'Henry James: The Religious Aspect': *Collected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 41.

sloping shoulders and yellow decaying teeth. He leaves a trail of death: four hostages have been slain because they would not betray him.

The *other* half of the paradox is that he is clearly a saint in the making. The more he rebukes himself for pride, the more we are aware of his humility. He is constantly criticising himself and attempting to see the best in others. By remaining, at the risk of his life, he has not only administered the Mass to the faithful, he has set an influential and salutary example. He thinks he is useless; but we see that numerous people have had their lives touched by his life. After his execution, a pious mother speculates that he may become a saint, and she mentions that, already, precious relics, pieces of a bloodstained handkerchief, are being sold. The theme of the priest's influence is extensive; indeed, *The Power and the Glory* has an extensive covert plot on this theme.

A useful technical term, coined by Ian Watt, is "delayed decoding". Delayed decoding occurs when a writer gives first an *effect* and secondly, but only after a marked delay, the *cause* of that effect. It forms an enlarged instance of hysteron proteron. *The Power and the Glory* abounds in delayed decoding. For instance, the novel's second paragraph tells us that Mr Tench passes "the Treasury, which had once been a church": pages elapse before we understand why a Treasury has replaced a church; and we may then recognise the irony that an atheistic régime (reversing the actions of Jesus as reported in Matthew 21: 12, 13, and Mark 11: 15-17) has put the money-changers back into the temple, perhaps creating a new "den of thieves". Another example, given just now, was the delay before we learn why the priest uttered the name "Brigitta". When delayed decoding is used on a large scale, it may become covert plotting. A covert plot is one which, at a first reading of a literary work, is not seen by the reader as a coherent sequence. The reader sees elements of it, but not the entirety. Only at a second or subsequent reading is the plot-sequence likely to emerge as a clear, co-ordinated entity.[4] A second reading of *The Power and the Glory* reveals that numerous seemingly-disparate elements of the plot are co-ordinated by the changes for the better which have been effected by the priest's presence. Mr Tench, the boy Luis, Coral Fellows, some of the villagers, the hostile pious woman in the jail, and even the Marxist lieutenant: all have apparently been touched by grace.

Tench, the dentist, after meeting the priest, is moved to write to his wife in England to try to re-establish their relationship. He may not succeed (for she has fallen into bad ideological company), but at least he has made the effort. The novel's treatment of the boy Luis is more extensive. The realism of Greene's narrative concerning the whisky priest is made the more persuasive by its lengthy contrastive quotations from a supposed work of Catholic propaganda and hagiography. A Catholic mother reads to her children the story of a recent martyr, Father Juan, who defied the atheistic law by ministering to the people but was arrested and shot. The story stresses *ad nauseam* the supposed virtues, the sweet saintly nature, of this priest. Understandably, the boy Luis shows signs of rebellion against this indoctrination: he expresses boredom and scepticism. For him, a more convincing hero is the local Marxist lieutenant: he is delighted to be allowed to touch the officer's revolver, and the lieutenant feels proud that he is winning young followers for the atheistic cause. But, after meeting the whisky priest, and after hearing of his execution, Luis turns in resentment against the officer, and spits on his revolver-butt. In contrast, as the novel ends, the boy kisses the hand of a new priest who clandestinely arrives to take the place of the martyr. We do not hear the new priest's name; it is the continuity of the sacred office that counts. Just before the knock at the door from the newcomer, Luis had dreamt that the dead whisky priest "winked at him – an unmistakable flicker of the eyelid, just like that", so that we may detect a sign of complicity, a hint of resurrection, a glint of victory for the faith. Greene was strongly influenced by J. W. Dunne, who had accumulated evidence to demonstrate that dreams could be truly premonitory, a theory related to the orthodox Christian belief that all time is simultaneously present in the mind of God or, as Dunne called Him, the "Master-mind". (Greene's most modernistic tale, 'The Bear Fell Free', is exuberantly Dunnian, chronologically layered like an onion.)[5]

The whisky-priest returns from safety to danger, knowingly entering an ambush, in order to administer the last rites to Calver, the dying gangster.[6] Calver is aware that he is being used as bait,

Ian Watt discusses 'delayed decoding' in his *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), pp. 175-9, 270-71.

4 See Cedric Watts: *The Deceptive Text: An Introduction to Covert Plots* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984).

5 J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927) and *The Serial Universe* (1934) influenced various writers, including J. B. Priestley, John Buchan and T. S. Eliot. "I am convinced that Dunne was right", remarked Greene. See Watts, *A Preface to Greene* (Harlow: Longman, 1997), pp. 128-36.

6 The gangster's name brings to mind 'Calvary', and there is a hint of 'carver' (given that he bears a knife).

and in his dying moments he tries to help the priest by offering him a knife. The priest prays for him, saying "O merciful God, after all he was thinking of me"; and though the prayer is "without conviction", a kind of altruism was indeed there in the gangster's action. One cruel irony of the situation is that Calver's victims, we gradually realise, include Coral Fellows, who had previously sheltered the priest.

In addition to the large-scale covert plot concerning the priest's transformative power, there is a briefer covert plot concerning Coral's death. That death is never directly described. Once again, we experience markedly delayed decoding which becomes a short sequence of covert plotting. When the fugitive priest had revisited the Fellows' homestead, he had found it deserted except for a broken-backed starving dog: some disaster had befallen the place. Near the end of the novel, we find that Coral's parents are returning to England. They try not to talk about her death, but the topic obtrudes; and random references combining with the couple's mutual recriminations enable us eventually (probably at a second reading) to infer what has happened. The references include the phrases "that scoundrel", "running away and leaving her" and "If you'd been at home". Slowly, we work out that what happened was this: When Captain Fellows was away from the homestead, Calver had arrived there. Mrs Fellows, a depressive hypochondriac, always fearful of death, fled from the intruder. Coral, always brave and responsible, tried to drive Calver away. We know that long previously, she had warded off the lieutenant, threatening to set the dog on him; but on this occasion, it appears, the intruder maimed the dog and shot Coral. It may seem strange that such dramatic material is not presented directly by Greene but is left to be inferred by us. One explanation is that Greene admired Joseph Conrad, who liked oblique techniques. For instance: in Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent*, the violent death of the innocent boy, Stevie, is not presented directly, but gradually has to be inferred by us. Conrad once remarked: "One writes only half the book; the other half is with the reader."[7] But there is a better explanation. By leaving plot-gaps which we subsequently fill by inference, Greene attunes us to the notion of a God who (in William Cowper's words) "moves in a mysterious way, / His wonders to perform".[8] The Christian God is a covert plotter, too. Furthermore, Greene employs the paradox which T. S. Eliot exploited in *The Waste Land*: an apparent absence of God may simply be a test of our ability to recognise His presence, by intelligence or faith.[9]

In *The Power and the Glory*, Coral's parents appear to have no religious belief; and Coral herself had said that she lost her faith "at the age of ten". She, however, had met both the lieutenant and the priest, and had sided with the priest, taking him food and drink, and resenting his persecution. She teaches him a bit of the Morse code, as a means of communication, and actually chooses two longs and a short: the Morse for G: perhaps it stands for God. Her parents later remark that "she went on afterwards – as if he'd told her things". One implication is that the priest may have restored Coral's faith. The confirmation of this, in Greenian terms, is provided in the following way. After her death, and on the eve of his execution, the priest has a strange dream. In a cathedral, he feels detached from the Mass until Coral appears and fills his glass with wine. She says, "I got it from my father's room". The cleric and congregation then tap a sign in Morse code: three longs and a short. To us and to *Webster's Dictionary* it may be merely a coded exclamation-mark;[10] but Coral decodes it as the word "News". And it is evidently good news: the priest wakes with, we are told, "a huge feeling of hope". Well, a sceptic may say, "It's only a dream"; but it hints that Coral, after death, has become an intermediary who can offer the priest a glimpse of his salvation to come. Perhaps, like Beatrice with Dante, she may guide the pilgrim heavenwards.

One of Greene's later tales is called 'The Last Word' (1988). It describes a future era in which atheistic totalitarianism has prevailed and the last Pope is kept alive only as a figure of scorn.

7 *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, edited by C. T. Watts (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 46.

8 Hymn 35, 'Light Shining out of Darkness' in *The Poems of William Cowper*, Vol. 1, eds. John T. Baird and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 174.

9 Morin, in the tale 'A Visit to Morin', and Querry, in the novel *A Burnt-Out Case*, both reflect that their state of unbelief might be proof of God's existence. They suppose that, for their sins or their neglect of Him, God has punished them by letting their belief die; but if they infer that this has happened, then, logically enough, their faith is maintained. Thus 'faith' is tantamount to the hope that what is not now believed may yet have a basis. Greene's janiform imagination could apply scepticism to scepticism.

10 *The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language* (Naples, Florida: Trident Press International, 1996), p. 828. In some versions of the code, the sign represents the German ö (o surmounted by an umlaut).

Eventually, he is taken before the arch-dictator, a general, and shot. Yet, even as the trigger is pulled, the general reflects, "Is it possible that what this man believed may be true?", and the implication is that the message of faith has, after all, been transmitted to posterity. In *The Power and the Glory*, Greene has established an elegant contrast and contest between the whisky priest and the atheistic lieutenant. Both are idealists; both work hard for their ideals; and both are concerned about the poor and the children. And both are ideologically opposed. The lieutenant is in some ways priest-like. We are told this:

> There was something of a priest in his intent observant walk – a theologian going back over the errors of the past to destroy them again.
>
> He reached his own lodging [...]. In the light of a candle it looked as comfortless as a prison or a monastic cell [...].
>
> He was a mystic, too, and what he had experienced was vacancy – a complete certainty in the existence of a dying, cooling world, of human beings who had evolved from animals for no purpose at all. He knew. (18-19)

During the meetings between the lieutenant and the priest, some fellow-feeling is established. Eventually, experiencing sympathy with and respect for the priest, the lieutenant seeks (illegally and unavailingly) to fetch a confessor for him. Here the cowardice of Padre José, the married ex-priest, contrasts tellingly with the courage of the whisky priest. (Repeated use of such mutually-illuminating contrasts helps to generate the book's vividness.) Next, the lieutenant brings the priest, again illegally, a bottle of brandy. "You're a good man," the priest had told him earlier. "You aren't a bad fellow", the lieutenant tells him now. After the execution, the officer finds that (in Greene's acerbically paradoxical phrasing) "the dynamic love which used to move his trigger-finger felt flat and dead". Perhaps that atheistic commitment will return; but perhaps, like the general in 'The Last Word', the lieutenant has been inflected towards religious belief.

And numerous other people, whom the priest has met or helped, have possibly been strengthened in their faith or nudged towards the faith because of him: notably the fellow-sufferers in the stinking jail, and the people of his home village. A proud woman in the prison rebukes him for bringing the Church into disrepute, but later, in a charitable lie, intervenes to save him from being recognised by the lieutenant. Again, his sly daughter, termed a "little devil", temporarily if unintentionally saves him. She identifies him to the lieutenant as her father; and the lieutenant (familiar with the rule of celibacy) is thereby persuaded that the fellow must really be a peasant and not a priest. Furthermore, even the treacherous Judas-figure grudgingly observes, "You may be a saint for all I know", and seeks the whisky priest's blessing. The priest's execution takes place not in the customary public place, a cemetery, but in a private yard. The reason given is that otherwise "There might have been a demonstration", a popular protest against the authorities.

Thus, the narrative in which a representative of the Church is apparently defeated is one of covert victory for the faith. Abandonment has not, after all, been total. When in Mexico, in Orizaba, Greene felt that "it was like Galilee between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection". He says this in the travel-book *The Lawless Roads*.[11] According to the Bible, after Christ's crucifixion the disciples felt abandoned on the journey to Emmaus, but Christ was present and accompanied them unrecognised. At the outset of *The Power and the Glory*, abandonment is repeatedly stressed: there is a symphonic orchestration of the theme. Tench experiences "the huge abandonment". The priest feels that "he was abandoned". The church has been abolished by the state; and Luis's father says "We have been abandoned here". Greene, in his travels through those regions of Mexico where the Catholic Church had been prohibited, had experienced a sense of nightmarish vacancy, and he recalled Cardinal Newman's sombre words about the "aboriginal calamity" of a human race "discarded" from God's presence.[12] As *The Power and the Glory* unfolds, however, and as irony dovetails with irony, plot-detail with plot-detail, so the overt and covert plotting of the narrative imply a covert plot in the world: which is, that the apparent defeat of faith is merely a test for the faithful and the ground of new victories for divine grace. To put it another way: in the novel *The Power and the Glory*, the emerging paradox of the title-phrase from the Lord's Prayer is this: the *power* of God is manifested in apparent weakness and defeat, while the *glory* of God is manifested through the base, mundane and sordid.

11 Graham Greene: *The Lawless Roads* (London: Heinemann, 1955), p. 114.

12 Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua* is quoted as an epigraph to *The Lawless Roads* (London: Longman, Green, 1939).

But that last sentence is not quite right, because it makes the novel sound too much like Christian propaganda. We need to go further.

The Pleasures of the Text

The large sales of *The Power and the Glory*, the high critical praise accorded it, and (in the experience of teachers) the responses of students from a wide variety of religious and irreligious backgrounds, show that the novel has a remarkably wide appeal. It seems to be enjoyed almost as much by sceptics as by believers.

One reason for this is that Greene boldly pre-empts the sceptic. He lets the lieutenant and other characters voice familiar hostile arguments. One such argument is that priests line their own pockets while promising "pie in the sky" to the poor. The lieutenant uses that one. The priest is sheltered by Mr Lehr, who criticises his Church from a Lutheran standpoint: Roman Catholic churches value luxury, Lehr says, while the people starve. Some Catholics (Luis's mother, and that proud pious woman in jail, and Maria) criticise the priest for being a disgrace to the faith. He himself is his own severest critic, noting his own pride, lust and cowardice. He also comments bitterly on the prosperous, complacent levels of the Church's hierarchy: he has known them at first hand. So the readers' scepticism is pre-empted and incorporated. Furthermore, the priest attracts left-wing sympathy. He moves among the poorest of the poor, sharing their squalor and wretchedness. Stinking, confused and weary, he makes a credibly flawed and sympathetic victim.

Numerous atheistic readers can suspend disbelief in religious premises when reading and enjoying religious poetry by, for example, John Donne or John Milton or Gerard Manley Hopkins. Similarly, such readers may suspend disbelief when reading *The Power and the Glory.* They may choose temporarily to imagine that among the characterisations, God is as real as is the priest. Even if they cannot, the novel may still be powerfully effective. It may seem to describe eloquently the folly of human beings who are seduced into intolerance or suffering by inflexible ideologies which sacrifice the pulsing present on the altar of an illusory future.

But that again may make it sound too moralistic. The value of a good literary work lies less in any paraphrasable message than in the richness of the imaginative experience that the work offers. To engage us with that experience, suspense is necessary. A student, after reading *The Power and the Glory*, said to me: "This novel is a good page-turner, isn't it?" Obviously, he meant that it gripped him and made him read on rapidly to discover the outcome. One secret of "a good page-turner" is this. Early in the reading, we formulate some big question which engages our mind and emotions and which seems to have at least two opposed answers. As we proceed through the work, we inspect the accumulating evidence to see which of the answers may prevail. The more evenly balanced the evidence, for and against, the greater is our suspense. The authorial trick is to keep the scales in motion but not clattering down on one side or the other. In the case of *The Power and the Glory*, we are soon engaged by this question: Will the priest elude pursuit, or will he be caught and killed? Evidence to *support* the notion that he will escape is ample. He is intelligent, kind and resourceful, and we like him. But the evidence *against* his escape is also ample. He is absent-minded, he is isolated; and his pursuers are numerous and are driven by the lieutenant, who himself is intelligent and resourceful. What's more, the terrain is often hostile, and the priest's sense of duty imperils him. So there is *one* big suspense-principle. But Greene loves paradoxes. So he gives another, and conflicting, suspense-principle. Now the big question is this: Will the priest evade his religious destiny or fulfil it? Evidence that he will evade it includes, again, the fact that he is so resourceful: he could indeed manage to cross the border into safety; and he does so. In contrast, evidence that he will fulfil it includes the fact that he repeatedly jeopardises his own safety by trying to minister to those who request or need him. At the beginning, he *literally* misses the boat to safety because a woman requests his priestly ministration. At the end, he *metaphorically* misses the boat to safety because, although he has crossed the border, he responds to the request to attend the dying gangster. So Greene has mastered a *double* suspense principle in which the theological plays against the secular. Our secular imagination wants the priest to escape. Our theological imagination, in contrast, wants the priest to fulfil his destiny: which is not to escape but to be a martyr and eventually a saint. A janiform structure thus emerges. I suspect that many an atheistic or agnostic reader has been seduced not only into imagining that the most important character in this novel is, after all, God rather than the priest, but also into estimating how God's intentions are being fulfilled as the events unfold.

Another reason for the appeal of *The Power and the Glory* is that, although the territory traversed is a familiar Greeneland, it is now a Greeneland within which there is scope for sympathy, compassion and even joy. Since his hero must express the Christian virtues of love, charity and compassion, Greene is obliged to mitigate his own former sombre harshness. In such previous novels as *Stamboul Train* and *Brighton Rock*, and even in the non-fictional *Lawless Roads*, that harshness came all too easily to Greene's depressive imagination. In *The Power and the Glory*, Greene moves towards a more humane balance. If the priest's daughter seems tainted, young Coral exudes hope. "Hate was just a failure of imagination", reflects the priest. This novel works hard to encourage an extension of the sympathetic imagination. The wretchedness of the villagers in the forest; the squalor of the prisoners in the jail; the mourning of the Indian woman with her slain child; even animals such as the burdened mule and the maimed dog: all these are evoked by an eye which does not glare with fascinated disgust, but rather seeks to observe, discriminate and understand. As it does so, it craftily plays a gamut of theological and political feelings in the reader. Right-wing, liberal and left-wing feelings are mingled: the traditional Catholic faith is made to seem relevant to the present, and is linked to the sympathetic observation of the poor and the oppressed. There Greene anticipates 'Liberation Theology' by about thirty years.

Another feature of the novel which may be under-estimated is the nature of its realism. *The Power and the Glory* is richly evocative, and the descriptions of people and places have strange vividness. In a novel, realistic descriptions can be tedious if they report what we already know or assume to be the case. On the other hand, realistic descriptions can be persuasive and engaging if they offer information which is cogent but new to us, or if they surprise us into fresh awareness of a situation, or if they seem to be looking at the situation from an unexpected angle. Repeatedly in *The Power and the Glory*, Greene provides this oblique and surprising quality. Here are just three examples. On his journey, the priest reflects: "One of the oddest things about the world these days was that there were no clocks – you could go a year without hearing one strike." And we learn that that's because the clocks were on the churches, which have been demolished. Second example: when the *jefe*, the Chief of Police, is playing billiards, the score is recorded not on a board but by means of rings strung on a cord across the room; and when the chief's game is briefly interrupted by the lieutenant, we are told that "somebody raised a cue and surreptitiously pushed back one of the jefe's rings". The little detail of cheating gives utter plausibility to that unexpected method of keeping score, and in turn to the locality and its denizens. Third example: this is how the novel describes the priest's entry into the yard where he is to be shot:

> A small man came out of a side door: he was held up by two policemen, but you could tell that he was doing his best – it was only that his legs were not fully under his control. They paddled him across to the opposite wall [...]. (215)

The reflective priest whom we have known so intimately is suddenly seen in a coolly objectifying perspective as "A small man". You can tell he's "doing his best", we are told: presumably because he holds his head up and looks determined; but of course his legs are not fully under his control: when we are in a state of terror, our knees go wobbly. And that word "paddled" in "They paddled him across" is unexpected but precise: if you paddle a canoe, there is an alternating pressure on first one side and then the other, and a slightly zigzagging course; so that word "paddled" fits surprisingly well the motion of someone who, with legs disabled by fear, is being swung along between two other people.

Another open secret of the book's descriptive vividness is the abundance of "leopards". In the autobiographical volume *A Sort of Life*, Greene says that he used to be all too fond of "leopards", that being his term for similes which are unusual, indeed so unusual that they may seem to leap out at you.[13] Like the "conceits" of English metaphysical poetry, some may be remarkable by their oddity rather than by their aptness. They often have a quality of paradox because they link the abstract with the concrete, or vice versa. Two quite famous examples are: "He drank the brandy down like damnation"; and "She carried her responsibilities carefully like crockery across the hot yard". The former may seem rather melodramatic and parody-inviting, but its context is the priest's reflections on how easy it is to relapse into complacency, and the intensity is appropriate to someone who feels (as Marlowe's Mephistopheles asserted) that Hell lies within him. The latter simile is fine: carrying responsibilities "like crockery" evokes succinctly young Coral's earnest concern to discharge her duties well; we think of someone carrying a heavy load of fragile china. But there are hundreds of original similes in the novel; and some are very striking. For instance, when Mrs Fellows gives her

13 *A Sort of Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 138.

husband a rapid frightened smile, we are told, “It was like a trick you do with a blackboard. Draw a dog in one line without lifting the chalk – and the answer, of course, is a sausage”. The simile, recalling that “dog” is a colloquial term for “sausage”, is an ingenious way of suggesting a response which is rapid and proficient, but deceptive and disappointing. Then, we are told this of the priest: “His conscience began automatically to work: it was like a slot machine into which any coin could be fitted, even a cheater’s blank disk.” So, even a fraudulent appeal evokes the priest’s habitual charity; even virtue may seem mechanical. Another strikingly complex example is this one: “an oil-gusher [...] was like the religious sense in man, cracking suddenly upwards, a black pillar of fumes and impurity, running to waste”. That one seems peculiarly negative, but it is prompted by the priest’s encounter with the Judas-figure, who feverishly seeks to confess his sins: he gushes.

Greene said that he became embarrassed by his leopards, and sought to eliminate them from his later prose. Indeed, his prose did, in later years, become more transparent and less stylised. Frankly, I think that’s a pity. These striking similes of his repeatedly surprise us into fresh linkages and reflections. Furthermore, in *The Power and the Glory*, they connect well with another engaging feature, which is this: the priest’s reflections are often intelligently paradoxical too. You could derive an anthology of Greene’s subversive “wit and wisdom” from this novel alone. Consider these three instances. “Man was so limited: he hadn’t even the ingenuity to invent a new vice”. “It was too easy to die for what was good or beautiful.....; it needed a God to die for the half-hearted and the corrupt”. “God might forgive cowardice and passion, but was it possible to forgive the habit of piety?”. In each case, a radical thesis is compressed into an aphorism which aspires to the condition of paradox. At one point in the novel, the priest reflects that if the Judas-figure betrays him for seven hundred pesos, this, far from damning the Judas figure, might actually save him:

> [A] year without anxiety might save this man’s soul. You only had to turn up the underside of any situation and out came scuttling these small absurd contradictory situations. He had given way to despair – and out of that had emerged a human soul and love – not the best love, but love all the same. (97)

Fiercely intelligent reflections, infused with the paradoxical, the janiform, and perhaps even with the saintly. The lack of anxiety might save the Judas figure from vice and damnation; and the priest links that man’s situation to his own, for he had found that the sin of despair led to the sin of fornication, and thereby engendered new life (his daughter’s life), and thus engendered love. And a typical bold linkage of abstract and concrete lurks in that metaphorical phrasing: “You only had to turn up the underside of any situation and out came scuttling these small absurd contradictory situations”: the metaphor links paradoxical reflections with the familiar experience of turning over a stone in the garden and finding earwigs and woodlice hurrying out. T. S. Eliot once remarked that to John Donne, the metaphysical poet, “a thought [...] was an experience; it modified his sensibility”.[14] In *The Power and the Glory*, the descriptions of localities are, of course, richly sensuous: you may recall the “sour green smell [...] from the river”, the snake that “hissed away into the grass like a match-flame”, and the stench from the “full and very heavy pail” in the prison-cell. But Eliot’s point about Donne seems to apply particularly well to Greene: because you find that in *The Power and the Glory*, original thinking is repeatedly given a sensuous familiarity, while familiar thinking is given originality by the vividness of expression. For instance: “Why should anyone listen to *his* prayers? [...] He could feel his prayers weigh him down like undigested food.” In those three words, “like undigested food”, you find shock-tactics, paradox, a familiar notion and unexpected precision. Sometimes, when reading such prose, you may recall Virginia Woolf’s suggestion that the meaning of life is a matter not of “the great revelation” but of local illuminations: just “matches struck unexpectedly in the dark”.[15] Greene’s novel is an open matchbox.

Comedy

One of the features which give a paradoxical quality to *The Power and the Glory* is this. Although the main plot obviously has grim, sombre, painful and tragic aspects, the narrative invokes various comic modes. The work as a whole is richly ironic, and sometimes the ironies yield a dry or dark form of comedy.

When the priest, utterly weary, arrives one night at a village, he simply wishes to sleep, but an old man infuriatingly insists that the villagers are eager to confess their sins to him now. The priest

14 T. S. Eliot: ‘The Metaphysical Poets’: *Selected Essays*, p. 287.

15 Virginia Woolf: *To the Lighthouse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964; rpt., 1970), p. 183.

reluctantly agrees to hear them, but weeps in exhaustion and anger. The old man then wakes up the sleeping villagers, and, though they wail that they are weary and only wish to sleep, he insists that they must now confess to the priest – who is clearly "very holy", for he is "weeping for our sins". Mordant comedy: the exhausted people reluctantly confess to an exhausted reluctant confessor.

A large instance of darkly ironic comedy is the priest's attempt to buy wine for communion. Beer is permitted by the state, but other alcoholic drinks are not, and in any case the priest is a fugitive, so his position is doubly risky. He negotiates with a beggar, who in turn negotiates with the governor's cousin. Eventually, after tough haggling, the cousin sells the priest a bottle of brandy and a bottle of wine. The priest courteously offers the vendor a glass of brandy; but of course the cousin takes a glass of wine, while the priest and the beggar drink brandy. Then the cousin decides to have a second and a third glass, while the priest watches in dismay. Next, the Chief of Police arrives, and has a glass of wine, takes the bottle, and proceeds to reminisce. And what does he reminisce about? Of all things, his first communion, and the thrill his soul experienced at the time, and the fact that later he was dutifully obliged to shoot the priest who had officiated. The whisky priest begs to be allowed to take the remaining wine away; but the Chief of Police empties the bottle, and is then puzzled to see the priest weeping. It is a scene of drunken comedy given a bitter edge as we see the wine intended for communion gratifying the priest-killer, the Chief of Police. The novel also, however, provides a running joke about the Chief's tooth-ache, and that has its culmination when the whisky-priest dies. The Chief, in the dentist's chair, is left moaning in pain, because Tench the dentist is distracted from dealing with his tooth; and he is distracted by his reflections about the priest who has just been shot. It is a kind of revenge against the Chief of Police. Numerous scenes in the novel have this black-comic or mordantly ironic edge.

Then we find that a more important mode of comedy emerges. Long ago, in the 4th century BC, Plato's *Symposium* had described a banquet at which Socrates was engaged in debate. At its close, Socrates claims that a great writer could be a creator of both tragedy and comedy. But the hearers fall into drunken sleep, so Socrates goes home, and we never learn his full argument. The proof of his claim is provided, however, by Greene's *The Power and the Glory.* In a profound sense, this novel is both tragic and comic. The whisky priest dies young: a good man is destroyed early. Readers may experience that eloquently-depicted waste which is a characteristic of great literary tragedies. Nevertheless, the priest has died for a continuing cause. Readers may imagine him as a martyr and potential saint; one whose sufferings gain heavenly reward. If you are a believer, you may think that Greene has created the following big paradox: *The Power and the Glory* reconciles human tragedy with what Dante originally termed simply *La Commedia* – the Divine Comedy. If, however, you are a sceptic, you may find another big paradox: *The Power and the Glory* depicts the human readiness to live, kill and die for ideological illusions: a perennial tragicomedy. The sceptic should still remember the Conradian observation that even the person who says "I have no illusions" has retained at least that illusion.[16] And, as Graham Greene reminds us, while the living close the eyes of the dead, the dead open the eyes of the living – as his words still do. While the dead priest is commemorated by the holy relic of a bloodstained handkerchief, Graham Greene continues to live in the vivid pages of *The Power and the Glory.* And we, the faithful and faithless alike, can experience that easy paradox as a mundane but sustaining miracle.

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16 Conrad: *Under Western Eyes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 175.

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