



Graham Greene's World of Pity and Piety: A Study of his novels *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*.

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It is interesting to note that in 1938, both Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene; the two contemporary Catholic novelists were commissioned to visit Mexico, particularly the Southern Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas, where the decree outlawing religion was most sternly enforced by the Cardenas regime. Both were concerned with the actions of the Cardenas regime in expropriating British and American oil holdings and ruthlessly suppressing the activities of the Roman Catholic Church in that country.

Waugh, whose book was published a few months later than Greene's, had been commissioned by the British Cowdray oil interests who had suffered from the confiscations of the Communist Regime. Greene had been asked by his publisher, William Heinemann, to explore and if possible to write a book on the "fiercest persecution of religion, anywhere since the reign of Elizabeth,"¹ which occurred in Mexico.

The contexts are slightly different. Waugh never allowed his book to be reprinted because it was originally commissioned by an industrial concern. Greene's, *The Lawless Roads* is more purely a "travel book" than Waugh's largely historical account, though that contains a good deal of vivid description of personal experience. *The Lawless Roads* is still more significant because it resulted in one of Greene's best novels, *The Power and the Glory*. Both his travel books anticipate a novel: *Journey without Maps* led through a process of incubation to *The Heart of the Matter* and *The Lawless Roads* to *The Power and the Glory*.

"What is extraordinary about *The Power and the Glory*," says Norman Sherry, "is that it should have been written by a man who spent only five weeks in Mexico, one week in Villahermosa and one night in Frontera and yet re-created the country and situation so convincingly in his novel that he won the praise of a Mexican priest."² Father Munos who knew Frontera where the novel begins, said in Mexico City in 1978:

"I think his masterpiece is *The Power and the Glory*...

The first three paragraphs of the novel when he gives you camera shots of the place, why it is astounding. You are in the place."³

Writing, "to Greene, as he confesses in *Ways of Escape*," is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose, or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation."⁴ As much as his writing, Greene saw his travels too, as ways of escape. Greene's travel books, *Journey without Maps* and *The Lawless Roads* offer an intensely personal response to repellent people in a hostile landscape. Yet the best work in this genre, they are voyages into self-discovery that explore and reveal the traveller as well as the country; they are far more revealing than his rather reticent autobiographies.

The Lawless Roads and *The Power and the Glory*- Greene's first overtly Catholic books belong to a distinguished but consistently negative tradition of English books on Mexico, like Lawrence's, *The Plumed Serpent* and Mornings in Mexico or Huxley's, *Beyond the Mexique Bay* and Waugh's, *Robbery under Law*.

D.H. Lawrence is the dominant influence in *The Lawless Roads* as Conrad was in *Journey without Maps*. Like Lawrence, Greene has found travel, a splendid lesson in disillusion. In his review of H.M. Tomlinson's *Gifts of Fortune*, Lawrence wrote that, though the pattern of his own travel books moved from enchantment to disillusion, the quest itself was still valid:

“We travel perhaps, with a secret and absurd hope of setting foot on Hesperides or running on boat up a little creek and landing in the Garden of Eden. The hope is always defeated. There is no Garden of Eden and the Hesperides never were. Yet in our very search for them, we touch the coasts of illusion, and come into contact with other worlds.”⁵ Yet Greene also sought a primitive Eden in Liberia, and felt the arduous quest was worth the risk of disillusionment.”

Like Lawrence and other disillusioned travellers, Greene is shocked by the sharp contrast between the promising image and the grim reality of Mexico. In a temporarily happy mood he is almost ready, to think of Mexico in terms of quiet, gentleness and devotion. But the real Mexico, Greene finds, is dirt and darkness, dead cockroaches on the floor and the sour smell of urine from the toilets.

In a late interview about Mexico Greene said, "I'd gone out there to write, not a travel book exactly, but a book on the religious persecutions, without any idea of writing a novel and the ingredients came to one."⁶ Though the decision to go to Mexico may have been taken as the result of the execution of Padre Pro. S.J., the main ingredient, or the "Jamesian germ" which led to the creation of the Whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory*, was the discovery that in Tabasco "every priest was hunted down or shot, except one who existed for ten years, in the forest and the swamps venturing out only at night; his few letters, I was told recorded an awful sense of impotence - to live in constant danger and yet be able to do so little, it hardly seemed worth the horror."⁷

Although the setting of *The Power and the Glory* is a place like Tabasco, a major influence on the novel is a poem by a writer who would never have dared to visit the wilds of Mexico. The novel draws parallels with Eliot's poem, *The Hollow Men*.

"Once again" says Shelden, "Greene's admiration for T.S. Eliot, led him to do some creative borrowing. *The Power and the Glory* is merely a prose extension of Eliot's vision of a cactus land', peopled by lost souls who find themselves surrounded by broken images of an abandoned faith. The hollow men wander aimlessly in a landscape of dry grass and ruined buildings, with rats crawling over the rubble. They want believe in something but have no faith left. They struggle with the phrase, for Thine is the kingdom, not remembering what comes next in Lord's Prayer. What comes next of course is "The Power and the Glory."⁸

The hollow man in Greene's novels finds that he is the last representative of God in a land, which recognizes neither His Power nor his Glory," says Shelden."⁹

Churches have been demolished, and no priest has dared to remain in the area except the hollow man, who has lived in isolation for so long that he has created his own version of Catholicism. He was a rather conventional priest before the official campaign of persecution began but as soon as he is left on his own, he abandons all the old rules. He stays in the Godless land not because he is brave, but because he wants to live by his own rules. He drinks heavily; plays card tricks, sleeps with a woman, and makes her pregnant.

When he is briefly imprisoned for possessing contraband alcohol he tells a fellow prisoner "Sins have so much beauty."¹⁰ He praises the beauty of fallen angels.

Because he is the last priest, God is stuck with him, whether he likes it or not. But as the Hollow Man, he knows that he represents nothing. The old religion has been vanquished, and his whisky and card tricks are a pitiful substitute for *The Power and the Glory*.

Hate and suspicion were what Greene brought out of Mexico, but if you are writing a novel about religious fundamentals and are enquiring into the human soul and its manipulation by a secular power - perhaps a basis of hate and suspicion is not a bad thing. *The Power and the Glory* deals after all with a cosmic war in human terms.

Greene's main theme expressed in the epigraph from Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, which is quoted twice in the text, concerns an appalling vision of a world without god and without hope. A world in which the "terrible aboriginal calamity," seemed to cast its grim shadow everywhere. The images of seediness are insistent throughout *The Power and the Glory* and through them Greene renders sensible,

tangible and arduous, closed world of sin, suffering and death which defines and is defined by the protagonist who is inescapably caught in it. Most of the characters and incidents of *The Power and the Glory* can be recognized as having an earlier existence in the pages of *The Lawless Roads*. As Greene states in the *Ways of Escape*:

"Now of course, when I re-read *The Lawless Roads*, I can easily detect many of the characters in *The Power and the Glory*. The old Scotsman, Dr. Roberto whom I met in Villahermosa with his cherished scorpion in a little glass bottle... he told me of the kindly disreputable Padre Rey of Panama with his wife and daughter and the mice not a scorpion which he kept in a glass lamp so it was the doctor who put him on track of Father Jose... Above all, he presented me with my subject: the protagonist of *The Power and the Glory*. I asked about the priest in Chiapas who had fled. "Oh," he said, he was just what we call a whisky priest." He had taken one of his sons to be baptised, but the priest was drunk and would insist on the child Brigitta. "He was little loss, poor man."¹¹

But long before the drunken priest another character had come on board his awful boat in Frontera, where the story was to open-the dentist, Mr. Tench, who made his living with gold fillings even in that abandoned little port. He was as complete in *The Lawless Roads* as in *The Power and the Glory*.

Even the other characters in *The Power and the Glory*, seem to have an earlier existence- an amiable corrupt Chief of Police in Villahermosa, a Mestizo, with curly sideburns and yellow fangs at either end of his mouth- who was to become the Judas of the story.

All these characters weren't invented ones; they were already there, beckoning from the pages of *The Lawless Roads*. But says Greene, I had not found the idealism or integrity of the lieutenant of *The Power and the Glory* among the police and pistoleros I had actually encountered-I had to invent him as a counter to the failed priest: the idealistic police officer who stifled life from the best possible motives: the drunken priest who continued to pass life on."¹²

Greene remarks, "So it is that the material of a novel accumulates, without the author's knowledge, not always easily, not always without fatigue or pain or even fear. I think *The Power and the Glory* is the only novel I have written to a thesis.... But I had always even when I was a school boy listened with impatience to the scandalous stories of tourists, concerning the priests they had encountered in remote Latin villages (this priest had a mistress and was constantly drunk), for I had been adequately taught in my Protestant history books what Catholics believed, I could distinguish even then between the man and his office. Many years later, as a Catholic in Mexico, I read and listened to stories of corruption which were said to have justified the persecution of the Church under Calles and under his successor and rival Cardenas, but I had also observed for myself how courage and the sense of responsibility had revived with persecution -I had seen the devotion of peasants praying in the priestess Churches and I had attended Masses in upper rooms where the Sanctus bell could not sound for fear of the Police."¹³

Greene's vivid sensibility made him persistently hesitate between Catholicism and Communism even till the moment of his actual conversion to Roman Catholicism. Intellectually, Greene had been fully aware of the rival dogmas and machinery of the Church and the Communist state; hence, against the failed priest he found it necessary to invent the lieutenant in his inflexibility.

The priest and the lieutenant are the human agents of the rival ideologies. But they are not so easy to distinguish. That we do not know their names strengthens the parable already set-up in the title taken from the Lord's Prayer.

Catholicism imagines a heaven, as a world hereafter, a vision that can be actualized only after death. Communism dreams of a heaven on earth - a heaven that can be achieved here and now by rectifying the mistakes, aberrations and vices of the social order. But a big interrogation mark stands against the beatific vision of the Communist ideal.

The two representatives of the opposed dogmas actually complement each other. The priest and the lieutenant, remarks A.A. Devitis "are doubles in the Dostoevskian and Conradian sense, each suggesting what the other should be, each accenting the pity that is in the other while denying the evil."¹⁴

Greene renders the highest justice to both the men and their ideologies so much so that Paul West is led to remark that: "Greene is on both sides, the whisky priest's and the police lieutenant's. Both embody a discipline; both present modified extremes."¹⁵

The priest has known early the good things of life, an education in an American seminary. Moreover, he was ambitious for promotion and proud of himself with a pride, which worked him, to stay when the other priests have fled. Letting himself go, his qualities slip into vices; he drinks and he is the father of an illegitimate child. The lieutenant hates, "the immense demands made from the altar steps by men who didn't know the meaning of sacrifice."¹⁶ He will wipe out the past. In describing him, Greene puts him on a footing with his adversary gives him the dignity of an idea."¹⁷ 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...."¹⁸ He had no sympathy at all with the weaknesses of the flesh: "This was his own land and he would have walled it in if he could with steel, until it had eradicated from it everything which reminded him how it had once appeared to a miserable child."¹⁹ His sense of mission is strong and he would do anything for children like Luis and his companions:

"All that was poor, superstitious and corrupt... He wanted to destroy everything to be alone, without any memories at all. Life began five years ago." But all he has to offer them is a vacant universe and a cooling world."²⁰ The Power and the Glory is a considerable advance on Brighton Rock because in it, good and evil, weakness and strength are more truly mingled in the central character of the priest than in the separate characters of Pinkie and Rose.

Thus, the novel opens with the priest about to escape to Vera Cruz. A child arrives to fetch a doctor for his dying mother and priest goes with him as though he is summoned to an occasion.

Notes & References

1. Graham Greene: Ways of Escape, p. 81.
2. Norman Sherry: The Life of Graham Greene, p. 695.
3. Ibid. p. 696.
4. Ways of Escape, p. 9.
5. "Graham Greene: A Revaluation, New Essays (ed. By Jeffrey Meyers), P. 48.
6. Ibid, p. 66.
7. Graham Greene: The Lawless Roads, p. 129.
8. Michael Shelden: The Man Within, p. 263.
9. Ibid. p. 262.
10. Graham Greene: The Power and the Glory, p. 130.
11. Ways of Escape, pp. 82-83.
12. Ibid p. 85.
13. Ibid.
14. A.A. Devitis: Graham Greene, p. 87.
15. Paul West: The Modern Novel, p. 94.
16. Graham Greene: The Power and the Glory, p. 22.
17. Ibid. p. 23.
18. Ibid. p. 24.
19. Ibid. p. 25.
20. Ibid. p. 58.