

Graham Greene and the Modern Catholic Novel Today

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Abstract—The present paper focuses on the Catholic novel by attempting to provide an answer to the question whether the Catholic novel still exists as a powerful genre in today's literary landscape. Our point of view is that readers in general and even non-Catholic readers still appreciate this distinguished genre as nowadays Catholic novelists have enabled the dialogue between modernity and the Church. The writer who best typifies the Catholic writer's rebellious and ambivalent relationship with the Church and with modernity is Graham Greene. This paper's aim was to show the way in which Graham Greene's famous novel *The Power and the Glory* blends catholic aesthetics with modern narrative devices.

Index Terms—Catholic novel, graham greene, modernism, religious literature, paradox, The power and the glory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Religion is an important force in our contemporary world. The idea that modernity would be secular was established as a dominant thought in the twentieth century. However, far from fading away, religion has continued to live side by side with modernity, challenging liberal, scientific and secular views. Similarly, in the field of literature as much as in other fields, Catholic writers have produced great religious literature while the period leading up to the Second Vatican Council has come to be known by readers and scholars alike as the golden age of Catholic writing. Half a century later, since the end of this golden literary era, the Catholic novel is described by some critics as “a literary phenomenon belonging to the past”. However we must ask ourselves whether this is really true. Is the Catholic novel really “dead”?

II. THE CATHOLIC NOVEL TODAY

In a 2007 article entitled *The Catholic Novel Is Alive and Well in England* Marian Crowe identifies this phenomenon as emerging from the chaos that has characterized the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, Crowe points out that the general critical opinion is that the great Catholic novels are the ones reflecting pre-Vatican II writing. But what exactly are ‘Catholic novels’ and ‘Catholic authors’? The very attempt to define the concept of “Catholic author” takes on different meanings as it seems to approach two kinds of directions. Thus, as Crowe notes, on the one hand we have classic literary Catholic writings which illustrate doctrines of Catholic faith, while on the other we have a new kind of

Catholic writing which is the expression of a personal vision of human life, imbued with sacramental symbolism. Although these Catholic writings draw on elements of Christian doctrine their purpose is rather artistic than apologetic. They do not paint an idealized picture of what a man should be rather their role is to show life through the eyes of their characters' spiritual make-up. Thus, most of the novelists we associate with Catholicism - Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark, Graham Greene are those belonging to the second category which refuses to separate the sacred from the secular.

Another distinction we feel compelled to make is that between traditional pre-Vatican II Catholic prose and that arriving after the Council's proclamation characterized by a growing rapprochement with secularity. In what concerns the first category we must point out the fact that it originated in the French Catholic Revival and it was the result of the disillusionment with the promises of the so-called Enlightenment and the age of Reason. Traditional Catholic novelists defined themselves in opposition to a number of values such as the World Wars, industrialism, materialism or modernity itself. Catholicism's relationship to the world changed after Vatican II as the church no longer expressed the same uniform worldview as it once did. In other words, as expressed by Crowe in the previously mentioned article, as the life of Catholics became more chaotic and less preoccupied with morals, the struggle to forge a clearly defined Catholic mode in the midst of continuous change became more and more of a challenging task. Commenting upon David Lodge's perspective, Crowe suggests that one cannot talk about the Catholic Novel in sharply defined terms anymore as the emphasis on spiritual life has much diminished. As David Lodge expressed it in his novel *How Far Can You Go?* we notice that “at some point in the nineteen-sixties, Hell disappeared. No one could say for certain when this happened. First it was there, and then it wasn't.” (qtd. in Crowe). Thus, in attempting to provide an answer to the question whether the Catholic novel still exists as a powerful genre in today's literary landscape, our point of view is that readers in general and even non-Catholic readers still appreciate this distinguished genre. Nowadays Catholic novelists have incorporated recent developments in Church and society into their work in ways that highlight new possibilities for Catholic fiction. Their novels are nuanced treatments of the problem of religious belief in today's society often built upon absurd situations. Simultaneously, the work of Graham Greene, David Lodge, Heinrich Boll, J.R Tolkien, to name only a few, catches the comic spirit of some aspects of Catholic life which might seem ridiculous to an outsider.

Accordingly, it should be noted that the striking feature common to all these writers is, as numerous critics point out,

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the coexistence of their Catholic vision together with their participation in modern society. Our study of Catholic literary culture has brought us to the question of whether it is possible to be both a major writer and a Catholic at the same time. The writer who best typifies the struggle between one's calling to be a novelist and one's calling to be a believer is precisely Graham Greene. His work can be considered a prototype for the Catholic writer's rebellious and ambivalent relationship with the Church and with modernity. Moreover his work typifies both the religious themes and patterns present in the early twentieth century Catholic revival (which structures his artistic vision through the lens of Catholic dogma) as well as Greene's treatment of themes which enabled the dialogue between modernity and the Church. His religious imagination reflects the inherent dilemmas of his century.

III. GRAHAM GREENE'S THE POWER AND THE GLORY A MODERN CATHOLIC NOVEL: A CASE STUDY

Graham Greene travelled to Mexico in the spring of 1938 commissioned by a London publishing house to report the persecution of the Mexican Catholic Church. Out of this experience was born the author's most paradoxical and popular work, the novel *The Power and the Glory*.

The Power and the Glory represents a plea for the religious sense whose ultimate aim is to illuminate the tragic destiny of a fallen humanity (Murata). Furthermore, the author himself acknowledged that *The Power and the Glory* was the only novel he wrote in keeping with a thesis, and that this thesis is Christian dogma. In light of the above mentioned statements made by the author himself, we consider it entirely appropriate to refer to the novel *The Power and the Glory* as to a parable of faith where Christian and pagan elements meet and contribute to the novel's undeniable value. In light of its multifaceted theme it becomes clear why the novel *The Power and the Glory* has also been condemned for its "paradoxical nature". Moreover, from an interesting 2001 article published by *The Atlantic* magazine and suggestively entitled *Graham Greene's Vatican Dossier*, we find out that the Vatican censors have actually demanded Greene to make changes in the text of his novel. The Holy Office, whose function is to examine suspect books, condemned the novel because it was too "paradoxical" and "dealt with extraordinary circumstances". The obvious faulty reasoning could have been due to the incapacity of the censors to grasp the message of the conceptual problems posed by Graham Green's writings. This was also stressed by another Catholic author, Evelyn Waugh, who at the time wrote in Greene's defence "it was as fatuous as unjust – a vile misreading of a noble book". Later on, when Greene himself met Pope Paul VI, the latter assured him: "Mr. Greene, some aspects of your books are certain to offend some Catholics, but you should pay no attention to that" (quoted in Goodman).

Having delineated some aspects necessary to the understanding of the genesis of what many novelists and critics consider to be Graham Greene's masterpiece, we can safely return to our critical endeavour, proceeding with the study of these paradoxical aspects which define Graham Greene's writing. In light of the aforementioned all evidence,

we aim to show the way in which the author blends catholic aesthetics with modern narrative devices.

We will set out to analyze the theological aesthetic which helps us define *The Power and the Glory* as a Catholic novel with special emphasis on the ways in which God's voice is displayed as well as to the relationship between secular ideologies and religion (illustrated by the conflict between the lieutenant and the priest). Like his French contemporaries' novels from which he took inspiration, Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* draws on all the specific ingredients of the French Catholic novel - and the most obvious here is the analogy between the whisky priest and Charles Péguy's concept of the "sinner at the heart of Christianity".

The unnamed priest of the novel or "the whiskey priest" as he sometimes refers to himself, is the character around whom the novel's most important questions revolve. When the story opens the priest is tempted to leave Mexico and spends most of his time on the run from the police, driven by doubt and searching for a moral purpose in his life. Many times in the novel the priest experiences flashbacks of his days of comfort before the persecution. His shallow self from those days fades away as he is pursued by a police lieutenant who believes the Church exploits the poor. On his journey from village to village he meets his daughter born from of a secret affair with one of his parishioners and discovers his love for her in spite of her being born from sin. Equally important is also the encounter with the mestizo, a half caste who recognizes him and tries to betray him for the reward offered by the police. The priest finally manages to escape into the next province, yet on his way to a peaceful life, he meets again the mestizo who preys him to return to hear the confession of a dying American gangster. The priest understands the mestizo will betray him, but he goes with him anyway although he is aware that this means his capture and death.

From the very first pages of the novel Graham Greene's unnamed priest describes himself as unworthy of his priesthood, a bad priest who in a state of drunkenness has conceived a daughter. Yet, in spite of all his shortcomings, the priest struggles to fulfil God's will by continuing his mission. Although Graham Greene takes his thematic inspiration from French theological aesthetics, it is quite evident that in terms of narrative modes of expression, the author decisively uses a more modern technique by rendering the story exclusively through the main character's point of view (the authenticity of which cannot be verified by a second narrative voice). Thus, the main character is left to his own judgment, which inevitably leads him to an anguished state of doubt with regard to his salvation. This is nowhere more evident than in the three strange situations in the novel when the protagonist is on the verge of escaping over the border into the nearby province. Each time he is called back to perform the religious sacraments to a dying person the whisky priest's consciousness struggles with his doubts, with his urge to arrive to a safe place. After a long interior struggle he finally chooses to succumb to God's will and sees all these obstacles as a part of God's plan for him. The whisky priest's reflection in interior monologue clearly depicts the complexities of his moral struggle:

- He didn't sleep again: he was striking yet another bargain with God. This time, if he escaped from the prison, he would escape altogether. He would go north, over the border. His escape was so improbable that, if it happened, it couldn't be anything else but a sign—an indication that he was doing more harm by his example than good by his occasional confessions. (*The Power and the Glory*, 158)

Greene's attitude towards matters such as doubt versus divine grace, belief versus non belief find an absolute incarnation in Graham Greene's protagonist, the unnamed whiskey priest. Similarly, the French Catholic theme of the 'sinner at the heart of Christianity' finds an incarnation in the whiskey priest as the writer wants readers to be silent observers of the way in which the main protagonist undergoes a change of vision - paradoxically through his very sinfulness. The reader perceives the whiskey priest's sinful nature precisely through the character's own judgments and interior monologue. All the priest's choices are inevitably passed through the sieve of ambiguity, doubt and anguish. His reflections are our only means of perceiving the protagonist's relationship with the divinity. In this respect, the novel's Catholic narrative has evolved decisively into a more modern direction. Furthermore, we notice how classic Catholic motives blend with many allegorical, mythical and even pagan elements. The obvious Catholic theme of purging one's sins through suffering or "willing damnation" is reinforced by the Biblical symbolism. It is obvious that the concept of the nameless priest as a man haunted by his sins can be interpreted in reference to the biblical story of Jesus. Another parallel between the priest and Christ can be exemplified by the chase and betrayal motif. Feeling pursued not only by the Mexican police forces but also by the mercy of God, the whiskey priest leaves behind his old self to help the wounded American even if this means being caught. Like Jesus, the whiskey priest understands the person that betrays him, the mestizo and sees in him a manifestation of the mercy of God.

In light of a mythical or archetypal reading, the reader anticipates very early that the half-caste must betray the whiskey priest although we do not know when this is going to happen or in what way it will re-enact the symbolic sacrifice of the Christ.

Besides mythical elements blending with Catholic themes another striking feature of *The Power and the Glory*'s literary force is expressed by the complex relationship between the two archetypal figures of the lieutenant and the priest. The two unnamed protagonists of Graham Greene's novel are prototypes of the opposite pairs of the hunter and the hunted but they also embody two distinct perspectives of an ideological conflict between a religious view and an ideological secular one. The paradoxical inversion of values Graham Greene uses when he describes the lieutenant also observed in the characterization of the whiskey priest is one of Graham Greene's essential modern techniques.

The lieutenant is described as having a very strong, resolute and rational temperament. As a disciplined man of principles, he is always sure of his decisions, he never hesitates and he has self-respect. Characterized in a sharp contrast, on the allegorical level of reading the two characters have been referred to by critics as two opposite poles. As

compared to the lieutenant, the whiskey priest is a coward, always on the run from the authorities, trying constantly to evade his responsibilities. He has a very bad opinion about himself, he is self-critical and driven by powerful guilt feelings. The evocation of these two characters and their implicit juxtaposition by contemplating the deficiencies of one man in order to caricature the virtues of the other, ultimately points to the force of Graham Greene's irony. Greene's emphasis is certainly on revealing the fact that although there are many similarities between the whiskey priest and the lieutenant, their very significant differences reveal the dangers of the cold idealism portrayed by the character of the lieutenant.

The lieutenant's hatred of priests originally stems from his concern for poor people who in his mind are wrong to believe in such superstitions as a merciful God: "it infuriated him to think that there were still people in the State who believed in a loving and merciful God" (*The Power and the Glory*, 19). The interrelated nature of the two characters is best brought to our attention in the final chapter of the novel along with the priest's arrest when the two characters finally come face to face in a dramatic encounter. In a broad sense, this encounter speaks about the conflict between the secular world-order represented by the lieutenant and the religious one represented by the priest. In other words, what the author tries to do is to provide us with a representation of the whiskey priest's piety antagonistic to the lieutenant's idealism. We are inclined to agree with Peter Mudford's opinion who considers that the question raised by Graham Greene in his novel is whether the end justifies the means. The lieutenant in his desire to protect children from a Church which tolerates poverty and abuse, has no problem killing people who stand in his way of capturing his pray. For the whiskey priest, however, the importance lies in the emotions and beliefs aroused by the ends. The lieutenant in his drive to capture the priest is animated by hate while the whiskey priest in spite of all his weakness, does not succumb to such feelings (pp.30-31).

We also appreciate critic Neil Synyard's perspective and originality in comparing Graham Greene's characters with Russian novelist Dostoyevsky's counterparts. According to the critic, the novel *The Power and the Glory* represents Graham Greene's most Dostoyevskyan novel in the sense that it best emphasizes the duality of human nature as he sees the whiskey priest and the lieutenant not as opposites but rather twin potentials of the same personality. When the lieutenant manages to finally capture the whiskey priest, they have a direct confrontation and the latter emerges for the first time as "good man" in the lieutenant's eyes. The whiskey priest is seen by the lieutenant as a modest, intelligent and compassionate man and this further proves that even this person who feeds on wrong ideals is capable of change. Thus, both the lieutenant and the whiskey priest alienate themselves from their old selves and their old values, and this constitutes another important aspect of their modern construction because it demonstrates how values become relative in Graham Greene's universe.

The human perspective, the predominant doubt, the irony, the rhetorical devices which place the burden of the interpretative key of the novel on the reader who has to

decide whether to accept or reject a religious interpretation, all prove the value of Graham Greene's writing. Although the reader comes to sympathize with the priest, the lieutenant is also depicted in a humane light, as a man who cares about the well being of poor people. After the lieutenant shoots the priest, there should be a moment of triumph, yet although the lieutenant has accomplished his mission he feels emptiness while doubts fill his mind. This sensation of vacancy makes him aware of his own emptiness and makes him question the legitimacy of his act. Has he done the right thing by killing the priest?

IV. CONCLUSION

Our brief analysis of the way in which traditional catholic motives and themes mingle with modern narrative techniques shows that Graham Greene's writing is much more experimental than it is given credit for. One of the most important techniques is represented by the new ways in which the author addresses the readers – Graham Greene's novel does not prove God's existence to the reader but rather invites him to choose a personal religious interpretation for his novels. In *The Power and the Glory*, the modern reader identifies with the main protagonist's doubt and uncertainty with regard to the perception of God and this brings the two of them closer.

The author also uses the mythic and allegorical qualities of the narrative in order to create this irony. The ironical perspective emerges particularly from the art of interpretation of the character's complex meaning. Thus, on the level of the plot the whiskey priest apparently loses during the direct confrontation with the lieutenant, however at a closer look and analysis of the final chapter of the novel, the priest's faith proves triumphant. Another pattern which reinforces irony, as shown by the conflict between the priest and the lieutenant, is the frequent use of juxtapositions. On the one hand the lieutenant is juxtaposed to the whiskey priest while on the other, from the perspective of an ideological framework, Catholicism is juxtaposed to Socialist Marxism's influences. It is interesting to notice how apparently the juxtaposed elements seem to contradict themselves, but in the long run

their association leads to a dissolution of their antagonism. Given all this evidence, we may safely arrive at the conclusion that Graham Greene's writing is both traditional and innovative in the sense that it employs modern narrative techniques specifically woven into a fabric of classic Catholic thematic ingredients. A conclusion section is not required. Although a conclusion may review the main points of the paper, do not replicate the abstract as the conclusion. A conclusion might elaborate on the importance of the work or suggest applications and extensions.

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