

The Silence of God in the Modern Catholic Novel: Graham Greene and French Catholic Novelists Adopting a Pascalian Deus Absconditus Perspective on Faith, Truth and Reason

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Abstract:

The paper examines the religious and aesthetic modernity of the interwar and post war Catholic novel using a combined narratological and Pascalian approach. The Catholic novels of Graham Greene, Julien Green, François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos are often connected with the literary Catholic revival emerging in the 1880s. I insist, however, that the modern, open Catholic novel emerging after the First World War and based on a Pascalian Deus Absconditus must be distinguished from the traditional, closed novel of the revival (1880-1914), which displays a providential God communicating through divinely omniscient narrators. In the modern Catholic novel, the Pascalian Deus Absconditus implies that the believer's confinement to an uncertain, human perspective produces/shapes religious open-mindedness and tolerance. The analysis of Graham Greene's Catholic novels aims at showing how the "pascalisation" of the modern Catholic novel is established through modernist narrative techniques (characterization, plot, narrative voice and focalisation), and that the very modernity of Greene's Catholic novels to a great extent is indebted to Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* from 1670.

Introduction

This paper examines the narrative representation of God in Graham Greene's Catholic novels. On the basis of examples mainly taken from the novel *The Power and the Glory* (1940) I aim to show that Graham Greene's God is basically a silent God, and that this representation of God is decisive for the modernity of his Catholic works.

Greene's Catholic novels are often, somewhat misleadingly, connected with the literary Catholic revival¹, a term used too inclusively not only about the original current of traditional Catholic literature emerging in France in the 1880s², but also about the French Catholic novel of the interwar and post war period. This broad use of the term has the unfortunate effect of creating the impression that all Catholic literature written in this period is essentially traditional and static, thus concealing possible historical, theological and aesthetic changes.

This paper adopts the perspective of change in one specific field of investigation, namely the narrative representation of God. I argue that an important rupture can be observed within this field between the traditional, early revival novel (1880-1914) and a more modern Catholic novel in the interwar and post war period, and that this rupture is closely related to the narrative representation of God. Whereas the early French revival novel constructs a present and communicating God, the new Catholic novel emerging after the First

¹ See for example Mark Bosco, *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9, 57, and Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution. The Catholic Revival in French Literature 1870-1914* (London: Constable, 1966), 358-59.

² The Catholic revival movement (including J.-K. Huysmans, Léon Bloy, Paul Claudel, Charles Péguy, Paul Bourget and Ernest Psichari) developed as a reaction against the fierce anticlericalism of the Third Republic culminating in the separation of Church and state in 1905. Richard Griffiths, in *The Reactionary Revolution. The Catholic Revival in French Literature 1870-1914* (London: Constable, 1966) includes a thorough analysis of the cultural and political background of the French Catholic revival.

World War constructs an absent and silent God. These two distinct representations of God are constructed by different uses of specific narrative techniques such as characterization, plot, narrative voice and focalisation. In France this new type of Catholic novel is developed by major novelists such as François Mauriac, Julien Green and Georges Bernanos, and my purpose is to show that Graham Greene belongs to this group of modern novelists.

I shall also try to point out some interesting parallels between the silent God in the modern Catholic novel and the hidden God in the Jansenist philosopher Blaise Pascal's apology for the Christian faith, *Pensées*, from 1670. My purpose is not to claim that Graham Greene shares Pascal's Jansenist views in general, but to show that he may be inspired by central aspects of Pascal's *Pensées*: the consistent use of the human perspective of the individual believer, to whom God necessarily appears as hidden.

The present and speaking God in the early Catholic revival novel

In order to show the novelty of Graham Greene's novels, I shall begin by presenting two examples of the narrative representation of God in the early revival novel. The first example is Léon Bloy's novel *La femme pauvre* (1897). The setting is the artistic circles of the reactionary Catholic revival movement. The heroine Clotilde is surrounded by flamboyant writers and artists who make vehement speeches against the French anticlerical republic and celebrate the saints, the miracles, the ideal Catholic community of the golden Middle Ages and the necessity to imitate the poverty, humiliation and suffering of Christ. Clotilde embodies all these religious ideas. She is a stock character endowed with the attributes of the traditional female saint: the face of a saint, a pious life in poverty borne with humble nobleness, a disposition to suffer, and mystical gifts resulting in recurrent mystical experiences, presentiments, dreams and visions. The initial prophecy made by an Orthodox missionary that one day she will be consumed by flames³ is a central leitmotif. One example is when Clotilde wakes up surrounded by flames (her bed curtains have caught fire) after a dream of premonition in which she sees her benefactor being stabbed to death and her future husband Léopold burning to death in flames (*La femme pauvre*, 236-38).

These predictions are not mere words or imagined inner experiences of the characters, since the predicted events actually happen at the reality level of the novel. Clotilde's benefactor and her husband die in exactly the same way as in her dream (*La femme pauvre*, 252, 389-90). Likewise, the characters' prayers are fulfilled at the reality level of the story. In accordance with the doctrine of the communion of saints, Clotilde and Léopold intercede for each other with God, offering their life in exchange for the salvation of their spouse. After having implored God to punish his wife's persecutors in exchange of his own life (*La femme pauvre*, 355-56), Léopold's prayers are heard. The persecutors die or go mad (*La femme pauvre*, 367-68) and Clotilde finds peace. The conversion of Leopold is an answer to Clotilde's prayer (*La femme pauvre*, 255). Delivered from unbelief by Clothilde, says the narrator, Léopold is instantly converted, grabbed by the throat by Some One stronger than himself and brought to God's abode of fire (*La femme pauvre*, 286-87).

By making the mystical predictions and the prayers come true as real events, the narrative establishes an unambiguous communication between man and a present God whose direct intervention in this world is manifest. That the events are indeed part of a divine plot is vouched for by the divinely omniscient narrator. One example is the death of Léopold, brought about by God's miracle, affirms the narrator (*La femme pauvre*, 285-86). Also Clotilde's mystical experience of burning in God's purifying flames at the end of the novel is narrated unequivocally as a genuine holocaust, God's consecration of her to sainthood. After

³ Léon Bloy, *La femme pauvre* (Paris: Editions de Mercure de France, 1972), 58. Hereafter cited in text.

Clotilde's ardent prayer to be made a saint by God she receives the certitude that God grants her prayer, whereupon the holocaust begins (*La femme pauvre*, 386-87). The omniscient narrator addresses encouraging words to Clotilde in the flames, saying that she must know that this holocaust is only a light version of God's breath, and reminding her of the missionary's prophesy that she is elected by God (*La femme pauvre*, 388).

The second example is Ernest Psichari's novel *Le voyage du centurion* (1915). In this novel, the same narrative methods are used to invoke a communicating, providential God, and with even bolder divine omniscience. The setting is the colonial French Sahara, the main theme is the holy mission of French colonisation in its traditional Catholic version associating Church and Army in a medieval, mystical conception of France as a nation elected by God to crusade for the temporal victory of the Church. The hero Maxence, officer in the colonial army, becomes the saint soldier of Christ during the course of action. Modern city life had made him deaf to God's appeal, but in the Saharan desert, the ideal setting for mystical contemplation, God's voice is heard, and here Maxence's conversion takes place.

In this novel, the omniscient narrator not only tells the readers that the conversion is conducted by God, he also shows us this divine intervention by visualizing a personified God in action. At first, the narrator hesitates to overstep the human perspective in a meta-narrative passage evoking the shortcomings of human thought, but he soon overcomes his scruples and assumes truly divine vision. While Maxence is struggling to believe, God leans out from his heaven and looks mercifully down on earth, observing his creatures while the saints' prayers go up to him⁴. God has become a novel character and now the narrator audaciously begins to represent God's very words addressed to Maxence. At first in the form of a monologue proclaiming that Maxence is chosen for salvation (*Le voyage du centurion*, 80-81), but before long Maxence is ready to speak with God in dramatic dialogues in direct speech covering nearly twenty pages, in which God repeats his promise to save him (*Le voyage du centurion*, 192-210). On the last page (*Le voyage du centurion* i, 242) the narrator can proclaim with certitude that the saint soldier marches victoriously to meet his Saviour.

As we have seen, the revival novelists Bloy and Psichari make extensive use of divinely omniscient narration revealing the intentions and actions of a speaking and very present God who conducts the plot and leads it to an unequivocal, closed ending. These narrative techniques are used to create a coherent Catholic universe in which the characters' destinies are transparent. They are stock figures described from above as saints and heroes representing a triumphant Church in traditional, apologetic novels combating modernity and secularisation.

The absent and silent God in the interwar and post war Catholic novel

The antagonism between Catholicism and republicanism did not survive long after the First World War⁵. The Church ceased to appear as an enemy of the state after the national solidarity between Catholics and republicans during the war and the Pope's condemnation of the reactionary, monarchist movement *Action française* in 1926. After fifty years of republican regime the new generations of Catholics fully accepted the secular state, and Catholic writers now turned their attention inwards, to the individual drama of faith.

However, the Catholic novels published by the generations after the First World War still tend to be classified as traditional along with the early revival novels because of

⁴ Ernest Psichari, *Le voyage du centurion* (Paris : Editions Louis Conard, 1936), 79-80. Hereafter cited in text.

⁵ See Jacques Le Goff and René Rémond, eds., *Histoire de la France religieuse*, vol. 4 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992), 11-127.

their Catholicism⁶. But although God and the Church are indeed still main themes in the modern novels, there is a strong tendency among novelists to adopt a radically different perspective on God and faith: A guaranteed authentic divine voice is no longer heard, and consequently God's existence becomes a matter of individual faith. This new emphasis on the silent God and the implied human perspective is shaped by major changes in narrative modes.

One fundamental change is the abandonment of the divinely omniscient narrator, which is seen already from the 1920s in French Catholic novels. God is no longer viewed from above, through omniscient narration, but from within, following the characters' point of view. Writers such as François Mauriac, Julien Green and Georges Bernanos do employ omniscient narration, but restricted to a purely human omniscience, so to speak, expressed through extensive use of psycho-narration⁷. The narrative voice knows and comments on everything going on in the character's mind, but the narrator has no access to God's perspective, and so is as ignorant of God's intentions with the characters as are the characters themselves. And in some novels, the narrator stands back and renders the character's interior monologue, for example in Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927).

In other words, from the 1920s, the narrative point of view has shifted from the divine to the human perspective, and the focus of interest becomes an investigation of the subjective, inner experience of faith and God. Instead of the stock characters of the revival, the new novelists create individuals whose psychology and religious experiences are studied in detail. The characters are definitely no longer heroic saints but antiheroes and sinners operating in a world without clear guidance from God, who never manifests himself clearly to them. As a consequence, virtue and sin are not experienced as easily definable, distinct entities in concrete situations, but are struck by complexity, opacity and ambiguity. In other words, modernity and modernism come to occupy the Catholic novel. Where are the beginnings of our actions? This question is asked both by Thérèse Desqueyroux and the narrator in Mauriac's novel⁸ when Thérèse tries to define her motives for attempting to poison her husband with arsenic. She never gets to the bottom of the matter in her eight-chapter-long interior monologue, nor does the narrator in his comments. In accordance with this concern for constant uncertainty, the new Catholic novel has an open ending: Mauriac leaves Thérèse in a street in Paris to face an uncertain future in life and in the hereafter, and he deplores in the prologue that it is not in his power to declare Thérèse saved by God (*Thérèse Desqueyroux*, 17).

The silence of God in Graham Greene's Catholic novels

Graham Greene draws on the same narrative techniques as those employed by his French contemporaries in his four so-called Catholic novels: *Brighton Rock* (1939), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) and *The End of the Affair* (1951), and in some respects he contributes to the further development of the modern Catholic novel. All Greene's Catholic novels have open endings; the characters are left in a state of uncertainty with regard to their salvation. Like his French contemporaries, Graham Greene does not use divinely omniscient narrators in these four novels. And he is even more restrictive as to narrative point of view than his French colleagues. In this respect, Greene's narration is decidedly more modern. Only the first novel, *Brighton Rock*, employs humanly omniscient

⁶ See for example Mark Bosco, *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7-9.

⁷ See Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 37-74

⁸ François Mauriac, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1979), 28. Hereafter cited in text.

psycho-narration. The other three novels are non-omniscient narratives narrated in internal focalisation⁹, either in the form of first-person narrative (*The End of the Affair*) or in the form of neutral third-person narrative rendering the story through the characters' point of view (*The Heart of the Matter* and *The Power and the Glory*). This narrative mode means that God can only be described from the human perspective, and that the authenticity of the characters' feelings and thoughts about God cannot be verified by the narrative voice.

In *The Power and the Glory*, the central character and focalizer is a Catholic priest. The novel is set in a Mexican state ruled by an anticlerical communist regime. Priests are forced to renounce their faith, and those who resist are persecuted and shot. The central character, constantly on the run from his persecutors, is the only priest left in the whole state to carry on the combat for the survival of the Church.

The Catholic priest as a main character is an important innovation in the Catholic novel. Already in the 1920s, Georges Bernanos introduced the Catholic priest as a main character in *Sous le soleil de Satan* (1926). Bernanos' priest figure, Donissan, is not an emblematic, subordinate character symbolizing the Church, as were the priest figures of the revival novel, but a complete human being described in extensive passages of psycho-narration as a clumsy antihero, bearer of an equivocal sainthood. Greene takes inspiration from Bernanos' priest character in *The Power and the Glory*, but he uses a more modern narrative technique by letting the priest do the characterization of himself in internal focalisation, and he makes his character appear even more unworthy of his priesthood than Bernanos' priest who has no base and comical traits. Greene's priest describes himself as having an untrustworthy smile and the face of a buffoon¹⁰; he is a bad priest in a state of mortal sin (*The Power and the Glory*, 77): Before the persecution he was too full of ambition and vanity, and during the persecution years of moral disintegration, the mortal sin of despair has led him to break the vow of celibacy and father an illegitimate child, and has turned him into an alcoholic, a so-called whiskey priest.

Yet this Catholic antihero is still an ordained priest: "it doesn't matter so much my being a coward—and all the rest. I can put God into a man's mouth just the same—and I can give him God's pardon" (*The Power and the Glory*, 234). In spite of all his shortcomings, the priest sees himself as chosen by God to stay on and continue his clandestine sacramental service among the Catholics of the state. Again and again he refers to God's will during the course of action. When he tries to escape, but misses the boat to Vera Cruz because he is asked to attend a sick woman, he sees this obstacle as willed by God, "I am meant to miss it" (*The Power and the Glory*, 13). He declares several times that it is his duty not to be caught until God decides otherwise (*The Power and the Glory*, 43, 68, 90). And when he is caught and put in prison his reflections in interior monologue express clearly his conviction that his destiny is in God's hands:

If God intended him to escape He could snatch him away from in front of a firing-squad. But God was merciful. There was only one reason, surely, which could make Him refuse His peace—if there was any peace—that he could still be of use in saving a soul, his own or another's. But what good could he do now? (*The Power and the Glory*, 154)

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

⁹ See Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), 206-11.

¹⁰ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (London: William Heinemann & The Bodley Head, 1971), 67. Hereafter cited in text.

example than good by his occasional confessions. (*The Power and the Glory*, 158)

The next day when he is confronted with the half-caste who is pursuing the reward offered for his capture, he observes that “it seemed as if God were deciding” (*The Power and the Glory*, 163), and as the half-caste does not give him away, he concludes that “God had decided. He had to go on with life” (*The Power and the Glory*, 165). In accordance with his bargain with God he goes north and crosses the border, only to meet the half-caste, who betrays him to the police. Also this incidence is considered by the priest as part of God’s plan: The half-caste is Judas (*The Power and the Glory*, 106), meant to betray him. Thus the betrayal, capture and execution of the priest are experienced by him as part of God’s plan.

This present and intervening God resembles the providential God of the revival novel, except in one decisive respect: It is the priest himself who constructs this religious plot directed by God, not an omniscient narrator. The narrator does not in any way guarantee the authenticity of the priest’s divine plot through comments revealing God’s intentions. The novel’s discourse on God is almost exclusively undertaken by the priest rendering his subjective, inner experience and reflections, but in this discourse God’s will is really nothing but the priest’s own conjectures: “there was only one reason, surely”, “it couldn’t be anything else but a sign” etc. These reflections stand alone and are at no point accompanied by impressions of mystical communication with God, real or imagined. When the priest prays, he feels no signs of divine response or guidance either.

The complete absence of mystical experience in this priest is very remarkable, so much the more because the characters of the contemporary French Catholic novels frequently have mystical experiences, although always of highly ambiguous origin. One example is the priest in Bernanos’ *Sous le soleil de Satan*, who is constantly under the impression of being in contact with supernatural forces, God or Satan¹¹. Another example is Joseph Day in Julien Green’s *Moïra* (1950). From childhood, Joseph Day has had mystical experiences of being thrown into a furnace of fire, heaven or hell¹². In these novels, neither the characters nor their narrators are able to decide with certitude whether the experiences of supernatural forces at work are of divine or satanic origin—or if they are mere constructions of the imagination. In that sense, God remains silent in these French novels, but the characters’ disposition to mystical communication with God is very pronounced.

In *The Power and the Glory*, God remains absolutely silent. The priest is in reality left to his own judgement, and in the human perspective everything becomes complex and contradictory. He reflects in interior monologue on the paradox of mortal sin producing love:

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 just the same. (*The Power and the Glory*, 118)

Choice is inevitably accompanied by ambiguity and doubt. In another interior monologue the priest faces the insoluble dilemma: Should he leave or stay?

¹¹ See in particular Georges Bernanos, *Sous le soleil de Satan* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961), 155-214, containing the novel’s key episodes: the encounter with Satan and the confession of Mouchette.

¹² Julien Green, *Moïra* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1973), 160.

Had it become his duty then to run away? (...) If he left them, they would be safe, and they would be free from his example. (...) But it was from him too they took God – in their mouths. When he was gone it would be as if God in all the space between the sea and the mountains ceased to exist. Wasn't it his duty to stay, (...) even if they were murdered for his sake? Even if they were corrupted by his example? He was shaken with the enormity of the problem. (*The Power and the Glory*, 74)

Without manifest divine guidance good and bad, right and wrong are intermingled in the believer's concrete life world, which is in fact characterized by the same opacity and ambiguity as we see in modern non-Catholic novels. Likewise, the salvation of the priest's soul is utterly uncertain. All along, he is in an anguished state of doubt with regard to God's judgement, and in constant fear of damnation (*The Power and the Glory*, 69, 211, 240, 253).

The priest's basic doubt also produces a remarkable openmindedness and tolerance towards the Mexican Indians' Catholicism mingled with pagan magic. In a native place of worship, a grove of crosses, he watches an Indian woman who prays to God to bring her dead baby back to life:

No priest could have been concerned in the strange rough group; it was the work of Indians and had nothing in common with the tidy vestments of the Mass and the elaborately worked out symbols of the liturgy. It was like a short cut to the dark and magical heart of the faith (...). When she reached the tallest cross she unhooked the child and held the face against the wood and afterwards the loins; then she crossed herself, not as ordinary Catholics do, but in a curious and complicated pattern which included the nose and ears. Did she expect a miracle? And if she did, why should it not be granted her, the priest wondered? Faith, one was told, could move mountains, and here was faith—faith in the spittle that healed the blind man and the voice that raised the dead. (...) The priest found himself watching the child for some movement. When none came, it was as if God had missed an opportunity. (*The Power and the Glory*, 185-86)

The ending of the novel bears the stamp of a fundamental uncertainty. Alone, drunk and scared in his prison cell the night before his execution the priest tries to confess to himself. He faces the probability of damnation, feels that he goes "to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all" and dies in the conviction that he is not a saint (*The Power and the Glory*, 253). However, in the following and last chapter we learn that immediately after his execution the Catholics begin to construct a hagiographic story about him. He is now considered a hero of the faith, a martyr of the Church and possibly a saint (*The Power and the Glory*, 264) by the pious Catholic mother, who had hitherto despised him and declared that this whiskey priest was certainly not a martyr (*The Power and the Glory*, 27). Her son who had yawned in weary disbelief every time his mother read aloud from the pious book about Juan, the saint soldier of Christ who died a heroic death as a martyr, is now moved to open himself to faith by the thought that the whiskey priest is actually a hero (*The Power and the Glory*, 265). When another clandestine priest knocks at the door, the boy swings the door open and puts his lips to his hand (*The Power and the Glory*, 267). By this ending, the narrator contradicts the priest's own interpretation of his priestly work as useless. His efforts have borne fruit after all, in the sense that the priest has caused faith to survive in some so that other priests can continue the battle for the Church.

But with regard to the salvation and the sainthood of the priest, the narrator abstains from adopting a divine point of view giving access to God's judgement. This

question is considered consistently through the perspective of the characters, opposing the interpretation of the priest and that of the Catholic family. In this human perspective doubt is predominant, and so the novel has the open ending of a question mark: saint or sinner?

The open form of *The Power and the Glory* is a total contrast to the closed form of the pious book about the heroic martyr Juan read aloud by the Catholic mother in the novel (*The Power and the Glory*, 25-27, 55-57, 261-64). With its divinely omniscient narration displaying a present, providential God, its heroic stock figure and its closed, pious ending, the novel in the novel functions as an ironical intertextual reference to the revival novel and as a metatextual reflection setting off Greene's own novel as a modern, realistic story of a very human priest, consistently told from an ambiguous, human point of view leaving it up to the reader to accept or reject a religious interpretation. And perhaps modern readers are more ready to read in a faith perspective, because they can identify with the priest's bewildered weakness, which makes the grandeur of his religious enterprise seem more humanly plausible.

The silence of God and its consequence, the confinement of the believer within his own purely human perspective of doubt and ambiguity—these aspects of Greene's novel are also central in Pascal's *Pensées*. While the ultramontanist, orthodox revivalists took no interest in Pascal because of his close association with gallican, heretical Jansenism, the 20th century Catholic writers rediscovered *Pensées*, now appreciated for its consistent focus on the individual's inner faith experience. Julien Green and François Mauriac expressed their enthusiasm for Pascal in books, articles and diaries, and many of their novels are influenced by his Christian thought¹³. Graham Greene was aware of Pascal's influence on Mauriac. In an essay from 1945 on Mauriac's novels, Greene has the following concluding remarks:

One name—the greatest—cannot be left out of any consideration of M. Mauriac's work, Pascal. (...) If Pascal had been a novelist, we feel, this is the method and the tone he would have used.¹⁴

I will give a very brief summary of the basic concepts and arguments in *Pensées* in order to indicate that the concept which Greene coins here, the Pascalian novel, may apply to Greene's own novels as well.

Pascal's aim is to persuade the rational and sceptical unbeliever to believe, and this choice of addressee is decisive for the modernity of his argumentation. Pascal scorns the conventional strategy employed by the Christian apology, namely to prove God's existence by evoking the perfection of the world as a clear sign of God's presence¹⁵, or by referring to prophecies and miracles because they are never absolutely certain and convincing (*Pensées*, fr. 564). This conventional strategy is only convincing to people who believe already, but will produce nothing but scepticism and disbelief in persons without faith.

This is because God's existence is not manifest in this world, says Pascal. He refers to the Bible's definition of God as a hidden God, a *Deus Absconditus*, in a number of fragments (*Pensées*, fr. 194, 242, 288, 430, 518, 556, 557, 585, 586, 751, 848). God has chosen to hide in order to create confusion and darkness in man and thereby encourage him to search God. As a consequence, the persuasion of the unbeliever must take its point of departure in man's experience of God as hidden and adopt the human perspective on God, man, faith and salvation, which is the only point of view available to man.

¹³ For an analysis of Pascal's influence on Julien Green, see Anne Loddegaard, "Julien Green : *Le voyageur sur la terre*. Conte fantastique et allégorie janséniste", *Revue Romane* 32, 2 (1997), 263-282.

¹⁴ Graham Greene, *Collected Essays* (London: The Bodley Head, 1969), 120-21. Hereafter cited in text.

¹⁵ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Léon Brunschvicg (Paris: Editions Garnier-Flammarion, 1976), fragment 242. Hereafter cited in text. All references are to the fragment number (fr.).

In the human perspective everything is marked by radical uncertainty, ambiguity and contradiction. Man is utterly incomprehensible to himself, a paradox (*Pensées*, fr. 434). On the one hand man sees his misery, his sinful nature; on the other hand he sees his grandeur as a thinking human being who is conscious of his present baseness and dimly aware of a former state of perfection (*Pensées*, fr. 409). So man's grandeur springs from his awareness of his misery (*Pensées*, fr. 397), and it is this realization which may lead the unbeliever to a rational acceptance of the Christian doctrine of man's grandeur before the fall and his present misery caused by original sin (*Pensées*, fr. 434).

But rational knowledge of God is very far from believing in God (*Pensées*, fr. 280). The way to God is not through reason and proof, but through the heart, as a subjective feeling of faith (*Pensées*, fr. 278). In other words, the only way to cross the gap between unbelief and belief is to make an irrational leap into belief, to wager. In the famous wager fragment, *Le pari*, (*Pensées*, fr. 233), Pascal tries to persuade the sceptical unbeliever that faith necessarily is a wager on the probability of God's existence. And because God is hidden, the believer is enclosed in his own human perspective in a permanent state of hope mixed with anguish and doubt. Life is a daily renewal of the faith wager, and salvation is marked by radical incertitude (*Pensées*, fr. 518).

In *The Power and the Glory* the priest's faith experience has a remarkable resemblance to Pascal's definition of the conditions of belief: the hidden God, the ambiguity and doubt caused by enclosure in the human perspective, the grandeur springing from misery, the daily faith wager, the incertitude of salvation

Another novel which strongly suggests an inspiration from *Pensées* is *The End of the Affair*, in which the main character Bendrix is confronted with a Pascalian wager on the Deus Absconditus. The central event of the novel is a possible miracle. Bendrix is buried under the front door of his house in a bomb explosion during a bombing raid over London in 1944. Sarah, his mistress, discovers him motionless under the door and is convinced that he has been killed. Although she is not religious, she vows to "anything that existed"¹⁶ that she will give up her lover if he is brought back to life. Immediately after her vow Bendrix walks into the room, alive. The characters have two competing interpretations of this event: According to Bendrix himself, he wasn't dead at all, just lying unconscious under the door for a while. But Sarah feels compelled to consider it a miracle, and accordingly she ends the affair and eventually becomes a Catholic. These two opposing interpretations coexist throughout the novel without any of them being pointed out as the truth by the narrative. This fundamental ambiguity is produced by the adoption of a strictly human narrative perspective established through first-person narration, and that excludes an authoritative confirmation of divine intervention by a third-person narrator. Bendrix is the first level narrator, and in his narrative are incorporated his readings of extracts of Sarah's diary containing the miracle interpretation. Thus, the main focalizer is Bendrix, and as he is a hardcore unbeliever, the focus is on his inner struggle to fight against Sarah's mystical version of the event and to maintain his own rational explanation. After Sarah's death more events take place which also suggest both a religious and a natural interpretation, for instance when the radical rationalist Smythe is suddenly cured of a strawberry mark on his cheek while sleeping with a lock of Sarah's hair on his pillow. This event could be a spontaneous healing of nettle rash—or the miraculous intervention of Sarah having ascended to sainthood. Bendrix's atheism becomes progressively undermined, but he stubbornly insists that these inexplicable events are coincidences, not miracles (*The End of the Affair*, 205-08). At the end of the novel, Bendrix realizes that faith is not a question of proof, but a personal decision to leap into faith:

¹⁶ Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (London: William Heinemann & The Bodley Head, 1974), 75. Hereafter cited in text.

If this God exists, I thought, and if even you [Sarah]—with your lusts and your adulteries and the timid lies you used to tell—can change like this, we could all be saints by leaping as you leapt, by shutting the eyes and leaping once and for all: if *you* are a saint, it's not so difficult to be a saint. It's something He can demand of any of us, leap. But I won't leap. (*The End of the Affair*, 209)

This faith leap is a Pascalian wager on God's existence. The novel has an open ending: The reader cannot know if Bendrix will leap or not, but he is invited to wager too by choosing a religious interpretation of the novel.

Conclusion

The analysis of the narrative representation of God in Graham Greene's Catholic novels shows that Greene employs new narrative ways of addressing himself to the reader compared to the ways adopted by the Catholic revival novelists. Greene's novels do not prove God's existence to the reader by omniscient narration displaying a speaking, present God's providential intervention. Like the new French Catholic novels of the interwar and post war period, Greene's novels invite the reader to choose a religious interpretation which is not guaranteed as the only truth by the narrator. Through the non-omniscient narration following the human perspective of the character, the reader identifies with the character's faith experience, which has a striking resemblance to Pascal's concept of the hidden God, the implied enclosure of the believer in the human perspective marked by uncertainty and ambiguity, and the necessity to wager on the probability of God's existence. Pascal's method of persuasion is well-designed to persuade the modern, sceptical reader who can identify with the believer's doubt and uncertainty—persuade him to wager on meaning by leaping into the Catholic interpretation proposed by the novel.

Let me conclude by quoting once more Greene's definition of Mauriac's novels, but this time applied to Greene's own novels: "If Pascal had been a novelist, we feel, this is the method and the tone he would have used". (*Collected Essays*, 121)

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