Between

The Anti-conquest of Space/Time in Graham Greene's Africa

Nejib Souissi

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore via a postcolonial lens Graham Greene's peculiar handling of space-time in *Journey without Maps*, a travel account of his trek through Liberia, and his African novel *The Heart of the Matter*, set during WWII in Sierra Leone. The attempt to cut across generic borders to examine the meanders of discourse draws upon David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire*, where various tropes are held up for critical scrutiny as focal mediators of colonial perspectives on other cultures. However, the overriding argument is informed by Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the anti-conquest which suggests that even empathetic attitudes toward Africa can be underwritten by European, white, male privilege. Of particular interest is Greene's honest vision coupled with the tenacity of Africanist discourse that resurfaces as a transposition of physical movement across foreign lands into a journey through the library to encode a Western existentialist angst *à la* Conrad. A further displacement involves the incorporation of an idealized African space-time into a psychic drama of the individual and collective Western self. The ultimate effect of these double gestures is that Graham Greene assumes the paradoxical posture of the liberal colonizer.

Keywords

Graham Greene, Africa, Space-time, Anti-conquest, Travel, Liberal colonizer.

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> That, once again, is not absolutely new: in order to constitute the space of a habitable house and a home, you also need an opening, a door and windows, you have to give up a passage to the outside world [*l'étranger*].
> Jacques Derrida (2000: 61)

In *Of Hospitality*, Jacques Derrida is certainly more interested in cultural identity and difference than in architecture, yet his language partakes of the spatial turn which refers to a range of critical discourses that consider space more than an inert locus or an abstract category as reductive scientific theories would have us believe. Inaugurating this new trend, Gaston Bachelard maintains that to the hypersensitive person, lived space affords an intense imaginative experience, replete with fantasies and childhood dreams that lyrical poetry is apt to take to the highest level of intimacy. In the wake of the resourceful «topo-analysis» (1969: xxviii) he outlines in *The Poetics of Space*, it would appear that no one will ever look at a house, a door, a chest, a drawer, a snail's shell with the same habit-dulled eyes. While acknowledging «Bachelard's monumental work» (1986: 23) though, Michel Foucault holds that the field of significance created by phenomenological perception «primarily concern internal space» (23), and sets out to study exterior heterogeneous zones, lying on the borderline of Western culture such as fairgrounds, colonies and boats, to which he ascribes the status of other spaces: heterotopias overlapping with heterochronies. Thus, space, which intertwines smoothly with time, seems to shift with every change of vantage point, calling for a careful scrutiny of its multiple dimensions and, if necessary, an unmasking of its political unconscious.

Subsumed by Bakhtin under the concept of the chronotope, space and time embody an «intrinsic connectedness», (1981: 84) yet it seems that for

polemical reasons, they have parted company in the works of Edward Said and Johannes Fabian. Given that spatial divisions have physical as much as symbolic value, Edward Said engages with the concept of an imaginative geography or a cultural topography that is mapped out in the English novel under empire, displaying «a slowly built up picture with England—socially, politically, morally charted and differentiated in immensely fine detail—at the centre and a series of overseas territories connected to it at the peripheries» (1993: 88). Such a configuration is dutifully replicated in the settings of colonial fiction, where a familiar, sovereign, and central European space dominates a foreign, prostrate, and marginal native one. While recognizing the importance of geopolitics, Johannes Fabian argues that time as well is an ideological category that confines the European scholar and the target societies of Western anthropology into separate zones, distributed on a linear, evolutionary line that runs from the primitive to the civilized with no possibility for «temporal coexistence» (1983: 34). «That which is past is remote, that which is remote is past: such is the tune to which figures of allochronic discourse are dancing», Fabian adds (1983: 127). In these terms, Fabian castigates the absence of coeval interaction between the Western anthropologist and the indigenous subjects of his fieldwork.

What is missing, though, from these early studies of colonial discourse analysis is the notion of ambiguity, which implies that even the idealization of foreign cultures could trail behind it the dark shadow of a hidden agenda as David Spurr shows in his book *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993). In the same vein, Marry Louise Pratt identifies the anti-conquest as «the strategies of representation whereby European Bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony» (1992: 7). When applied to Graham Greene's perception of Africa, the latter critical perspectives reveal a double movement of dissent and consent, whereby a geographical exploration of foreign, uncharted lands is transposed into a journey through the library to encode a Western modernist sensibility à la Conrad. This initial displacement is further compounded with a more insidious incorporation of an idealized African space-time into a psychic drama of the individual and collective Western self.

Revisiting colonial configurations

For Graham Greene, the shape of Africa on a map is "roughly that of the human heart" (JWM 37), and he seems to have fallen in love with it twice: once during a trek through the Liberian interior, which is recorded in

his travelogue *Journey without Maps* (1936), then between 1941-1943 when he served as a secret agent in Sierra Leone collecting meanwhile material for his novel *The Heart of the Matter* (1946). As it turns out, both works are stamped with a genuine appreciation of African culture that springs from disillusionment with European civilization in the aftermath of the World War I and the steady erosion of faith in the empire. *Journey without Maps*, in particular, enacts Greene's escape from the decadence of European society by searching for an instinctive way of life below the cerebral, away from the din of cities, and back to a time before modern progress. He therefore makes a point of reporting scenes of natives bathing, or dancing at night in full complicity with the moon, as well as half-naked girls carrying pots of water and walking with a graceful gait. Giving free rein to his romantic imagination, Greene celebrates African communal festivity in the following terms:

> I remember wandering round the village listening to the laughter and the music among the little glowing fires and thinking that after all, the whole journey was worthwhile: it did reawaken a kind of hope in human nature. If one could get back to this bareness, simplicity, instinctive friendliness, feeling rather than thought and start again. (JWM 192)

Although infused with a whiff of sentimentality, Greene's lines pay tribute to life in the state of nature in the sense that natural surroundings inspire authentic feelings such as honesty and simplicity. On the very edge of subsistence, he feels exhilarated to discover that «love was an arm round the neck, a cramped embrace in the smoke, wealth a little pile of palm-nuts» (JWM 79) as well as vindicated in his search «behind the present» for «something, lovely, happy and un-enslaved» (61) as he witnesses first-hand the indubitable qualities of virtue in his carriers. While he has been told that the natives cannot be trusted, he still maintains that the behavior of his boys is so exemplary that he sometimes gets exasperated at his inability to live up to their standards of loyalty.

As it should be expected, the flip-side of this paean to the noble savage is the demystification of the white man in the tropics. Hence, to give more resonance to the African idyllic setting, Greene juxtaposes it with the English expatriates' modes of dwelling in the colonies which ultimately disclose their psychic alienation. Whether in Freetown or Monrovia, these pathetic colonizers clutch at flimsy vestiges of European culture which help them reduce nostalgia and assert their British identity. In order to boost

their morale, they are engaged in filling their «corner of a foreign field» (JWM 44) with ports, hotels, churches, and libraries, but to no avail. In *The Heart of the Matter*, for instance, the English Club, which is supposedly an icon of cultural supremacy, is transposed to a place of gathering to listen to the radio, play bridge, and celebrate the arrival of newly imported frozen meat, in a mock-festive atmosphere where alcoholic drinks are the only solace from discomfort. Alternatively, the club allows the English exiles to seek refuge in their language and literature from a run-down colony where the police station is «a great stone building like the grandiloquent boast of weak men» (HM 15). Thus, ostensible edifices of confident authority are re-inscribed as sites of vulnerability, suggesting that the English on the West African coast are not only away from home but also displaced from their seat of unimpeachable power.

In a similar self-deprecating gesture, Greene, poses in his travelogue as an ironic persona, dramatizing himself as a mock-heroic adventurer so as to deflate the old overblown rhetoric of empire. Throughout the journey in the Liberian interior, he intentionally interjects evidence that he is a sham master, whose authority stems essentially from bluffing. This histrionic attitude is manifest in his frequent wrong estimations of distances, his ridiculous attending to the natives' incurable sores, and the theatrical arbitration of the carriers' quarrels. Equally telling of Greene's deflated stature, is the dramatization of his first encounter with Africa as an act of coming up against a closed black door; an episode which is neither promising nor heroic (JWM 15). Contrary to old travelers, who boast of wide prospects and their mastery over foreign landscapes, Greene's vision is obstructed. He concedes in this way his failure to decode alien surroundings and admits that the African scene remains cryptic and intransigent because he lacks the interpretative tools to decipher it. Such tentative start and relative perspective testify to the idea that conventions of travel writing have been changing with the result that cynicism has superseded inordinate idealism and self-satisfied optimism.

In self-conscious emulation of Conrad, Greene forsakes the famous promontory positions of the Victorian explorers to take to the hills, the swamps, and the bushes for a close look at sordid reality. Mary Louise Pratt describes this modernist shift of position as «the fall from the sun-drenched prospect into the heart of darkness» (1992: 67). In other words, panopticism has become outmoded due to the dwindling of imperial confidence. In terms of style, this demotion from the crest of civilization entails a shift from an overblown rhetoric of discovery to a graphic description of prosaic reality. The former spatial configuration is predominant in *The Heart of the*

Matter, with a few intermittent exceptions where the European onlooker is parodically perched on a relatively high and central site. One such occasion occurs at the opening of the novel while the secret agent Wilson is having his first view of Freetown from the balcony of the Bedford Hotel. This scene acquires a special significance because it parodies the Victorian heroics of discovery, or what Mary Louise Pratt succinctly calls the «monarch-of-all-I-survey trope» (1992: 201). Although Wilson enjoys a panoramic view of the town, he finds no sublime visions, or stupendous sights. Instead, all his eyes can catch are grotesque, ordinary features: there are young black girls combing their wiry hair, tin roofs, vultures, a fortune-teller, and a seaman heading for the brothel escorted by a throng of young boys. This catalogue of visual details shows that stylistically there is a shift from an ornate, metaphorical depiction of the sublime to a less ambitious metonymic style, designed to record the incongruous, transient aspects of reality. What gives more weight to the parodic overtones of the scene is that Wilson has no control over it. The commanding view he possesses is certainly not genuine because even though the description is filtered through his own eyes, it is proffered by a detached third-person narrator. Thus, instead of enjoying a substantial narrative distance from the reported scene, Wilson is in turn taken as part of the landscape. Even worse, with his bald pink knees and young moustache, he seems out of place, self-conscious, and ridiculous. Additionally, his nostalgia and over-sensitivity shield him from apprehending the colonial setting. It is this demystified picture of disoriented colonists who have lost their overweening standpoint alongside Greene's self-parody and romantic poetics that drive home his cross-cultural sensitivity.

The insidious strategies of the anti-conquest

What is intriguing, however, is that the same tropes that Greene employs to convey his romantic infatuation with Africa open him to the charge of the anti-conquest, in the sense of a will to knowledge/power masquerading as innocent empathy. This invidious rhetorical move recalls David Spurr's remark that «while [naturalization] identifies a colonized or primitive people as part of the natural world, it also presents this identification as entirely 'natural', as a simple state of what it is, rather than as a theory based in interest» (1993: 157). Indeed, as long as colonial discourse thrives on the myth of authenticity, it will tend to convert what are, in the first place, historical and cultural differences into natural and essential ones. The idealization of the "primitive savage" then allows no meeting ground between the colonizer and the colonized, since both parties end up sealed

off in reductive essences and unchanging definitions. It is as if Greene wanted the Africans to stay forever in the state of nature, unsophisticated and unblemished by civilization, which is of course not a flattering compliment, but rather a call for stagnation. As Hayden White is wont to say the «amelioration of the natives' treatment was not a primary consideration of those who promoted the idea of their nobility» (1978: 192).

We also tend to forget that beauty is in the eye of the beholder when we take for granted the happiness of the people, whose pathetic sight fills us with satisfaction, mistaking thereby ignorance, poverty, disease, and austerity for signs of natural bliss. When Greene, for instance, feels a strong appeal to «two stately Mohammedans asleep on the gravel path in the public gardens beside a black iron kettle…; the men's sewing parties on the pavements; the old pock-marked driver who stopped his horses and disappeared in the bushes to tell his beads» (JWM 33), he is guilty of occluding the natives' point of view. Yet, this is not an oversight since his objective is to uncover a primeval past that would rejuvenate European civilization. As such, the difference of place is converted into the sameness of time, since Africa becomes an early stage on Europe's itinerary toward progress. Eventually, what has been taken so far as a reversal of binary oppositions, along with a daring border-crossing, appears to be underwritten by an incorporation of Africa into «Western culture's dialogue with itself» (Spurr 1993: 128).

Equally, Greene's self-parody as well as his demystified optics of visual representation are rhetorically and ideologically dubious. From a deconstructive perspective, Greene's self-deprecating irony over his reduced status as a belated figure on the African scene does not totally demystify the Western travel project. As Mary Louise Pratt would have it, deflating strategies such as irony and parody partake of the anti-conquest in that a partial concession of authority downplays intrusion and writes power relations out of the text. In fact, the ironic posture that Greene assumes is still useful to impress and monitor his carriers; moreover, even the mask of the colonial master that parodies the figure of a public-school headmaster proves extremely helpful to see the journey through to the last. Textually, this indisputable sense of authority is reflected in Greene's ability to meticulously chart the Liberian interior. Starting out with a notebook scribbled with «probably mis-spelt names in smudged pencil» (JWM 47), he ends up fulfilling an excellent cartographic work of inscription, laying thus the groundwork for future travel, exploration, and probably colonization.

Getting into intimate contact with Africa does not seem then to preclude a self-serving interest in foreign countries that ultimately proves

Euro-centric, as it is revealed by Greene's presumed abdication of the promontory view to have a close look at decadent landscapes. To be sure, in *The Heart of the Matter*, the house of the protagonist, Major Scobie, is situated in «a piece of reclaimed swamp» (HM 21), and the police station is a place where he «could always detect the odour of human meanness and injustice—it was the smell of a zoo, of sawdust, excrement, ammonia, and lack of liberty» (HM 15). However, this imaginative topography which indicts the civilizing mission is correlated to the idea that Africa discloses «the injustices, the cruelties, the meanness that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up» (HM 36). As in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, it is intimated that the Europeans' predicament is mostly caused by the debilitating influence of Africa. Indeed, we are led to think that devoid of stable and conventional frames of reference, the Europeans are wont to behave in highly unexpected ways. For both Greene and Conrad, then, the implicit aim behind the journey into darkest Africa is to probe to what length European man can go when freed from the restraints of civilization. Taken as an off-limit zone and a classical topos of confusion and moral chaos, Africa eventually acts as a handy testing ground for Western values. Once again, a modernist sense of crisis displaces the momentous issue of colonization, while travelling to a foreign culture imperceptibly veers into a journey along the beaten paths of a well-established rhetorical tradition. As Elleke Boehmer points out, Greene seems to pick his way «through a rhetorical tradition as well as through physical terrain» (1995: 164).

In yet another gesture of displacement, Graham Greene, who wishes to recover «the finer taste, the finer pleasure, the finer terror on which we might have built» (JWM 226) transposes Africa into an outlet for the repressed side in his psyche and the collective unconscious of the West. Moving smoothly from sentimentality to sensuality, he redeploys the tropes of flirting with spaces, bodies and frontiers, which are common to the discourses of sex and colonization. When his selective gaze captures «butterflies, palms, goats and rocks and great silver cotton trees, and through the canes the graceful women walking with baskets on their heads» (JWM 99), it conjures up a utopian scene of original grace akin to a primitive Garden of Eden. Shortly afterwards, though, his erotic gaze focuses on seductive parts of the female body such as «bare breasts [and…] neat rounded thighs» (JWM 55), just like Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, who feels the same appeal to «the small high breasts, the tiny wrists, the thrust of the young buttocks» (HM 20), manifesting an avid search for sexual promise. But since these fantasies are not satisfied, for one reason or another, Greene resorts to the conventional trope of erotizing Africa, imagining 'her' in the words

of Walter Raleigh as «a land that hath yet her maidenhead, never sacked, turned, nor wrought» (JWM 134). Thus, with a secret combination of desire and anxiety, Greene chooses to breach the virginity of the forest gently. Contrary to diamond prospectors, who have a premeditated intention to rape the land and plunder its minerals, Greene edges his way tentatively, making his own discoveries with a heightened sense of excitement. To a large extent, this progressive penetration proves successful, for he once declares in the depth of the 'dark continent' that «one was happy all the same; one had crossed the boundary into a country really strange; surely one had gone deep this time» (JWM 132). It is through this soft erotic allegory that Greene's encounter with Africa is encoded in terms of a white, male adventurer taming a feminine geography that is identified to a seductive, exotic woman who is in turn reduced to the functions of her body. The avid curiosity of the colonial gaze is thus well and alive scanning voyeuristically landscapes as well as bodyscapes.

Not confined to lyrical and sensual imagery, Graham Greene's Africa also encompasses wild scenes of horror, because a «quality of darkness, of the inexplicable […] of an unexplained brutality» (JWM 20) is needed to make the journey worth the trouble. Decidedly, Africa has its own forms of the horror in the shape of poverty, disease, slavery, and tribal wars which are exacerbated by European corruption. As he advances steadily through the African bush, Greene notices «the coffin-shaped holes» (JWM 194) left behind by prospectors for precious minerals, bearing witness to the disfiguration of the land and the lethal exploitation of the natives. However, since Greene is more interested in an Africa of the unconscious, his gaze gradually moves to more domesticated visions of the horror as it is the case in the following passage of dancing and howling natives:

> It wasn't so alien to us, this masked dance (in England too there was a time when men dressed as animals and danced) […] One has the sensation of having come home, for here one was finding associations with a personal and racial childhood, one was being scared by the same old witches. (JWM 93)

Reminiscent of Conrad's claim that England as well «has been one of the dark places of the earth» (HD 19), this perceptual framework cannot help encoding Africa as a relic of atavistic, elemental passions that are evocative of a remote European past.

The predicament of the liberal colonizer

In the late days of imperialism, it would appear, all roads do not lead to Rome, but rather to Joseph Conrad, whom Chinua Achebe has once called excessively a «bloody racist» (Brantlinger 1996: 277). However, in light of his paradoxical strategy of the anti-conquest, Graham Greene qualifies more for the title of the liberal colonizer because despite his deep affection for Africa, he is hampered by a regressive notion of time, failing thus to anticipate a postcolonial future. In spatial terms, this would mean that the crisscrossing of cultural boundaries does not necessarily amount to their complete subversion. If in George Orwell's *Burmese Days*, the culturally-sensitive Flory ends up defending the European Club that «spiritual citadel, the real seat of the British power, the Nirvana for which native officials and millionaires pine in vain» (Orwell 1989: 14), Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* instigates the murder of his servant Ali, while Greene, after taking his fill of the African jungle, heaves a sigh of relief once he reaches the African semi-civilized coast, «for here there is iced beer and a wireless set which will pick up the Empire programme from Daventry, and after all it is home, in the sense that we have been taught to know home» (JWM 226). Whatever their degree of self-conscious irony, these closing words by a travel-writer with a return-ticket, call to mind Albert Memmi's succinct remark that the liberal European who mildly criticizes colonialism ends up in a deadlock because he «participates in and benefits from those privileges, which he half-heartedly denounces» (1991: 20).

Overall, Graham Greene in *Journey without Maps* and *The Heart of the Matter* sets the stage for an intricate interplay between the African and the European cultures. Far from being unidirectional, his apprehension of space/time takes meandering pathways, at times reversing the binary opposition between the civilized and the primitive, and at others seeking analogies that could possibly challenge spurious hierarchical divisions. With the romantic eulogy of the African primitive culture, self-parody, and the graphic depiction of the English colonizers' spatial debasement, Greene opens the door to a hospitable appreciation of foreign territories. But just as Derrida's *pas d'hospitalité* wavers between a step of hospitality and no hospitality (2000: 75) Greene's spatial imagination suffers from the same ambiguity. While revisiting colonial settings, he acts as an affable guest as well as a congenial host of Africa and the Africans in his narrative. Along the way, though, a series of displacements take place, transmuting a physical journey into an inner psychological probing, a modernist literary quest, and an excavation of a mythical past, all of which geared toward

European self-definition. In the process, Africa loses its grounding in reality to become an abstract symbol at the same time as its history comes to a standstill. At any rate, the missing link in Graham Greene's African novel and travelogue is a third-space of syncretism that would allow for a more fruitful interaction between cultures. Eventually, in spite of inscribing his texts in a complex contact zone, it is more likely that Greene's imaginative line of flight is "a molecular line, where the deterritorializations are merely relative, always compensated by reterritorializations which impose on them so many loops, detours of equilibrium and stabilization" (Deleuze - Parnet 1987: 136).

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