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IN SEARCH OF A POETIC
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ART OF GRAHAM GREENE
AS REFLECTED IN HIS NON-FICTIONAL WRITINGS

SUBMITTED BY
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ABSTRACT

The body of Graham Greene's non-fictional writing is large and varied. It includes over five hundred review articles and literary essays and ranges in subject matter from seventeenth-century poetry through the craft of fiction to the popular art of the cinema. It is odd that this store of material has been neglected largely in critical estimates of Greene's fiction for it is a valuable guide to the development of his art. Through his own critical discussions, Greene seems to have articulated many of the themes - and confronted many of the problems - that characterized his own evolving art. The most important themes that emerge from his non-fiction are those he himself refers to as his "obsessions": the psychological legacy of childhood, spiritual faith, and the political conscience.

Since the obsessional quality of Greene's art is so marked, a biographical tour of his early years is provided. This helps to identify and explain the sources for Greene's expectations in the area of artistic truth: "a deep poetic sensibility and extreme technical ability". His non-fiction and fiction are then examined as interdependent units along the lines suggested by Greene's criteria ("poetic" vision and technique), taking into consideration always Greene's particular obsessions.

What comes through as perhaps the most distinctive quality of both Greene's critical and creative worlds is described best in his own metaphor, "the divided mind". Just as he was, as a child, torn between obedience and rebellion; as a young adult between despair and spiritual commitment; and as a mature adult between ideological cause and personal freedom, so in his career as a writer he has been poised on the border: between the "visible universe" and the "private vision", the blend of which defines each artist's peculiar achievement.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past forty years the reputation of Graham Greene as a novelist has assumed almost institutional proportions. If his institutional stature is not always associated with his nationality (he is "the only plausible British candidate for the Nobel Prize" in Frederic Raphael's opinion¹), it is associated with one of a variety of genres: Catholic allegory, psychological novel, political thriller, or light comedy-adventure. Indeed, his enormous popularity as a novelist who is at once serious and entertaining makes the appearance of each new addition to his canon a major literary event. But if Greene is prolific as a creative writer, he is hardly less so as a critic of that broad range of issues which constitute the general subject of art and society. In fact, a collection of his journalistic writings: book, cinema and theatre reviews, literary essays, travel books, political

¹"Dishing the dirt," Sunday Times Magazine, 15 May 1977, p. 78.

articles, and miscellaneous contributions of the letter-to-the-editor type would present, quantitatively, if not qualitatively, a real challenge to his imaginative output. One has only to read (to name a few) his essay on the Prefaces of Henry James,² his biography of the seventeenth-century poet, John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester,³ or his review of the latest Eric Ambler thriller⁴ to discover a critical faculty, not to mention a broad knowledge of literature, which brings to light another whole side of Greene's talent. Similarly, one has only to consider Greene's reports, for the Sunday Times, on the Mau-Mau rebellion,⁵ his essay on violence written during the London blitz,⁶ or his admonitory letter to the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris regarding the funeral of Colette⁷ to realize the intensity with which Greene regards those aspects of "real" life on which his inventive powers feed.

From a reading of Greene's fiction alone, one gets the sense of an artist engagé, of a realist who does not

²"The Lesson of the Master" in The Lost Childhood and Other Essays (London, 1951), pp. 49-50. For the original publication details for this and all subsequent references to the collected essays, see Bibliography.

³Lord Rochester's Monkey (London, 1974).

⁴See, for example, Greene's review of Ambler's Judgment on Deltchev, The Month, 6 (1951), 49-51.

⁵"Kenya as I see it," Sunday Times, 27 September and 4 October, 1953.

⁶"At Home" in Collected Essays (London, 1969), pp. 447-451. Most of the essays in this volume were collected first in The Lost Childhood. For the sake of simplicity, my references will be to the more recent volume.

⁷"Colette's Funeral Rites," Le Figaro Littéraire, 7 August 1954. See Philip Stratford's translation in his anthology The Portable Graham Greene (New York, 1972), pp. 595-596.

tread lightly. His writings, in fact often provoke indignant responses from their subjects (or victims). His portrait of the saint-like whisky priest in The Power and the Glory caused the Holy Office to condemn the book: a gesture he did not relish except in so far as it confirmed his low opinion of institutional orthodoxy.⁸ His portrait of Haiti in The Comedians caused Papa Doc to denounce Greene publicly and viciously: a gesture he did relish, and with a certain amount of pride.⁹ And his portrait of a lapsed Catholic in A Burnt-Out Case greatly troubled his friend and fellow Catholic, Evelyn Waugh: a reaction which saddened Greene but did not cause him to regret the book's tolerant view of atheism.¹⁰

But it is in Greene's journalism, his essays, his autobiographical pieces that the force of his uncompromising attitude toward the representation of life in art comes home. In a responsibly irreverent address he gave upon being awarded the Shakespeare Prize by the University of Hamburg, Greene took sides against Shakespeare (that "great poet of the Establishment") with "poets who dared to reveal themselves whatever the danger": Dante, Baudelaire, Zola, and Dostoevsky.¹¹

⁸ Greene discusses this in his interview with Christopher Burstall, "Graham Greene takes the Orient Express," The Listener, 80 (1968), 672-677, and in Ways of Escape (London, 1980), p. 69.

⁹ See "Graham Greene démasqué," Bulletin, Department of Foreign Affairs, The Republic of Haiti (Port-au-Prince, 1968). For Greene's reaction, see Ways of Escape, p. 232.

¹⁰ See Ways of Escape, pp. 219-222.

¹¹ "The Virtue of Disloyalty," Address given 6 June 1969. See Portable, p. 607.

And he had, certainly, a personal right to do so, for his non-fictional prose, like the "Shakespeare" address, is shot through with unorthodox comments and unpleasant truths. Not only has Greene used such opportunities as have come his way to speak his mind on life and art, but also he has sought actively to generate such opportunities. Reviewer, essayist, publisher, political correspondent: the various roles he has assumed over the course of his writing career all point to a persona for which the term "novelist" is simply inadequate. They point quite clearly to the fact that for Greene the profession of artist carries broad cultural responsibilities as well as personal, imaginative ones, and that social and political questions, as much as literary ones, require consideration in a public forum.

* * * * *

Any discussion of Greene's non-fictional output must take into account, first, its sheer bulk, for although this tells us nothing about its value, it indicates the extent of his commitment to the medium of writing generally. He has produced, for example, some five hundred book, film and theatre reviews as well as numerous longer pieces and complete works of a literary, religious, political, and personal sort. The earliest of his reviews appeared in the Oxford Outlook in 1924. From then until the sixties, Greene has contributed primarily, and in decreasing proportion, to the Spectator, Night and Day, the New Statesman and Nation, London Mercury, and The Tablet, as well as to the

following on an irregular basis: Cherwell, The Evening Standard, The Fortnightly, The Listener, London Magazine, The Month, and the Weekly Westminster.¹² Not all of his reviews are noteworthy, of course. For one thing, choice of subject is not always attributable to Greene. As a novice reviewer for the Spectator in the early thirties, he could hardly have relished a weekly batch of three or four novels, most of them forgettable. For another thing, reviews are often fragmentary and superficial by force of circumstance. Those published in his Collected Essays, however, are of real value for, as he says in the Author's Note, "In selecting what essays to reprint over a period of more than thirty years I have made it a principle to include nothing of which I can say that, if I were writing today, I would write in a different sense" (p. 9). The same can be said for his collected film reviews and in his Introduction to The Pleasure-Dome he says: "Re-reading these reviews of more than thirty years ago I find many prejudices which are modified now only by the sense of

¹²My source list is very nearly a complete compilation of the available material though I do not claim it to be entirely exhaustive. I owe a certain debt in this respect to Ann Gilbert McDonald's Bibliography of the Periodical Contributions of Graham Greene (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The George Washington University, 1969). This bibliography, omitting as it does contributions to newspapers, is not exhaustive either, but includes verse and prose fiction pieces which do not figure in my estimates. Since the research was done for my study, a more comprehensive bibliography of Greene's non-fiction (and fiction) has appeared: R.A. Wobbe's Graham Greene: A Bibliography and Guide to Research (New York, 1979).

nostalgia".¹³ As for the longer pieces - about which I shall speak in a moment - they are of especial interest since they are, on the whole, self-generated and naturally more substantial than the reviews.

If we take a birdseye view of the range of Greene's interests - quite as remarkable as his prolificness - we will be in a position to form a few impressions of the nature of Greene's affair with the written word, and of the motives that lie behind it. The first thing we notice is a scholarly streak in Greene, an interest - and some skill - in the intellectual appreciation of art historically. Incongruous though it may seem for a writer of political thrillers and sexual comedies, there is a little of the man of letters in Greene, a serious attitude toward the study of art and a curiosity about the byways of literature that one associates with nineteenth-century artists, scholars, and bookmen. For example, many of his short essays, those which fall into his category of "Characters" in the Collected Essays, are miniature portraits of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century figures (minor poets, dons, antiquarians, pamphleteers) of the sort that Austin Dobson or Edmund Gosse wrote.¹⁴

¹³The Pleasure-Dome. The collected film criticism 1935-40, edited by John Russell Taylor (London, 1972), p. 1.

¹⁴ Greene wrote, for example, an informed review of Arthur Ponsonby's biography of John Evelyn - a relatively minor figure in whom Dobson also was interested. Greene shows, too, an agility akin to Gosse's in character sketches: see, for example, his piece on George Darley in Essays.

His biography of Rochester, written at a surprisingly early stage of his career,¹⁵ grew out of a desire to resurrect, in the interest of defining Rochester's achievement, the historical and personal artefacts that shaped his poetry. The book is notable for its controlled objectivity, its scrupulous, academic handling of fact and interpretation, and its lack of the personal touches that mark so much of Greene's non-fictional pieces as the work of an imaginative writer. It also reveals Greene to be something of a connoisseur of seventeenth-century poetry, a fact which has some rather interesting consequences for his own stylistic tendencies.

There is a slight danger of reading too much into this donnish aspect of Greene. He is, after all, an entertainer - with a taste for melodrama and roguish humour - and prone to view academic gravity a little askance. Nevertheless, there is equally a danger of not giving his serious, scholarly side its due, of not recognizing the genuine moral and aesthetic principles that lie behind his persona as a popular novelist. In a 1937 essay on Fielding and Sterne, he said:

One cannot separate literature and life.
If an age appears creatively, poetically
empty, it is fair to assume that life too
had its emptiness, was carried on at a
lower, less passionate level. (Essays, p. 84)

¹⁵Lord Rochester's Monkey (though written in the early thirties) was not published until 1974 for fear of obscenity charges, Rochester still having been considered "pornographic" in the thirties. See Greene's Preface to the book, p. 9.

And a large part of this passion, he goes on to say, is a certain "moral seriousness" (p. 90), a conviction that the poetic imagination is synonymous with the spiritual - or at least the metaphysical. It is an idea that he developed into a unifying leitmotif in his survey of English drama, British Dramatists,¹⁶ and one that places the book in a tradition of value-oriented scholarship. And his longish essay "The Seed Cake and the Love Lady"¹⁷ similarly appeals to quasi-classical standards - this time of aesthetics. Here Greene's aim is to expose what he views as the insincerity of the decorative style one associates with the art-for-art's-sake movement, an insincerity, he feels, that depends upon verbal trickery to mask the moral and social remissness of its subject matter. One gets from these pieces a sense that for Greene the relation of art to life is a serious business and that art without some moral and aesthetic dignity is the mark of a troubled society.

Another impression one forms upon considering the range of Greene's output doesn't exactly contradict his scholarly side but certainly qualifies it. This impression is one of unassuming and deliberate commonness or, to put it another way, of sympathy for tastes that are non-élitist in a cultural sense. Looking over the book reviews, for example, one is struck by the catholicity of subjects, the curious

¹⁶The British People in Pictures Series (London, 1942).
¹⁷Life and Letters, 10 (August 1934), 517-524.

mixed interest in, say, first-rate, established novelists and minor "popular" novelists (often of the "thriller" variety). In the Collected Essays, Henry James, Dickens, Fielding, and Sterne sit side by side with writers such as Somerset Maugham, John Buchan, Rider Haggard, and Edgar Wallace. That Greene deliberately chooses to make room for those usually thought to be not quite worthy of critical consideration is made clear in his essay "Rider Haggard's Secret". He says:

How seldom in the literary life do we pause to pay a debt of gratitude except to the great or the fashionable, who are like those friends that we feel do us credit. Conrad, Dostoevsky, James, yes, but we are too ready to forget such figures as A. E. W. Mason, Stanley Weyman, and Rider Haggard, perhaps the greatest of all who enchanted us when we were young. (Essays, p. 209)

Greene's deep-seated respect for childhood favourites is something that strongly affects every aspect of his writing, as we shall see; but the point I want to draw out here is his democratic instinct in matters of artistic taste.

This instinct is nowhere more apparent than in his film reviews. So early as the twenties, his interest in cinema as a developing art form (as editor of the Oxford Outlook he appointed himself film critic) shows an almost prophetic recognition of changing cultural habits. In 1935 he contrived to add film reviewing to his literary duties on the Spectator - an activity he took on from "a sense of fun," as he

puts it,¹⁸ but which nevertheless shows up his accepting attitude toward popular trends. This is not to say that Greene condones the dissipation, as many would call it, of culture in the sense that Q. D. and F. R. Leavis use the term. On the contrary, Greene can be quite as acid-tongued in his remarks on cinematic artlessness as Q. D. Leavis is in her comments on the "debauch" of modern popular fiction.¹⁹ Still, there is in Greene a more flexible attitude toward the message of modern media. Although he says that "Popular taste makes a thoroughly bad dictator" in any art form (Pleasure-Dome, p. 40), he was realistic enough in the twenties and thirties to see the potential impact of the film industry - and to set about considering its potential as an art. He has, of course, a personal stake in this critical expansiveness: his own novels and films are nothing if not popular. Indeed, one gets the impression that if Greene were to balk at the label "popular", it would be less out of a sense of professional pride than out of a sense of personal modesty.

Somewhat related to the image we get of Greene from his reviews is the impression conveyed in his political journalism: that of a writer for whom a "social consciousness,"²⁰ an awareness of what goes on in the

¹⁸See Introduction to The Pleasure-Dome, p. 1.

¹⁹Fiction and the Reading Public (London, 1932), p. 236.

²⁰Greene uses the term frequently in his thirties' criticism; see especially "The Seed Cake and the Love Lady".

lives of ordinary people, is a prerequisite not only for integrity in art but also for integrity in personal conduct. In this Greene is to some extent a product of the thirties, of the generation of writers who sought to appeal to the common man - as opposed to the educated élite - through technical apparatuses fashioned, very often, after journalistic devices, or reportage. But his interest in social and political milieux has very personal roots too: in his childhood feeling of being an outsider - a border inhabitant, in his long-standing physical and mental restlessness, and in his early fascination with the moral varieties of human nature.

Greene's first travel book, Journey Without Maps,²¹ tells of his trek into the heart of Liberia, a trek that was symbolic of his quest for "the past from which one has emerged" (p. 7), for "those ancestral threads which still exist in our unconscious minds to lead us back . . . [to the] 'heart of darkness'" (p. 295). His second, The Lawless Roads,²² he tells us, originated with a desire to "examine . . . the effect of faith on action" and "to be a spectator of history."²³ When his attempt to satisfy this urge first-hand in Spain failed (he was interested in the "Catholic struggle against Franco"),

²¹Volume XVIII, The Collected Edition (London, 1978).

²²Volume XIX, The Collected Edition (London, 1978).

²³See Introduction to Brighton Rock, Volume I, The Collected Edition (London, 1970), viii.

he accepted gladly the opportunity to go to Mexico to conduct a commissioned study of religious persecution there, for it was a task equally suited to his personal inclinations at the time. These books come early on in Greene's career, at a time when his political "obsession", as he calls it,²⁴ had not fully ripened; but they look forward to the time when he actively assumed the role of political observer in the early fifties. Many of his journeys to remote foreign countries (typically hot-beds of political turmoil) were commissioned: Indochina, Haiti, and Paraguay for the Sunday Times, Cuba for the Sunday Telegraph (the list goes on). Many - China, Russia, East Germany, Argentina - were self-induced attempts to - in his words - "kill boredom."²⁵ But all were inspired by a larger purpose: to expose what he views as the inherently inhumane principles of institutional authority, especially, in these cases, of political bureaucracies.

This brings me to the final point I want to make about what Greene's non-fictional writings tell us, in a broad sense, about his disposition as a writer: that is, of his deep commitment to the written word as a measure of one man's personal contribution to art and to society in general. In a 1938 essay on Somerset Maugham, he said: "An author of talent is his own best

²⁴See Burstall interview, p. 672.

²⁵See V. S. Pritchett, "Graham Greene into the light," The Times, 18 March 1978, p. 6.

critic - the ability to criticize his own work is inseparably bound up with his talent: it is his talent . . ." (Essays, p. 202). The comment was made with reference to Maugham's The Summing Up, a candid exercise in the self-examination of his life and work. That Greene should fix on the critical aspect of the creative talent is telling, for it indicates the importance he must attach to his own ventures into self-observation. The most obvious example of this is his autobiography, A Sort of Life.²⁶ Critics have remarked on how little this personal offering actually reveals about Greene as a man, on how intent he seems to be to maintain a tone of reserve and detachment toward his private self. But this should not surprise us, for Greene does not view such an exercise as an opportunity for self-indulgent catharsis but rather as a means of understanding one's place in what he calls the "chaos of experience" (p. 9). It is intended as a part of one artist's whole canon, a necessary contribution in the process of criticizing and defining one's peculiar strengths and weaknesses as a writer. It is true that Greene is a very personal writer: his temperament, his philosophical inclinations, his biases and idiosyncratic quirks lie just beneath the surface in both his fiction and his non-fiction. But he is never self-revelatory in a sentimental or egotistical sense. His personal observations are grist

²⁶London, 1971.

for the mill: unearthed, examined, analysed, and added to the cumulative store of useful raw material.

If Greene is reticent in a format so inviting of licence as autobiography, he is even moreso in situations in which the public display of his "real" self is mediated by promotional - or simply inquisitive - agents. He is notoriously elusive when it comes to media appearances,²⁷ and although he has granted a good many private interviews with critics and fellow novelists over the years, these interviews tend to be more perfunctory than informative.²⁸

There is some justification for Greene's recalcitrance, for he is conscious of the dangers inherent in success, in allowing the cultivation of a public image that more often than not contrives to squash an artist's ideas and stylistic tendencies into a simplistic pattern. Far more characteristic, and genuine, are his own attempts to decipher, for the sake of his reading public, the artistic convictions, the work habits, the life style that contribute to his peculiarities as a writer. A good example of this is his published correspondence with

²⁷A rather amusing incident occurred shortly after the publication of his novel The Human Factor when he consented to be present on a BBC-TV programme devoted to the discussion of his work only in the form of a "disembodied voice" (as the commentator put it), reading excerpts from his new novel.

²⁸An example of Greene at his evasive best may be found in Philip Toynbee's "Graham Greene on 'The Job of the Writer'," The Observer, 15 September 1957, p. 3.

Elizabeth Bowen and V. S. Pritchett titled Why Do I Write?²⁹ How comfortable he seems to feel with this format which, though concerned with exposing personal views to the public eye, operates in a professional context: a dialogue about art with fellow artists. An even better example is his recently published volume of memoirs, Ways of Escape. I use the term "memoirs" loosely, for the book is framed around the Introductions Greene wrote for the collected edition of his works. It is true that these Introductions are remarkable for the amount of personal background material they contain. They are, as Greene said of the Prefaces of Conrad, "not like James's an elaborate reconstruction of technical aims . . . they are about life as much as about art, about the words or the actions which for one reason or another were excluded from the novels . . ." (Essays, p. 182). Nonetheless, they are calculated to reveal only what he views as relevant to his professional career, not what will embellish his image in either a private or a public sense. And because they are, like Why Do I Write?, connected to the act of writing, they have none of the coyness, the subtle refractoriness so characteristic of Greene's pose in interviews.

* * * * *

²⁹Why Do I Write? An Exchange of Views between Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene, and V. S. Pritchett (London, 1948).

Given the quantity and diversity of Greene's non-fictional output, it is tempting to consider it in its own right: to assess his reviews and essays, for example, in accordance with commonly accepted standards of literary criticism, or to estimate the value of his political pieces in accordance with standards of journalistic excellence. If pressed, one could make a case, I suppose, for his critical acumen and journalistic perceptiveness. But it is more useful to regard his non-fiction as an adjunct to his fiction, for it offers a background of knowledge and inquiry that increases our appreciation of his art far more than it expands our understanding of critical theory or political reality. Even a cursory glance at the essays, reviews, miscellaneous journalism, or off-the-cuff remarks will reveal the remarkable degree to which they reinforce or anticipate themes and techniques apparent in the fiction; or the efficiency with which they offer a kind of chronological measure of Greene's development along certain lines; and, finally, the extent to which they confirm or contradict suppositions one might form from a reading of the fiction alone. Indeed, the tendency of his non-fiction and fiction to mirror one another suggests immediately that his perspective as an artist will colour whatever subject he confronts journalistically, whether it is literary or political, social or religious.

To some extent, Greene must have viewed his journalism as an opportunity to sharpen his creative

skills. This fact does not detract necessarily from the worth of the essays; in fact, it gives them an originality in terms of style and emotional perspective that is not always apparent in terms of ideas. But Greene's creative style of journalism does remind us, continually, that an artist is at work: that we are being offered an imaginative interpretation of things which are often, in other hands, apparently (if not actually) objective. As an example of what I mean, consider his description of Ho Chi Minh, whom he interviewed in 1955:

Dressed in khaki drill, with thick dark woollen socks falling over his ankles, Ho Chi Minh gave an impression of simplicity and candour, but overwhelmingly of leadership. There was nothing evasive about him: this was a man who gave orders and expected obedience and also love. The kind, remorseless face had no fanaticism about it. A man is a fanatic about a mystery - tablets of stone, a voice from a burning bush - but this was a man who had patiently solved an equation. (Essays, p. 402)

This is rather more than is required of the professional reporter, not to mention quite a departure from the orthodox Western view of Ho Chi Minh. Consider, too, Greene's rather malicious description of Beverley Nichols (he is reviewing Nichols's No Place Like Home):

A middle-aged and maiden lady, so I picture the author, connected in some way with the Church: I would hazard a guess that she housekeeps for her brother, who may be a canon or perhaps a rural dean. . . . She is not married, that I am sure, for she finds the sight of men's sleeping apparel oddly disturbing . . . She conforms so beautifully to type (I picture her in rather old-fashioned mauve with a whale-bone collar) . . . (Essays, p. 420)

At the time that Greene composed this daring mock portrait, he had just proved, in A Gun for Sale, that he was certainly not a sentimental, whimsical maiden lady, even if he enjoyed the type for its descriptive possibilities.

Where we see Greene's metaphorical urge at work most consistently, if most crudely, is in his film reviews. The cinema, that world of melodramatic indulgence, obviously appealed to the entertainer in Greene; and in the following passage from The Pleasure-Dome we get an idea of just how amenable to his disposition this medium was. This is from his review of The Case of the Lucky Legs, a film in which Warren William as Perry Mason offers (in Greene's eyes) a contrast to William Powell's The Thin Man:

Mr. Powell is a little too immaculate, his wit is too well turned just as his clothes are too well made, he drinks hard but only at the best bars; he is rather like an advertisement of a man-about-town in Esquire, he shares some of the irritating day-dream quality of Lord Peter Wimsey. I find the cadaverous, not very well-dressed Perry Mason more real in his seedy straw hat with his straggly moustache; one does not find him only in the best bars; he is by no means irresistible to women; his background is the hiss of soda rather than the clink of ice. (p. 49)

It took a long time for Greene to arrive at a light, comic touch in his fiction to match the tone of this (his man in Havana is perhaps a sort of parody-tribute to this Perry Mason); but the character traits behind an exercise such as this are standard Greene, be it Minty in England Made Me or Scobie, without his

religious scruples, in The Heart of the Matter. At any rate, whatever subject Greene tackles as a commentator, his skills as an artist invariably come into play; and although this makes his journalism colourful, it makes it, too, distinctively Greene's.

His personal creative bias, of course, can be a limitation: as it is when he feels compelled to attribute to Henry James a religiosity as intense as his own;³⁰ or when his temperamental iconoclasm conquers his political realism and allows him to speak of Fidel Castro in almost reverential terms.³¹ On the other hand, Greene's bias can be an advantage: it allows him to speak with an empirical authority only the practitioner can muster about the problems of his art. He can appreciate the difficulties someone like Dickens must have experienced with his use of the deceptively simple first-person narrative form because he has struggled with it himself.³² But even when Greene's remarks reflect more on his own interests than on those of his subject, they are telling. In his admiring review of G. M. Young's essays, Daylight and Champagne, he says: "Reading a volume of essays is rather like reading a hand: from lines and bumps the character rather optimistically emerges . . .".³³ And in large part, this is the spirit in which Greene

³⁰See "Henry James: The Religious Aspect" in Essays.

³¹See "The Marxist Heretic" in Essays.

³²Greene discusses Dickens and first-person narration in his Introduction to The End of the Affair, Volume XIII, The Collected Edition (London, 1974), vii-viii.

³³"Matured in Bottle," London Mercury, 37 (November 1937), 77.

invites us to share his offerings. If they add to our appreciation of literature and life generally, well and good. If they enlarge our understanding of Greene's disposition as a whole, so much the better.

There are two facts about Greene's non-fiction that one cannot avoid considering if one takes the view that it is useful as a reflector of his fiction. The first is potentially the most troublesome, for it has to do with his pecuniary motives as a journalist. As he is quite willing to admit, a substantial number of his early reviews represent a concession to material demands. In his Introduction to Brighton Rock he tells us:

I was still [in 1938] not earning enough with my books to make a living for my family (after the success of my first novel and the spurious temporary sale of Stamboul Train each novel added a small quota to the debt I owed my publisher), but reviewing films regularly for The Spectator and novels once a fortnight, I could make ends meet. (viii)

The novel, he tells us in his Introduction to The Heart of the Matter, is his "only reality and responsibility,"³⁴ and his unfavourable reaction to a fellow-novelist's critical efforts (John Galsworthy's Candelabra: Selected Essays and Addresses) is based on his impression that they were a means of "resting" between novels.³⁵ In this respect, Greene's reviews are probably less true

³⁴Volume VI, Collected Edition (London, 1971), xii.

³⁵"A Prisoner of the Forsytes," Spectator, 5541 (October 1932), 454.

to the nature of his talent than the novels; nevertheless, it would be difficult to imagine Greene - or any professional writer - attaching his name to a piece of journalism if he anticipated a subsequent desire to disown it. If we remember his admission that his Collected Essays stand today as fair representations of his former convictions, we must assume that some sense of integrity is at work in the novelist-on-holiday. It is worth noting, too, that he continued to offer critical pieces long after the war period, in a time which, one assumes, financial pressures were alleviated by his increasing success as a novelist. As for his political writings, almost all of which come in the post-war period, there is no question that pecuniary motives play a minimal role.³⁶ Greene says of his first trip to Indochina in 1951: "I fell in love with the country and arranged for the next four years to go there every winter to report the war"³⁷ - a hint of the mercenary instinct, perhaps, but far more of the personal instinct for adventure, for living - as he puts it - on "the dangerous edge of things."³⁸

³⁶Of the eighty reviews, essays, and political articles that appear in the Collected Essays, roughly fifty fall within the period 1929-1941 and the remainder range over the period 1943-1968. (My figures are rough because a few of the essays are fusions of reviews written at different times.)

³⁷Interview with Ronald Bryden, The Listener, 83 (1970), 544.

³⁸Burstall interview, 672.

The second fact about Greene's journalism that needs to be taken into account is its place, chronologically, in his career as a whole. It is important to acknowledge, particularly with respect to his literary criticism, that he was at his most demanding as a critic at the time when he was only beginning to warrant respect as a novelist. Sternness regarding the technical and moral requirements of art is perhaps the most characteristic feature of his reviews in the thirties. A novelist, he says in 1934, must have "a deep poetic sensibility and extreme technical ability,"³⁹ and by this time he himself had produced only one novel (It's A Battlefield) out of five that showed promise on both counts.⁴⁰ In fact, his critical adamance is in part, and ironically, what limits the success of his early novels. With an almost academic diligence he experimented, in 1935, with a stream-of-consciousness style in England Made Me and ended up with a narrative that is diffuse and vague. And with a too obvious eye on moral directness, Greene loaded Brighton Rock (three years later) with theological slogans in place of characters.

Philip Stratford, in his excellent study Faith and Fiction: Creative Process in Greene and Mauriac,⁴¹

³⁹"Fiction," Spectator, 5525 (May 1934), 786.

⁴⁰The Man Within appeared in 1929; The Name of Action (1930) and Rumour at Nightfall (1931) were both, understandably, suppressed; and Stamboul Train (1932)

⁴¹had, as he says, only a "spurious temporary sale."
Indiana, 1964.

takes a hard line on Greene's early criticism because of its naive severity. "One can hardly bind him to the letter of his critical views at that date" (p. 250), Stratford says, because, as an initiate, eager to impress, Greene tended to strong opinion and overstatement. But to put this point in perspective, there is nothing wrong with his demands as such: they are galling only as strident imperatives, and from a novice, at that! His search for poetic sensibility and technical expertise in his critical subjects was to form the basis of an essentially consistent approach to art, and this somewhat justifies his early rigour. His ardour certainly cooled as he gained critical experience; but it remained faithful to those qualities that had eluded him as a young novelist - only because he had tried too hard to cultivate them.

* * * * *

Before I take up the various threads I have dropped regarding Greene as a sort of latter-day man of letters and try to weave them into some sort of pattern, I should like to explain briefly the course I have chosen to follow. To some extent, any body of material such as the one we are concerned with defies systematic arrangement. The most obvious grouping, in Greene's case, would seem to be according to subject or aim: literary criticism versus political and social commentary, reviews versus reportage. But the ideas and convictions which lie behind both are interchangeable, and this, it seemed to me, argued for a scheme which

highlighted themes rather than medium or mode. Even a thematic approach raises problems: any one person's observations, opinions, and judgements are often made independently of one another and in response to circumstances of time and place. They are not offered, that is, necessarily as prefigured additions to a consistent position or oeuvre.

Having said this, however, I can admit to a certain compliance on Greene's part with respect to providing signposts. He once told an interviewer that the main obsessions of his books are psychological and political.⁴² This is a good start, and if we take the liberty of adding a religious obsession (which we must, Greene's evasion notwithstanding), we can see that these three preoccupations do indeed figure prominently in his writings. I have taken another liberty, and this one, admittedly, is based on organizational motives. I have divided his ideas into those which deal generally with the relation between life and art (that is, how the artist comes to terms with public "truth" and his own private vision) and those which deal specifically with the technical representation of life in art. Since he chooses to refer to his concerns with such a strong term as "obsessions" - and since these obsessions prove so powerful as to colour almost everything he has written - it is only fair to begin with a biographical sketch. We will then be in a position to realize just how much weight we must attach to his personal disposition when we come to consider his views on life and letters.

⁴²See Burstall interview, p. 672.

CHAPTER I

A SORT OF LIFE

I should say at the outset that this will be little more than a sketch. There are two reasons for this. First, I wish to highlight only those aspects of Greene's life which helped to shape his three main interests as a writer: namely, childhood and its impact, psychologically, on later life; religion; and politics. Second, my biography will stop prematurely, at the point at which Greene reached a more or less settled attitude toward life and art. I have put this point in the immediate post-war period, although we will see that from so early as the thirties, when Greene took up letters professionally and exclusively, biographical facts lose some of their interest as the writings more and more take up the story of his career. Greene's own autobiography, A Sort of Life, ends prematurely, with the years of failure following the publication of his first novel. "Failure too is a kind of death,"¹ he says; and so his choice of an ending has a kind of logic. But, as he also says, a writer's biography can be only a "sort of life", for so much of his time is spent in the realm of the imagination, and in the inventive world of the

¹Introductory Note, A Sort of Life, p. 9.

written word. Still, the facts of Greene's life, especially those of his early years, are important to us, if we are to really get at the nature and quality of his prose.

At the end of his introductory note to A Sort of Life Greene sets the tone, gives us a straightforward statement about how he views the beginning of his long road to maturity. "I have tried," he writes, ". . . to live again the follies and sentimentalities and exaggerations of the distant time, and to feel them, as I felt them then, without irony" (p. 9). As one then proceeds through Greene's reminiscences, one gets the feeling that his objective was not hard-won. Throughout the book he treats his early thoughts and actions with an almost grave respect; throughout there is an empathy between Greene's adult self and his youthful one that suggests that the two have never severed relations to the extent that occurs in many of us. This is not to say that Greene never grew up; on the contrary, one could say that he was a very adult child in the sense that a fairly sophisticated awareness of life's vicissitudes directed his behaviour from a very early age.

For anyone who has read even a little of Greene's fiction, or a few of his essays, his serious treatment of childhood comes as no surprise. The early novels and short stories especially are pointed illustrations of the long arm of the past. Andrews in The Man Within, Kate and Anthony and Farrant in England Made Me, Raven in A Gun For Sale, Pinkie in Brighton Rock, and Arthur Rowe in The Ministry of Fear are all, more than anything

else, products of their childhood. They are all, to put it another way, confirmation of Ida Arnold's statement that people don't change: "It's like those sticks of rock: bite it all the way down, you'll still read Brighton" (p. 247). In most cases, too, Greene's characters are determined by one particular, isolated event or critical turning point in their young lives. Philip Lane's nightmarish brush with adult sexuality and revenge in "The Basement Room,"² and Pinkie's sexual initiation via his parents' indiscreet Saturday night routine have fixed certain images in their minds that recur, in adulthood, with the regularity of a leitmotif. The idea that the first several years of life are the formative ones is so characteristic a theme of early Greene that by the time we come upon Arthur Rowe's statement in The Ministry of Fear: "the child does make the man,"³ we are not startled by the tribute to Wordsworth. Even the title of the novel, he tells us in its Introduction, is taken from Wordsworth: probably from "The Prelude" where the poet speaks of Nature's

Severer interventions, ministry
More palpable . . .

which,

Haunting me . . . among my boyish sports . . .
Impressed, upon all forms, the characters
Of danger or desire⁴

²See Collected Stories, Volume VIII, The Collected Edition (London, 1972).

³Volume X, The Collected Edition (London, 1973), p. 132.

⁴The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind, edited by Ernest de Selincourt, second edition (Oxford, 1959), I, l. 355 and I, l. 495.

And when Greene says, in a critical context, that "the creative writer perceives his world once and for all in childhood and adolescence, and his whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we share" (Essays, p. 106), we can see a parallel in these lines from Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode":

. . . those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing . . .⁵

But this is as far as we can go with the Wordsworth analogy, for the qualities which he attributes to the child's vision are quite different from Greene's. The "fountain-light" and the "master-light" are bright and optimistic, even though they are tempered by "obstinate questionings" and

Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realized . . . (l. 145)

Greene's child has no radiance; he carries a burden from very early on; and his primitive inklings represent the first stage on the "journey toward death" (Essays, p. 13).

Let us look at the very first piece in Greene's Collected Essays. It is worth noting, for a start, that this volume begins with a "Personal Prologue" and ends with a "Personal Postscript". The former, titled "The Lost Childhood", states the theme, and the latter, "The Soupsweet Land", acts as a coda, recalling once and

⁵The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Volume IV, edited by Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1947), IX, l. 149.

for all the variations on the childhood theme that have sounded throughout the essays. Here is the idea of "The Lost Childhood" as quoted by Greene from A. E.'s "Germinal":

In ancient shadows and twilights
Where childhood had strayed,
The world's great sorrows were born
And its heroes were made.
In the lost boyhood of Judas
Christ was betrayed. (p. 19)

This is dreary and pessimistic, a far cry from Wordsworth's image of childhood:

But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy: ("Ode," l. 64)

The "prison-house does eventually close on Wordsworth's youth, but at least he has begun with a store of innocence which prevents his adult self from forming a hopelessly bleak outlook. Greene's version is deliberately contrary: "Hell lay about them in their infancy," (Lawless Roads, p. 2) Greene says in references to certain acquaintances of his youth; and we hear Pinkie, in Brighton Rock, echo the sentiment in particularly grotesque terms: ". . . you had to go back a long way further before you got innocence; innocence was a slobbering mouth, a toothless gum pulling at the teats; perhaps not even that; innocence was the ugly cry of birth" (p. 175). With such a start it is little wonder that Greene's child so often becomes a maimed adult: Pinkie carrying round with him a nihilistic hatred, Raven killing a stranger to revenge a personal hurt, or Greene himself closing the Collected Essays with this remark about his own self-image in adulthood:

"I had failed at failure . . . for a writer as much as for a priest there is no such thing as success" (p. 463).

If there is a disparity of ideas between Wordsworth and Greene there is, too, a marked difference in the tone with which they treat the childhood theme. Wordsworth's reminiscences, whether of pleasant or unpleasant events and sensations, generally have a positive and meditative air about them. As he tells us in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" but "it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquillity."⁶ In the process of writing, the emotion should be qualified, subdued by a sense of pleasure so that the poet's mind, and the reader's, will "be in a state of enjoyment" (p. 401). This is not the case with Greene. Consider the images attributed to Pinkie: "slobbering mouth," "toothless gum," "teats," "ugly cry of birth." The metaphors are blunt and the diction calculated to revolt; both speak of an angry intensity that seems - again deliberately - contrary to Wordsworth's poetic principle. It is as if Greene wants to display his emotions for what they are and for all to see, exaggerating them, even - or at least justifying them - by giving them a bold vitality. In fact, we might say that Greene's imagery points not so much to an emotion - a temporary or "spontaneous" state of excitement - as to a more consistent, fixed, and haunting idea: in Greene's own

⁶Volume II, The Poetical Works (Oxford, 1944), p. 400.

words, an obsession. There is something dark and melancholy about Greene's treatment of childhood that suggests he is possessed by a kind of ever-present demon, rather than inspired, fortuitously, by a muse. Greene is fully aware of this quality. Indeed, he makes it the basis of his poetic principle. He says in an essay on Walter de la Mare that "Every creative writer worth our consideration, every writer who can be called in the wide eighteenth-century use of the term a poet, is a victim: a man given over to an obsession" (Essays, p. 141); and certainly Greene qualifies as a poet by his own terms.

It is not difficult to uncover the source of Greene's attitude to life and to art, to discover the genesis of the victim-writer idea. Curiously, Greene once told his friend Ronald Matthews that an unhappy childhood was not a prerequisite for an obsessional disposition. Matthews quotes Greene as saying: "Je pense que l'on pourrait dire d'Henry James qu'il a eu une enfance objectivement heureuse. Et voyez l'obsession qu'elle a laissée en lui!"⁷ The fact is, when Greene comes to write about James critically, he dwells on those unpleasant aspects of James's early life that seem (to Greene) to have coloured his art so dramatically. Perhaps the key word in Greene's comment is "objectivement", for an unhappy childhood is as much a product of the child's perception as a result of the circumstances of upbringing. But reading his autobiography,

⁷Mon ami Graham Greene (Bruges, 1957), p. 31.

A Sort of Life, is like reading two different accounts of the same thing simultaneously.

The facts of Greene's family life are innocuous enough: well-educated, tolerant, somewhat progressively-thinking parents; comfortable financial circumstances; and fairly pleasant surroundings in a town (Berkhamsted) which is conveniently close to the attractions of London yet which retains a certain rural aspect and small-town simplicity. But concurrent with Greene's descriptions of this part of his early life, we get an interpretation which is quite startling in its contrast. To show what I mean, here are a few of Greene's earliest memories: "sitting in a pram at the top of a hill with a dead dog lying at my feet" (p. 14); "a tin jerry full of blood" (p. 17); "a witch who would lurk at night on the nursery landing" (p. 29). Interspersed with his descriptions of the spacious grounds of Berkhamsted School (where his father was headmaster), the enticements of the canal flowing serenely at the bottom of Castle Street, and the enchantment of Berkhamsted Common for a young boy full of adventure, we hear Greene recalling his persistent, nauseating fits of boredom (boredom "seemed to swell like a balloon inside the head", p. 117) or his early, naive attempts at suicide by drinking "hypo" and cocaine or eating deadly nightshade (p. 86). "If I had known it," Greene says in the opening line of A Sort of Life, "the whole future must have lain all the time along those Berkhamsted streets" (p. 11); and he goes on to lace

his descriptions of Berkhamsted scenes with ghoulish images such as this:

And then there remains to be set reluctantly on my personal map the School . . . where the misery of life started, and the burial ground, long disused, which lay opposite our windows, separated from our flower-beds by an invisible line, so that every year the gardener would turn up a few scraps of human bone in remaking the herbaceous border. (p. 12)

There is no denying that Greene's boyhood emotions were genuinely neurotic, even if we hear them from the mouth of his articulate adult self. Yet there is a hint here of the future novelist: aren't the perceptions and actions of the young Greene tinged with romanticism, slightly melodramatized for a heightened effect? It is interesting to listen to the version of Berkhamsted and the youthful Greene given by Peter Quennell, a fellow student and friend of Greene's. In The Sign of the Fish he says:

I remember the school as dull, and the town as drab; but the undertones of evil that Graham Greene detected made no impression on my more unreceptive spirit . . . Graham Greene was not, in those days, the careworn and hag-ridden personage whom one might possibly conjure up from a study of his recollections. Tall, lank and limp, with an extremely pallid skin but sharp, cheerfully observant eyes, he would have made an admirable Pierrot in the eighteenth-century Commedia dell'Arte, concealing under his rather woebegone mask a great capacity for cynical humour. Nor have the exuberance and the blitheness vanished.⁸

Quennell adds, with some justice, that his own recollections (including his outsider's view of Greene's

⁸London, 1960, pp. 60, 62. The "recollections" Quennell is referring to are those which appear in Greene's Prologue to The Lawless Roads. Had he had the benefit of Greene's full-blown autobiography, Quennell's point would only have gained emphasis.

personality) are perhaps more accurate, in a literal sense, than Greene's, but they are certainly "less valuable as a source of literary legend" (p. 62).

We must read further in A Sort of Life, however, to get an idea of just how accurate - or superficial - Quennell's description is.

Very early on in the autobiography Greene offers us the key to his disposition. His root problem, he tells us, was that since his father was headmaster of his own school, he himself was like "the son of a quisling in a country under occupation" (p. 72). He had a sense of loneliness, as a schoolboy, from "the struggle of conflicting loyalties (p. 78) and a sense of suffering from a "great betrayal" (p. 79). The green baize door which separated the school from the family home was a constant reminder of the ambivalent claims of his father-headmaster. Speaking in The Lawless Roads of the physical and emotional barrier represented by the green baize door, Greene asks: "How can life on a border be other than restless? You are pulled by different ties of hate and love" (p. 2). Again, this is Greene's perception of his position. It seems not to have affected his brothers in the same way at all: in fact, the eldest, Raymond, was a school prefect, "one of Quisling's collaborators" (Life, p. 72). For Greene, allegiance to either side, that of authority or that of fellow "victims", was a betrayal to the other, so he felt himself in the impossible position of being betrayed by both. Little

wonder, then, that Peter Quennell did not share Greene's view of the school as "a place of almost unfathomable iniquity" (Fish, p. 61); to Quennell it was, at worst, "humdrum" (p. 60).

Given Greene's view of his position, we can understand a little better the source of the unpleasant early images, the motives for the clumsy suicide attempts, and the reasons for the debilitating fits of boredom. Reading between the lines of A Sort of Life we get a picture of Greene as a secretive, independent, often anti-social, and rebellious boy; and we can see these too as by-products of life on the border. Unable to align himself in any satisfactory way with the forces around him, he would take refuge in romantic adventure stories (King Solomon's Mines was a favourite) which presented a world where goodness triumphed and evil got its just deserts. This was a happy antidote to the arbitrary dispensation of justice which Greene witnessed in his own world. He remarks several times in his autobiography on the fact that he was often praised, much to his horror, for doing something that "others did quite naturally" (p. 230). By the same token, adult punishment seemed arbitrary, too. Greene recalls that one of his fellow students "was once caned in public in my form room by my father for some offence which was never made clear to any of us, but we were accustomed at that age to the moral confusion of adults and we didn't trouble to ask him the reason" (p. 47). As time went on, certain of Greene's fellow

victims began to take on the vindictiveness Greene saw in their adult models. He speaks of the intense desire for revenge fostered in him by two particular "torturers" and wonders, from his adult perspective, "if those years of humiliation had not given me an excessive desire to prove that I was good at something . . . if I would ever have written a book if it had not been for Watson and the dead Carter . . ." (p. 82).

If Greene is being honest with us - and we must assume he is - we must be grateful, in a selfish way, to Carter and Watson (and all the unhappy childhood circumstances which they symbolized). They acted as catalysts in the future novelist's imagination and represented a kind of turning point in his young life. If we turn to "The Lost Childhood" for a moment, we find Greene, at the age of fourteen, reading Marjorie Bowen's The Viper of Milan and recognizing in it a more realistic picture of life's injustices, a more truthful version of good and evil than the "too heroic" images of Allan Quatermain and Sir Henry Curtis could supply (Essays, p. 17). Miss Bowen's della Scala suffered the more probable fate of those who attempt to live by their conscience: he "at last turned from an honesty that never paid and betrayed his friends and died dishonoured . . ." (p. 17). Her Visconti, too, "with his beauty, his patience, and his genius for evil" was the real thing: "I had watched him pass by many a time in his black Sunday suit smelling of moth-balls. His name was Carter" (p. 17). To the young Greene, this seemed a sudden revelation - or at least

a dramatic confirmation - of what had been slowly and inarticulately forming in his mind: that "Goodness has only once found a perfect incarnation in a human body and never will again, but evil can always find a home there" (p. 17). Human nature, he concludes, "is not black and white but black and grey. I read all that in The Viper of Milan and I looked round and I saw that it was so" (p. 18).

Again, one is struck by the imaginative force with which Greene invests the events of his childhood - or, as Peter Quennell calls it, the romantic, "medieval" flavour of Greene's perception (Fish, p. 64). Quennell goes so far as to suspect Greene's sincerity, for, as he asks, don't his autobiographical pieces, like his novels, rub it in a little too thickly? "I cannot resist the suspicion," Quennell says, "that he gets a good deal of fun - light-hearted school-boyish fun - from causing his own and his reader's flesh to creep, and that he half enjoys the sensations of disgust and horror that he arouses with such unusual artistry" (p. 62). This might well be part of the truth about Greene: the comic side of him is certainly apparent in a novel like Our Man in Havana, the sardonic is obvious in the irreverent essay on Beverley Nichols, and the melodramatic appears in almost all of the fiction. But surely there is, behind the faintly gothic sensationalism, a real obsession that makes Greene's writings rather more than teasing pot-boilers, just as the facts of Greene's early life surely speak

of a genuine unhappiness. Even if he attempted suicide with one eye on dramatic effect, it takes a certain melancholy (not to mention courage) to follow through. Much as Quennell's affectionate unfrocking is worth keeping in mind, I think we must admit that Greene's outlook was truly pessimistic from very early on; and by pessimistic I do not mean negative, but rather sensitive and vulnerable. After all, a simple optimistic view of life is a myopic one: or, as Kenneth Allott and Miriam Farris remark in their interpretation of Greene's outlook, "This pessimistic view of life is in the long run simply an adult view." Greene's "reading of experience . . . is a simple Declaration of the Wrongs of Man to which most intelligent people would subscribe."⁹

But I am jumping ahead, too far ahead of where we left Greene reading The Viper of Milan. Although his early unhappiness was to transform itself into an adult view which is not markedly abnormal (relative though that concept is), at the age of sixteen Greene's ennui was debilitating enough to provoke a crisis. After a long period of escaping the hated dormitory and classroom of Berkhamsted School by regularly playing truant, Greene decided upon a final act of rebellion, one that would prove more worthy of notice than surreptitious gulps of hypo. Greene set out one

⁹The Art of Graham Greene (London, 1951), pp. 16-17.

morning for Berkhamsted Common, leaving a note for his parents to the effect that he would remain concealed in his fortress of gorse until they "agreed that never again should I go back to my prison" (Life, p. 87). The rebellion succeeded; and it is to his parents' credit that they treated Greene's state of mind seriously enough to agree to take what was then (in 1920) a rather liberal step: to submit their son to the care of a psycho-analyst.

Greene soon found himself, then, ensconced in London, in the home of one Kenneth Richmond. Richmond, Greene tells us, belonged to no particular school of thought regarding psycho-analysis although "he was nearer to Freud than Jung" (p. 99).¹⁰ However, his inclinations in this respect were not, initially at any rate, of prime importance: the happy effect his treatment had on Greene seems as much a matter of the pleasant circumstances in which it took place as a matter of doctrinal suitability. There are several changes Greene experienced in his new situation, and most of them were beneficial simply because they answered to certain very basic needs. First, with Kenneth Richmond, there was a new sense of freedom, a release from the prison-world of Berkhamsted School. "Either [Richmond] sorted me out," Greene says in an interview,

¹⁰ Richmond's main interest was educational theory, or so it would appear from his publications: The Permanent Values in Education (1917), Education for Liberty (1918), and The Curriculum (1919).

"or breakfast in bed sorted me out, or sitting quietly in Kensington Gardens reading history sorted me out, or having enough pocket money to go into the West End and to cinemas and theatres of my own choice sorted me out."¹¹ On top of this freedom, Greene was getting regularly from Richmond the undivided attention he so sorely missed from his father-headmaster. With Richmond, as Greene tells Ronald Matthews, "j'étais le centre incontesté. On m'invitait à considérer avec le plus grand sérieux les plus futiles de mes pensées."¹² Psycho-analysis was, too, a kind of adventure, a foray into regions unknown, and it had about it a flavour of excitement not unlike the pleasing suspense of King Solomon's Mines or one of Greene's earlier favourites, Dixon Brett, Detective. King Solomon's Mines had appealed to the young Greene partly because it offered an antidote to boredom; it belonged to the "region of the imagination - the region of uncertainty, of not knowing the way about" (Essays, p. 16). Thanks to Richmond, Greene was introduced to another world of mystery and intrigue, the unconscious, and Richmond must have seemed an ideal guide. He "told me nothing" Greene says; "he patiently waited for me to discover the long road back for myself. I too began to feel the excitement of the search" (Life, p. 100). Recalling a desire to conceal an embarrassing dream from Richmond,

¹¹Burstall interview, p. 674.

¹²Mon ami Graham Greene, p. 61.

Greene tells us: "I was caught sufficiently by the passion for analysis to be repelled at the thought of cheating. To cheat was to behave like a detective who deliberately destroys a clue to murder" (p. 101). Finally, psycho-analysis confirmed for Greene the importance he had attached so precociously to the thoughts and feelings of childhood. Greene refers to psycho-analysis as the study of "the mortmain of the past which holds us in thrall" (p. 100); and this in itself must have seemed a sympathetic balm to one who had realized his personal vision by the age of fourteen.

So far I have mentioned the ways in which psycho-analysis coincided with the way Greene was inclined to see and react to life. This concurrence was beneficial in itself; but the treatment provided Greene with rather more than a mere confirmation that his sensations and perceptions had their own kind of validity. I have said little about Richmond's actual approach; but Greene himself says little about it except that it relied heavily on dream analysis.¹³ Again, the mechanics of Richmond's therapy seem rather less important than the effects. It is not the method of dream analysis which attracted Greene so much as the material it uncovered and the symbols it released into his highly receptive imagination. We know that dreams were to become an

¹³Freud says: "The interpretation of dreams is in fact the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious; it is the securest foundation of psycho-analysis . . .". "Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis" in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 11, 1910 (London, 1957), p. 88.

important artistic resource for Greene. He says in his Preface to the Collected Stories:

Dreams, perhaps because I was psycho-analysed as a boy, have always had an importance when I write. The genesis of my novel It's A Battlefield was a dream, and a novel which I am working on now [The Honorary Consul] began too with a dream. Sometimes identification with a character goes so far that one may dream his dream and not one's own. That happened to me when I was writing A Burnt-Out Case. (xi-xii)

Almost all of his novels contain at least one dream account, and the short story which is arguably his best, "Under the Garden," is an almost tender probe into the proposition that "a dream . . . was an experience, the images of a dream had their own integrity" (Stories, p. 185). But in order for something to become a source of inspiration or a vehicle for expression in art, it must first touch some chord in the artist's mental and emotional make-up. This is just what did happen in Greene's case.

Greene's new acquaintance with the unconscious via dreams was in a sense another form of life on the border. But the frontier world of psycho-analysis had a positive aspect. Unlike the green baize door, which hopelessly confused the claims of hate and love, analysis called up two disparate forces - the rational and the irrational - in order that they be understood and reconciled. The division psycho-analysis posed could hardly fail to appear as a kind of truth to Greene, for this is the way Greene had come to see his life; but by giving credence to both sides, particularly the irrational, dream therapy took some of the sting out of

Greene's darker urges. Hatred, revenge, betrayal began to take on a less oppressive aspect. They were natural reactions - at least natural to the instinctive self - and were to some extent valid simply because they were expressions of real feelings. Greene didn't need dream analysis to tell him what his own "irrational" urges were: they were close enough to the surface of his waking emotions to be quite obvious. But he did need to trace these urges to their source in order to drain off some of their poison.

Greene was to refer to the therapeutic value of dreams much later, at a time when he was much better equipped to articulate this aspect of life on the border. By this time, too, Greene could acknowledge whatever traces of Freud (or Jung¹⁴) were implicit in Richmond's approach. In his first travel book, Journey Without Maps, Greene treats his trek through Liberia in the winter of 1934-35 as another form of the psychological journey backward with Kenneth Richmond. Early on in Journey Without Maps Greene says: "the method of psychoanalysis is to bring the patient back to the idea which he is repressing: a long journey backwards without maps, catching a clue here and a clue there, as

¹⁴It is curious that Greene credits Freud with an idea that is far more consistent (indeed, pivotal) in Jung. In Journey Without Maps he says: "Freud has made us conscious as we have never been before of those ancestral threads which still exist in our unconscious minds to lead us back." The fact that he prefers Freud to Jung (as he says in A Sort of Life) probably explains this; so too might the fact that Freud, generally, has been granted more authority than Jung as the master of psycho-analysis.

I caught the names of villages from this man and that, until one has to face the general idea, the pain or the memory" (p. 104). The images Greene faced in Africa, like the images that had coloured his childhood, were fearful: "a harp strumming behind a hut . . . a masked dancer, the poisoned flowers" (p. 265). But to face these fears was to rid them of their threatening, even incriminating, powers. Mingled with the "sense of terror deeper and purer" (p. 265) in these primitive fears was their ability to provide a "sense of release" and the promise of recovering "a lost objectivity" (p. 183). This is near enough to Freud, I think, for us to point a direct debt. Here, for example, is Freud's comment on the fearfulness of dream material:

Since dreams regress to the [infantile] level, they give the appearance of having brought to light the evil in us. If these evil impulses in dreams are merely infantile phenomena, a return to the beginnings of our ethical development . . . we need not, if we are reasonable, be ashamed of these evil dreams. But what is reasonable is only a part of mental life, a number of other things take place in the mind which are not sensible; and it so happens that we are ashamed of these dreams in an unreasonable way.¹⁵

Greene's version is, of course, more poetically phrased: closer, actually, to Jung's description of modern man's alienation from the positive side of psychic life. In "The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man," Jung says: ". . . if he . . . turns his gaze inward upon the recesses of his own mind, he will discover a chaos and

¹⁵"Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," The Standard Edition, Volume 15, 1915-1916 (London, 1963), p. 211.

a darkness there which he would gladly ignore. Science has destroyed even the refuge of the inner life. What was once a sheltering haven has become a place of terror."¹⁶ At any rate, the thrust of Greene's idea is essentially that of the psycho-analyst's: that the irrational side of the border is irrational only in so far as we are unwilling to come to terms with its audacious truths in our more decorous conscious life.

I think it is fair to say that Greene was pre-disposed, by the time he met Kenneth Richmond, to feel a sympathy with the psycho-analytical way of looking at things; but Richmond's therapy certainly affected the development of Greene's personal philosophy by giving it a solid push. If we look further into Journey Without Maps, we can see another influence psycho-analysis had on his outlook, and this time it is not so much a therapeutic one as an artistic one. Psycho-analysis, or at least that aspect of it which posed a division between the instinctive and the cerebral, was the source of one of Greene's characteristic images: the seedy. He was to regret, later, that he had ever used the word "seedy", that he had, in effect, left himself wide open to critical assumptions that it refers to some "strange . . . region of [his] mind".¹⁷ At the time he wrote Journey Without Maps, the term was intended as a realistic description of the

¹⁶See Modern Man in Search of a Soul, translated by W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (London, 1933), p. 236.

¹⁷Introduction To Brighton Rock, x.

external world: specifically of certain aspects of Liberia; but it is no accident that the term seemed an apt description of the border metaphor, a sort of password into the heart of Greeneland.

In the opening chapter of the book, Greene recalls the impression he got of Liberia from perusing the British Government Blue Book:

There seemed to be a seediness about the place you couldn't get to the same extent elsewhere, and seediness has a very deep appeal: even the seediness of civilization, of the sky-signs in Leicester Square, the 'tarts' in Bond Street, the smell of cooking greens off Tottenham Court Road, the motor salesmen in Great Portland Street. It seems to satisfy, temporarily, the sense of nostalgia for something lost; it seems to represent a stage further back. (p. 7)

As his journey proved to him, seediness had no place in the pure, wild, Liberian interior. There, life was savage and had its own virtue as a vitalizing contrast to the suburban complacency of the civilized world. He found seediness when he emerged from the heart of darkness into the Liberian coastland. Here were signs of civilization, but it was a civilization not yet in full swing: "The half-built Customs house, the water-side squalor of Kru Town, the asphalt road up to grassy Broad Street" (p. 294) still had traces of the untamed hinterland. The primitive "was at their back, it wasn't centuries away. If they had taken the wrong road, they had only to retrace their steps a very little distance in space and not in time" (p. 294). The seedy, then, is a kind of median point: it has not relinquished its ties with the instinctive side of

the border even though it has begun to show signs of a civilized exterior. The "seedy . . . is nearer the beginning," Greene says; "like Monrovia its building has begun wrong, but at least it has only begun; it hasn't reached so far away as the smart, the new, the chic, the cerebral" (pp. 296-297).

Again, we can look to Freud, and perhaps even more to Jung, for the source of this idea. Speaking of the content of dreams, Freud says:

In dream-life the child that is in man pursues its existence, as it were, and retains all its characteristics and wishful impulses, even such as have become unserviceable in later life. There will be brought home to you with irresistible force the many developments, repressions, sublimations and reaction-formations, by means of which a child with a quite other innate endowment grows into what we call a normal man, the bearer, and in part the victim, of the civilization that has been so painfully acquired. ¹⁸

But again, the way Greene milks the material for its metaphorical possibilities puts one rather more in mind of Jung's comparison of primitive and modern:

Great innovations never come from above; they come invariably from below; just as trees never grow from the sky downward, but upward from the earth, however true it is that their seeds have fallen from above . . . while man . . . contemplates a world that is distracted with treaties of peace and pacts of friendship, democracy and dictatorship, capitalism and Bolshevism, his spirit yearns for an answer that will allay the turmoil of doubt and uncertainty. And it is just people of the lower social levels who follow the unconscious forces of the psyche; it is the

¹⁸"Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," p. 36.

much-derided, silent folk of the land - those who are less infected with academic prejudices than great celebrities are wont to be. All these people, looked at from above, present mostly a dreary or laughable comedy; and yet they are as impressively simple as those Galileans who were once called blessed. (Modern Man, pp. 243-244)

So powerful was the idea for Greene, in a literary sense, that he was able, later, to find a place for it even beyond the shabby African landscape of vultures and cockroach-infested Nissen huts: in the holiday amusement world of Brighton, the slick chrome-plated Sweden of England Made Me, or the vacuum shop in Havana.

But we are jumping ahead again. Greene still had a long road ahead of him after his sojourn with Kenneth Richmond, a road which lead him eventually to religion. And here is a question we might just as well ask now as later: if psycho-analysis relieved Greene's melancholy and planted a seed that was to bear so much artistic fruit, why did he later feel compelled to seek comfort in religious conversion? There are certain circumstantial reasons, as we shall see; but even without these we might wonder that Greene should be receptive at all to a system of belief so apparently contrary to the secular and semi-scientific discipline of psycho-analysis. One might, of course, take the Freudian view that religion is a kind of collective, public counterpart to obsessional neuroses, an attempt to alleviate unconscious guilt by acting out, in ritualistic form, a sort of purge

of conscience.¹⁹ In Greene's case it is clear that he was still in need of a "cure" after his course of treatment; but only his analyst could say, with any authority, whether or not his conversion was merely an escape from private neuroses. The view that religious belief is only dressed-up pathology will not get us very far; but if we look at Greene's conversion from another angle, from the point of view of how he used psycho-analysis to artistic ends, we might well see an affinity between it and, say, the mystique of the Catholic Church.

In A Sort of Life Greene tells us that he went one day in 1925 to a "sooty neo-Gothic Cathedral" to request instruction in the Catholic faith (p. 161). The Church, he says, held "a certain gloomy power because it represented the inconceivable and the incredible" (p. 161). The striking thing about this description is the extent to which it resembles his description of the unconscious: a world in which anything might happen, an intangible, apparently illogical world which yet had its own absolute forms and rules. It is interesting, too, that Greene seemed to find this strange realm of the psyche primarily positive, not, as Freud would assume, distressing because so close to the repressive core. I think it is significant that the context Greene chooses in which to speak of his first confession is Journey Without Maps. This confession was, he says,

¹⁹See "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" in The Standard Edition, Volume 9 (1906-1908).

... . like a life photographed as it came to mind . . . I couldn't help feeling . . . that I had got somewhere new by way of memories I hadn't known I possessed. I had taken up the thread of life from very far back, from so far back as innocence. (p. 110)

To Freud, psycho-analysis may be only a therapeutic exercise and religion merely a palliative - and an illusory one at that. But to Greene both were routes of discovery to something that is neither clinical nor fabricated, to the deepest, purest instincts of the human soul. Perhaps there was more of Jung in Kenneth Richmond's approach than Greene recognized: more sympathy to, as Jung would put it, the "visionary" power of the unconscious, and more willingness to credit symbolic experiences with a reality quite outside the bounds of empirical truth.²⁰ At any rate, it is possible to conjecture that Greene's psycho-analysis, from an imaginative point of view, was to make him eventually more, not less, susceptible to a spiritual explanation of human affairs.

Having said this, I want to make it clear that to see affinities between psychology and religion in a metaphorical sense does not explain consent, in a literal sense, to religious doctrine. Indeed, on a conscious level, the possibility of conversion after

²⁰ See especially Jung's "Psychology and Literature" in Modern Man in Search of a Soul. Jung later, in his full-length study Psychology and Religion, made the point about the validity of spiritual psychic experiences most emphatically. For a useful comparison of Freud and Jung on the question of religious belief, see Paul E. Johnson's Psychology of Religion, second edition (New York, 1959).

his treatment simply did not occur to Greene; and when circumstances finally did present him with this option, the arguments he summoned for and against belief were purely intellectual. Let us trace the events which followed Greene's course of psycho-analysis. After six months in London, he returned to Berkhamsted, relieved of some of his ennui, but not cured. Part of the hatred and fear with which he had faced the routine of school was now dispelled; but the attitude which outwardly eased his acceptance of the old situation was inwardly debilitating, for it was based on a new-found sense of superiority. Greene returned to his classes, he tells us,

. . . with the proud sense of having been a voyager in very distant seas. . . I had been the witness of strange rites and gained a knowledge of human nature that it would take many years for my companions to equal, or that was what I believed. . . Who among my fellows in 1921 knew anything of Freud or Jung? (Life, p. 104)

In other words, he was able to cope socially only because he had, now, an inflated sense of his own worth. How shallow a comfort this is, Greene was soon to discover; his "old enemy" (p. 125) boredom was soon to catch him up again, and this was a sure sign that something, in his internal and external worlds, was not right.

By the time Greene went up to Oxford in 1922, he began to realize that he was, in a sense, less well off than he had been before his analysis. "I could take no interest in any visual thing," he says in A Sort of Life: "staring at a sight that others assured me was beautiful I felt nothing. I was fixed, like a negative in a chemical

bath" (p. 127). He then adds: "Rilke wrote, 'Psycho-analysis is too fundamental a help for me, it helps you once and for all, it clears you up, and to find myself finally cleared up one day might be even more helpless than this chaos'" (p. 127). Now it is not possible to estimate from this how familiar Greene was with Rilke at the beginning of his Oxford period; but the reference suggests an interesting analogy between Greene and this poet whose early preoccupation with death and the corrupt condition of earthly life led him to seek comfort spiritually.²¹ Rilke, like Greene, suffered long the emotional turbulence he experienced first in childhood. Also, like Greene, Rilke found no solace in the faith of his parents, though their religious character was fanatical and repressive, not benign and easy. But unlike Greene he chose to forego psycho-analysis and struggle, himself, to find some more enduring support, to find a spiritual attitude with which he could face death ethically and not court it as an escape.

Greene had not the resources to try this route yet. He was beginning to reject the world of "mindless sensuality" (Journey, p. 297) that psycho-analysis had opened up to him and that Rilke had backed away from. But Greene's choice at this point - his only choice, in his eyes - was to flirt with death to fill the void of his life. Several times he played Russian roulette with

²¹Helpful in this regard is Rainer Maria Rilke. Aspects of his Mind and Poetry, second edition, edited by William Rose and G. Craig Houston (New York, 1970).

with a six-chambered revolver loaded with one charge. "The chance, of course, was five to one in favour of life," Greene says laconically (Life, p. 126); but the game must have been played with a sense of real horror that he should be pushed to so desperate an act. Invariably, he won; then the initial "sense of jubilation" was replaced gradually by the "crude kick of excitement" (pp. 128-129); and he abandoned this particular gamble for good.

Greene took to drinking his way through each day - a pattern which lasted one full term and which left him, he says with grateful irony, with a "strong head and a tough liver" (p. 136). But this form of escape was no better; it was a sort of prosaic relative to the sensuous, melancholy longing of Baudelaire, discernable in what T. S. Eliot calls his "poetry of flight".²² Greene was to offer Baudelaire's false comfort much later to Fowler in The Quiet American:

Aimer à loisir,
Aimer et mourir
Au pays qui te ressemble.²³

But it was simply another way of arriving at the void: as, in a sense it was for Baudelaire himself. Baudelaire "could not escape suffering and could not transcend it, so he attracted pain to himself," as Eliot says of him (p. 423); so, too, for Greene, the escape held its own

²²See "Baudelaire" in Selected Essays, third edition (London, 1976), p. 428.

²³Volume XI, The Collected Edition (London, 1973) p. 5.

form of torment.²⁴

It was at about this time that Greene met his wife-to-be. She was a Roman Catholic and he was intrigued by her as someone who took the "subtle distinctions of an unbelievable theology seriously" (Life, p. 161). He was fascinated, and understandably so. He was living in a philosophical vacuum, or at least a state of philosophical confusion, and it is natural that strongly-held convictions of any sort in another person should strike up some reaction, even if it were a skeptical one. "Now it occurred to me," he says in Bertrand Russell-like fashion, "that if I were to marry a Catholic I ought at least to learn the nature and limits of the beliefs she held" (p. 161). He began a course of instruction rather in the manner of a challenger - who has no intention of losing - flinging down the gauntlet. "You must prove to me the existence of God," he might have said to his instructor, for he was fighting on the ground of "dogmatic atheism": it was "like a fight for personal survival" (p. 164). Greene was impressed enough by the ritual of Catholicism (as he had been by the "strange rites" of psycho-analysis)

²⁴Allott and Farris, in objecting to complaints that Greene's imagination is morbid, quote Eliot on Baudelaire: "'Without the morbidity none of his work would be possible or significant'". Their point is not to suggest a similarity between Greene and Baudelaire but to stress that morbidity should have nothing to do, from a critical point of view, with one's estimate of the quality of the work. Still, the analogy is useful. (See The Art of Graham Greene, p. 12)

to flirt with it; still, he had imbibed enough of Freudian rationalism to think that only if he could be convinced that a creed was plausible, could he be won over. And, indeed, he was.

Greene became, then, in 1926, what he would call an intellectual convert. He had gambled with God rather in the way he had gambled with death, and rather in the way that Pascal had wagered, in terms of probability calculus, on the existence of God. It was only the first step toward faith: to complete the process, according to Pascal, "la raison" had to be followed up by "la coutume" and, finally, "l'inspiration" - a true, emotional investment in one's chosen religion.²⁵

Greene did not reach anything resembling "l'inspiration" until many years later. Even as late as 1936 his faith was tenuous. One night during his journey through Liberia, he lay very ill, close to death, and awoke next morning to discover he had a new, "passionate interest in living":

It seemed . . . an important discovery. It was like a conversion, and I had never experienced a conversion before. . . If the experience had not been so new to me, it would have seemed less important, I should have known that conversions don't last, or if they last at all it is only as a little sediment at the bottom of the brain.
(Journey, pp. 251-252)

But in 1938, seeing in Mexico evidence of religious persecution, "attending secret Masses," he found his

²⁵See "Pensées" in Oeuvres Complètes, établi et annoté par Jacques Chevalier (Bruges, 1954).

"emotions touched,"²⁶ and his attitude toward Catholicism changed from dogged assent to calm acceptance. We have no evidence that Greene ever had a mystical experience like Pascal's or what Jung would call a religious revelation; and perhaps this explains Greene's permanent inability to surrender completely to a creed. But his initial intellectual consent to Catholic doctrine and fascination with the symbolic rituals of the faith were replaced by an emotional sympathy for what is more important than either dogma or ceremony: the humanitarian concerns which underlie Christian philosophy in its broadest form.

Greene's initial brush with the Roman faith, then, was gratuitous: he did not go looking for it, but when it confronted him he reacted mainly with his brain. But there were germs of other motives present even then, motives which were to find expression more and more as the issue of religious "truth" waned for him and the spirit of the faith gained ground in him. Remember that Greene found himself, in his Oxford days, staring at a blank wall. However stimulating in a cerebral sense he might have found the challenge of faith, he must, too, have seen that it offered answers to certain questions and reasons for certain convictions that no other avenue of appeal had yet supplied. By the time he began his critical career in the thirties, some of these answers were making themselves known:

²⁶Interview with Ronald Bryden, p. 544.

they slipped almost surreptitiously into his early reviews and essays. In 1933, for example, Greene reviewed Signe Toksvig's biography of Hans Andersen and dropped this weighty remark into his summary account of Andersen's resigned attitude toward his family's suffering: "this was not egotism," Greene says; "it was an artist's parallel to the Catholic ideal of the acceptance of pain for a spiritual benefit" (Essays, p. 112).

There are two points here which give us some hint as to how religion filled the emotional gap which analysis had left. First, the objective of the analyst is to alleviate suffering, not present it as a necessary part of life. But Catholicism accepted suffering and explained it in cosmic terms. The doctrine of Original Sin accounted, fairly persuasively for Greene at the time, for man's imperfection and Greene's conviction that human nature is black and grey. Second, psychoanalysis assumes, basically, that the individual psyche holds the clues to problems of adjustment. But as far as Greene was concerned, the state of his ego didn't provide all the answers: if analysis had cleared him up, why did there still exist, in the external world, seemingly permanent symptoms of disorder? Good and evil, suffering and despair were still manifestly there, and any system that pretended a cure simply evaded what seemed to him an undeniable truth. About this, the faith could offer hope that even if suffering could not be cured in this life, it might be justified

eventually in another. The idea that there is an arbitrator, somewhere, who will ensure that the pendulum swings, that "after all in the end justice is done" (Essays, pp. 18-19), seemed rather more potent to Greene than the image of the analyst, struggling with the vanity of earthly things with little hope of effectiveness beyond the term of clinical treatment.

If we turn, again, to a remark dropped unobtrusively in a piece of criticism (this time in British Dramatists), we see another emotional advantage religion had over psycho-analysis. Speaking of Dryden, Greene says that he "alone among the writers of his time was ruled by an idea - the idea of authority. There is no inconsistency in his praise of Cromwell and his welcome to Charles: William he never welcomed, for by that time he had found the source of his idea and become a Catholic" (p. 29). This is not an idea which points to any insightful footwork on Greene's part; in fact, he probably owes something here to T. S. Eliot's discussion of Catholicism and authority in, for example, "The Function of Criticism" or, later, For Lancelot Andrews.²⁷ But aside from its critical connections, Greene's comment on Dryden tells us something about his own motives, namely that by embracing the faith he was assigning himself to the guidance of some more powerful agent:

²⁷These appeared in 1923 and 1926 respectively. Greene acknowledges his debt to Eliot with respect to certain ideas about religion and art on several occasions. See my discussion in Chapter IV.

a comfort indeed to one who had exhausted his own resources for coping with life. Clearly, Kenneth Richmond had not satisfied Greene's need for authority, although he was certainly more successful in this respect than Greene's father had been. Since the analyst's aim is to remove the patient's need for him at all, he could hardly be expected to form the basis of an ongoing philosophical support system.

Just what kind of guidance was Greene looking for? Even if we didn't have his own remarks to go on, we could assume from his disappointment with psycho-analysis that it was not ethical pointers he wanted. If psycho-analysis did anything, it removed imputations of right and wrong from sensations and perceptions which the conscious self so ruthlessly censors. No, it was clearly something less tangible, less specific, something better suited to Greene's melodramatic propensities than vague notions of psychological normality could ever be. In fact, it was not really guidance at all that he was looking for, but simply the sense that thoughts and actions were important to someone or something outside himself, that even the most trivial aspects of human conduct had some meaning apart from their obvious personal import. If we dig once again into the lesser known regions of his prose we find Greene saying, in a 1934 review, that "religion is a matter of theology

and not primarily of ethics."²⁸ The idea that there is some supernatural force overlooking human affairs given a certain weight to actions and events so that they can never again be treated, cavalierly, as inconsequential accidents of human nature or explained, in solely rational terms, as psychological phenomena. The Catholic faith, of course, does insist on certain ethical standards, but with these Greene had little patience. He could never accept wholly the threat of eternal damnation or eternal salvation, but the thought that he might exist in a God's eye, however indeterminate that God's sense of justice might be, seemed to provide sufficient cause for circumspection. In very personal terms, God's presence represented a corrective to Greene's boredom: indifference was a form of egotism, a circular phenomenon that recoiled on itself and left no promise of escape. But faith demanded that one take a stand, that one live with an almost dramatic intensity. It provided, in short, a stimulant that was far less painful than Russian roulette, and certainly more enduring.

There is one more deep-seated motive, or at least possible motive, for Greene's conversion. I have said that Greene seems to have been, from very early on, rebellious by nature. He was seldom prepared to give

²⁸"Fiction," Spectator, 5549 (November 1934), 692. This idea, too, puts one in mind of Eliot, especially of "Religion and Literature" which appeared in the same year as Greene's review and which seemed to influence Greene in his subsequent critical applications of the theme. (See my Chapter IV.)

emotional or intellectual consent to the conditions of his life in Berkhamsted. He saw himself as being quite different from his fellow students, even from his brothers; and he took steps to ensure that others were aware of this difference. Greene's brush with psycho-analysis certainly reinforced this image, and it is perhaps not stretching the point to say that converting to Catholicism added another distinctive feather to his cap. I do not mean to trifle with Greene's motives; indeed, he was part of a generation of artists and intellectuals who made rebellion (albeit often for its own sake) a justifiable part of their private and public identities. A disenchantment with the complacency of their Edwardian elders after World War I compelled many of Greene's contemporaries (W.H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, and C. Day Lewis, to name a few) to take up, in the thirties, causes that were calculated to shake the status quo. Ronald Matthews, who was a fellow student of Greene's at Oxford, makes this point very clearly:

Parmi ceux de nos contemporains à Oxford qui ne se construisaient pas des tours d'ivoire, ou ne s'engageaient pas dans les routines confortables, afin de fermer l'oreille à l'appel strident du nouvel univers, ceux qui étaient de loin les plus intéressants cherchaient la solution de leurs problèmes en se tournant soit vers la révolution, soit vers le catholicisme. (Mon Ami, p. 25)

Matthews goes on to say, interestingly, "Je ne suis pas bien certain qu'entre les deux solutions, le catholicisme n'était pas pour eux la réponse la plus révolutionnaire" (p. 25). But Greene's conversion took place in 1926; he was well ahead of the general movement in that direction, and his purpose was more personal than social

or political. He was reacting against Edwardian complacency, yes; but it was the complacency of his own, familial elders that gave him the initial push. He says in his autobiography that he wrote "flippantly" to his mother just before his official reception into the Church: "I expect you have guessed that I am embracing the Scarlet Woman" (p. 165). Is there not a note of triumph in this, as well as flippancy? By choosing to embrace the "Scarlet Woman" he was choosing to align himself with a group which, in England, traditionally, was beyond the pale.

We don't have to read between the lines quite so much if we turn to Greene's Prologue to The Lawless Roads where he makes it clear that the hearty atmosphere of Anglicanism - the faith of his parents - was particularly unsympathetic for one whose young faith acknowledged only "violence, cruelty, evil across the way" (p. 3). The "big brass eagle, [the] organ voluntary, 'Lord, Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing'" were too easy; far more accurate (and dramatic) were "The Mother of God," "the appalling mysteries of love moving through a ravaged world," and "Péguy challenging God in the cause of the damned" (p. 3). Catholicism, then, was a new form of life on the border, of setting oneself apart by exploring a foreign territory. It must have been gratifying for Greene to be capable, finally, of choosing his own side, or at least setting up a frontier bounded by constituencies of his own choosing. Greene himself was to refer to his conversion in these terms at a much

later date. In "Letter to a West German Friend" he says:

What a relief it is sometimes to find oneself on a material frontier, a frontier visible to the eyes, tangible - even when in Berlin it is a wall. For most of us have all our lives in this unhappy century carried an invisible frontier around with us, political, religious, moral. . . . Nearly forty years ago I stepped across such a frontier when I became a Catholic, but the frontier did not cease to exist for me because I had crossed it. (Portable, p. 599)

As with his mature psychological formulations, we can assume that this passage merely articulates what had been sensed, vaguely, by Greene's younger self.

It is appropriate to pause at this point to question Greene's choice of Catholicism, given his rebellious nature. The Roman faith, far more than the protestant, is an authoritative one; and despite Greene's apparent need for some sort of spiritual direction, it is not unreasonable to ask how Catholicism sorted with Greene's temperamental independence. The fact is, it didn't. Even Greene's comment that the frontier still existed, even though he had crossed it, hints at a reluctance to burn his bridges entirely, to forfeit all that the other side has to offer. And when we look at how Greene translates his faith in practical terms, we find an interpretation that is distinctly his, and not Rome's. If Greene is to be called a Catholic at all, he must be called a rebel Catholic, for he attempts to bend the rules of divine justice to accommodate his own psychological views of human nature.

A case in point is Greene's treatment of sin, especially that sin which touches Greene closest (and which is unforgivable in Roman dogma): suicide. He tells

us in A Sort of Life than when he chose Russian roulette as a means of escape, he did so without fear, "perhaps because so many semi-suicidal acts which my elders would have regarded as neurotic, but which I still consider to have been under the circumstances highly reasonable, lay in the background of this more dangerous venture" (p. 128). He goes on: "this was not suicide, whatever a coroner's jury might have said: it was a gamble with five chances to one against an inquest" (p. 128). What is striking here is that Greene is defining suicide in his own terms, removing it, in a cool-headed way, from its usual clinical context. In a similar way he robs suicide of its theological import. Nobody, he would say, is going to tell him that this "unforgivable" sin will lead him straight to hell; indeed, hell is a property of the imagination with which the would-be suicide is too familiar already.²⁹ Greene puts this point across in The Comedians when he puts these words into the mouth of Dr. Magiot, a Catholic:

However great a man's fear of life . . . suicide remains the courageous act, the clear-headed act of a mathematician. The suicide has judged by the laws of chance - so many odds against one that to live will be more miserable than to die. His sense of mathematics is greater than his sense of survival.³⁰

²⁹Greene is fond of quoting Mephistopheles's remark to Faustus: "Why, this is hell; nor am I out of it" (see, for example, Prologue to The Lawless Roads and Brighton Rock).

³⁰Volume XVIII, The Collected Edition (London, 1976), p. 113.

Again, one is reminded of Pascal, the mathematician and physicist, assessing the odds for and against a Heavenly reward for an earthly commitment to Christian principles. But Greene's commitment to the truth of his experience never allowed him to give, as Pascal did, full consent to his creed.

It is difficult to read any of Greene's "religious" novels without being confronted with this obstinacy with regard to systematized belief. Indeed, it is arguable that his religious novels (excepting perhaps The Power and the Glory) are not religious at all - at least not in the usual sense of the term. A novel such as The Heart of the Matter is as much a gesture of defiance against Catholic dogma as a statement of the legitimate claims of the faith. In fact, it is a measure of Greene's brave, humanistic brand of Catholicism that he even attempts to juggle the two approaches at all. But it is tricky ground: to treat a character such as Scobie sympathetically, or at least fairly, Greene must credit him with his own iconoclastic convictions about love and hate, suicide and despair, at the same time as he is justifying Scobie's allegiance (however tenuous) to his faith. Scobie's God has got to be Greene's God. In other words, it must be possible for Him to consider Scobie's fate in the light of all the extenuating circumstances surrounding Scobie's "sins" - all the circumstances, that is, that Greene seems to put forward as semi-justifiable in human terms. As a result, the novel is a knot of psychological and theological imperatives which some readers find too

unwieldy to untangle.

I think it is fair to say that Greene is aware that any attempt to reconcile religious scruples with personal and psychological beliefs about human affairs carries with it certain frustrations. At the time of his conversion and for many years after, Greene actively debated the issues involved as if he were still working out in his mind an attitude that could account for the variety of ways he had come to view life. By the time he wrote A Sort of Life he was simply weary of theological debate, philosophical justification, and emotional confirmation. "I accept," he says simply; "With the approach of death I care less and less about religious truth. One hasn't long to wait for revelation or darkness" (p. 165). If we are surprised at this defeatist attitude in someone whom we know to be still far from passive or indolent creatively, we need not be. There are two reasons why religion lost some of its force as an object of active speculation and involvement. We can get an idea of the first from a comment Greene made in a 1951 essay on Simone Weil, the Catholic mystic-philosopher whose relationship to God was a matter for strenuous and continuous intellectual exercise. "She claims too much . . . [and] too stridently," Greene said (Essays, p. 375). She makes "blunt claims . . . on our credulity" as when she "tells us how once when she was reciting George Herbert's poem 'Love', 'Christ Himself came down and took possession of me . . .'" (p. 374). The impression we get from Greene's view of Weil is that,

however closely her literal acceptance of Christ might reflect on Greene's own eventual acquiescence, the experience made him less, not more, vehemently assert its effect. "We want to say," he adds, "'Don't go so far so quickly'" (p. 375); and we might add that this comes from someone who had learned, the hard way, the value of allowing faith to take the form of a quiet, private, and above all flexible source of inspiration.

The second reason for Greene's slackened religious zeal is perhaps the more potent: he found another metaphorical outlet for his convictions, and this one turned out to be comprehensive enough to hurdle the obstacles that conventional Catholicism placed in his way. I am referring to what Greene calls his political obsession, although it is neither political in the usual sense of the term nor particularly obsessive. Let us go back to our chronological map, for a moment, to see just how this new focus came about and what shape it actually took.

Soon after Greene entered the Roman Catholic Church two things happened to divert him, temporarily at any rate, from religious concerns. He made the decision to enter the world of letters professionally, and he was thrown unavoidably, partly in consequence of this decision, into the world of politics: a sort of baptism in fire, given the pre-war turmoil of the 1930's. It is worth looking briefly at the early stages of Greene's career because they throw some light on the beginnings of his political obsession: Greene's emergence, that is, out of

his private cocoon into a more wordly existence. A Sort of Life carries us a little further along the road. In 1926 Greene joined The Times as a sub-editor: a useful preparation, he says, for a professional writer's career. Here the young writer can learn "lessons valuable to his own craft":

He is removing the clichés of reporters; he is compressing a story to the minimum length possible without ruining its effect. A writer with a sprawling style is unlikely to emerge from such an apprenticeship. It is the opposite training to the penny-a-liner.
(p. 177)

In 1928 Greene's first published novel appeared - The Man Within; and in 1929 he relinquished the Times position in favour of full-time novel-writing. Two years later, after the publication of The Name of Action (in 1930) and Rumour at Nightfall (in 1931), Greene recognized that the success of his first novel had been only "a false start" (Life, p. 195), and he was forced, in 1932, to make his first artistic compromise. Realizing the accuracy of Frank Swinnerton's unfavourable review of Rumour at Nightfall,³¹ he set out to abandon the romantic Conrad-styled prose he had cultivated so far and to heed the lessons he had learned at The Times. He produced Stamboul Train: in itself a "spurious" success only but as a prototype of his later novels, a step in the right direction. He was beginning to create the simple style he had valued as an editor; he was discovering how to give to action

³¹See "People we all know," The Evening News (20 November 1931), p. 10.

described a "physical excitement" (p. 198) by avoiding decorative, reflective prose. In 1932, too, Greene began reviewing regularly for the Spectator, and now he was forced even more to put his thoughts about art and life into some sort of order and weigh his own skills as an artist against those of his successful contemporaries.

Such details as these of Greene's early vocational activities might seem beside the point; but in fact they are central to the development of his outlook. Take, for example, his decision to attempt writing on a professional basis. In a sense, art can be seen as a kind of escape from reality, or at least an activity pursued on the imaginative fringes of real life. On the other hand, in order for art to be good, that is, accessible in some degree to the reading public, it must capture the essence of life as it is lived. In order for Greene to make the leap from the laboured subjectivity of his early novels to the more lucid transcription of life in the later ones, he had to take a closer look at the world around him: he had, in other words, to see life from vantage points that were not his own. The same sort of observation of and fidelity to facts is required of a critic. When Greene took up the journalist's pen he was electing to expose his knowledge and judgement to the scrutiny of others, many of whom were far more seasoned than he; and it is not so easy to hang on to convictions arrived at personally when one enters the diverse, adult world of

occupational expertise. Greene chooses to end his autobiography with a description of his début as a novelist because, he says, "Failure too is a kind of death" (p. 9). But his early mistakes pushed him toward a pattern of thought and expression that was to make him, in the long run, a success.

The fact that Greene's entrance into the professional world coincided with a period of intense political activity only exaggerated Greene's developing sense that there were far more ways of seeing life than he had been aware of to this point. The crisis of the thirties was something to which no writer could be immune, and Greene soon found himself swept up in a wave of highly-charged opinions regarding the "proper" ideological solution to economic and social ills. The foundations of English society were cracking and ominous prophecies of war were challenging all assumptions about what the future might hold. It is hardly surprising, then, that Greene felt compelled to inject into his writing some measure of political consciousness. How, he found himself asking, could one condone the so-called humorous journalists of Punch, for example; those "cheerleaders in a great community laugh" at the expense of those outside the intelligent or privileged sectors of society?³² Or how could one sympathize with novelists like Virginia Woolf who continued, doggedly, to dramatize the subjective impressions of ethereal Edwardian spirits?³³ Art, as far as Greene

³²"Fiction," Spectator, 5409 (November 1933), 728.

³³See, for example, "The Saratoga Trunk" (1938) in Essays.

could see, should have some sense of contemporary life. It should deal with ordinary men and common problems, and especially those problems which are bound to be writ large in times of trouble.

We can see, now, the reason for Greene's choice of the word "political" for this new direction in his attitude. The political world, in a very general sense, is where things happen to people, both individually and collectively, justly and unjustly; and Greene was coming to realize, if only by force of circumstance, that to close one's eyes to the influence of politics on our lives is to live in a state of emotional and intellectual amnesia - the negative in the chemical bath again. But what about Greene's use of the term "obsession" in conjunction with political? It, surely, does not suggest that this state of mind is given over wholly to public concerns. It suggests, rather, that Greene is talking about a private response to a public reality; and the form this obsession took was an uncommon one in the thirties: a refusal to take sides, to forward the claims of any one political platform as a solution to all ills. Greene's own experiences and temperament had taught him that allegiance to any system of belief was constraining, and a political system, as much as any other with which he had experience, was bound to evade the reality of individual suffering while it constructed its web of theory and impressive rhetoric. For Greene the political sense had to be private, too. It had to have an element of iconoclasm, a sense that allegiances should be seen,

objectively, for what they meant in simple human terms. Greene's political obsession is really, then, a state of mind, an attitude that sees the necessity for involvement in public issues at the same time as it sees the need for personal integrity and independence of judgment. It was only later, of course, that Greene was able to speak of his political obsession in terms of a formula; in the thirties he was merely reacting, according to his nature, to a set of circumstances and events. But somehow politics caused Greene to scrutinize his convictions with a new sharpness, with a critical sense that had been lacking in his earlier encounters with psychological and religious imperatives.

Why did this happen? Why did the political world seem to offer a metaphor which could somehow reconcile Greene's private convictions with his need to feel part of a larger reality? I think we can conjecture two reasons. The first is that Greene's forced entry into the world of "politics" brought him to the limit of his ability to acquiesce, emotionally and intellectually, in preconceived ideological schemes. We know that he had felt pulled toward various forms of response to life, at various stages in his life. We know, too, that none offered a blanket solution, none had provided more than a circumscribed view of human nature. Politics, to put it very simply, came along with new but similarly impassioned pleas for allegiance; but by the time this happened, Greene found that he could give no more. He was drained, like his own Querry in A Burnt-Out Case,

of the power to ally himself with anything that required strenuous assent - although he was far from Querry's nihilistic void. To some extent, this is what happened, too, to his spiritual faith; but it was politics that first forced the issue and showed him what it costs the individual to belong to a collective cause.

The second reason is perhaps just an extension of the first: Greene's political indoctrination coincided with what one might call his entrance into maturity. Maturity is, of course, a relative and vague term; but I think it is possible to say that each of us, at some point, becomes capable of appraising our experiences, and those of others, without the passion and romanticism that is so characteristic of our young selves. Listen to Greene's description of Arthur Rowe's transformation in The Ministry of Fear:

Rowe felt a longing to get back into that world [of the profound, natural common experiences of men]: into the world of homes and children and quiet love and the ordinary unspecified fears and anxieties the neighbours shared; he carried the thought of Anna like a concealed letter promising just that: the longing was like the first stirring of maturity when the rare experience suddenly ceases to be desirable. (pp. 207-208)

For Greene personally, relinquishing the "rare experience" meant refusing to join any particular bandwagon, weighing the claims of various platforms against their actual, practical effects, and realizing that a state of vacillation, of concerned detachment, could be, in itself, a virtue.

The Ministry of Fear did not appear until 1943; but it is possible to see Greene working toward this position of emotional and intellectual neutrality in his fiction and journalism in the pre-war period. In the novel which followed Stamboul Train by two years, It's A Battlefield (and which, incidentally, provoked words of praise from V. S. Pritchett, Ezra Pound, and Ford Madox Ford³⁴), Greene nods his head in the direction of politics but withholds consent to any one political solution. The theme of the novel, Greene tells us in its Introduction, is "the injustice of men's justice" (ix), and the various political attitudes it surveys contribute equally to this state of injustice. The Assistant Commissioner of Police, for example, uses his position as a law enforcer to justify an unwillingness to commit himself, politically, emotionally, or morally. He has the robot quality of a mercenary, paid only to do his job and leave the thinking to others. Yet he carries round with him a fear of being followed, not physically, but intellectually - by "questions, doubts, suggestions" (p. 178). Mr. Surrogate is the Assistant Commissioner's opposite. He is a Communist, committed wholly to the vague but noble idea that no sacrifice is too great in the war

³⁴In his Introduction to the novel Greene says that it was because of this praise that he was able to overlook the unfavourable comments of "the popular reviewers" and feel that he "had received [his] spurs." See Volume II, The Collected Edition (London, 1970), x.

against bourgeois capitalism. But the facts of humanity get in the way of Mr. Surrogate's ideals; he feels "rattled and betrayed by the individuality of men" (p. 48). And Conrad Drover, a petty insurance clerk, speaks for the small man who is the victim of police mercenaries and political prophets. Not for him the remote and arbitrary justice of those in power; he will take the law into his own hands, make justice an individual matter. But his misguided attempt to murder the Assistant Commissioner results only in his own agonizing and futile death. It is a bleak picture of pre-war England - and the state of Greene's outlook. But here, certainly, is evidence that Greene was beginning to assess the value of extreme commitment, whether to a public or a private system of belief. It is perhaps natural that at this point Greene saw both forms of commitment as destructive (there is no reward even for those, like Conrad Drover, who act out of a sense of love); in a sense Greene had to demolish in order to reconstruct.

Soon after the publication of It's A Battlefield, Greene's reviews in the Spectator begin to deal more and more with the ways in which political questions should affect art; and in these reviews we can almost see Greene working out a personal philosophy that would fill the void projected in It's A Battlefield. In 1936, to take just one example, Greene reviewed Paul Rotha's Documentary Film and quoted from John Grierson's preface to the book: "Art is wider than political doctrine and platform solution . . . It may,

like politics, realize the social ills, but it must also sympathize more widely." Greene adds this comment: "To sympathize more widely . . . I can think of no better distinction between art and propaganda . . ." ³⁵ There were shades of this idea in It's A Battlefield, but there was too a sense that personal affiliations and individual justice were doomed to fail. Conrad Drover may have been sympathetically conceived - as indeed were Surrogate and the Assistant Commissioner - but he certainly didn't suggest that sympathy, artistic or otherwise, paid off in terms of happiness.

If we jump ahead, for a moment, to a much later political novel, Our Man in Havana, we can see how far Greene travelled from the pessimism of It's A Battlefield to the "sympathy" he had admired only critically in the Rotha review. Our Man in Havana is, uncharacteristic though this may seem, a comedy; and humour is, surely, a form of resolution, a sign that one has drained off the oppressive power of various warring notions and is able to treat them without anger or a sense of hopeless frustration. Greene's vacuum salesman-cum-secret service agent Wormold, is a descendent of Conrad Drover. He refuses to be a victim of institutional justice:

If I love or if I hate, let me love or hate as an individual. I will not be 59200/5 in anyone's global war. . . . I don't care a damn about men who are loyal to the people who pay them, to organizations . . . I don't think even my country means all that much. There are many countries in our blood, aren't there, but only one person. Would the world be in the mess it is if we were loyal to love and not to countries? ³⁶

³⁵"Wings Over Wardour Street," Spectator, 5613 (January 1936), 137.

³⁶Volume IV, The Collected Edition (London, 1970), pp. 206, 209.

But unlike Drover, Wormold refuses also to take justice into his own hands. His attempt at murder is comically botched. When it fails, he is suddenly happy: "He had proved conclusively to himself that he wasn't one of the judges; he had no vocation for violence" (p. 225). Wormold's only successful gesture for individual justice is throwing a wrench into the workings of the British Secret Service and giving it, almost innocently, a deserved come-uppance. And for this Wormold is granted a reward: he not only gets the O. B. E., but he also gets Beatrice. For Greene to administer love, uncomplicated and gratuitous, is beneficent indeed.

Obviously the years separating It's A Battlefield and Our Man in Havana tell a great deal about how Greene found it possible to reach a state of benign iconoclasm. After the publication of It's A Battlefield, Greene had still some way to go to reach a settled attitude, for it was in the thirties, too, that he devoted some time to organizing in a coherent way the things he had learned from psycho-analysis and religion respectively. Journey Without Maps appeared in 1936 and in the winter of 1937-38 Greene went to Mexico desiring, as he says, to "examine more closely the effect of faith on action."³⁷ The extent to which religion was still a forceful part of Greene's outlook is clear from his

³⁷Introduction to Brighton Rock, ix.

output in the next few years: Brighton Rock was published in 1938, The Lawless Roads in 1939, and The Power and the Glory ("the only novel I have written to a thesis," Greene says³⁸) in 1940. But his reviews at the time continued to keep alive the political idea. In 1936, for example, Greene praised Charlie Chaplin's Modern Times in these terms:

Mr. Chaplin, whatever his political convictions may be, is an artist and not a propagandist. He doesn't try to explain, but presents with vivid fantasy what seems to him a crazy comic tragic world without a plan, but his sketch of the inhuman factory does not lead us to suppose that his little man would be more at home at Dneipostroi. He presents, he doesn't offer political solutions. (Pleasure-Dome, p. 52)

In the same year Greene reviewed David Mathew's Steam Packet and remarked that Mathew "has that most precious thing to a writer, a point of view, doubly precious when it is unpolitical."³⁹ Greene is using "unpolitical", of course, in the sense of uncommitted to a cause. A later review, this time from 1939, explains the value he sets on what the word stands for. Speaking of the Soviet film Professor Mamlock, he says that the film proves, to its artistic discredit, that "the ideological argument is made more of wind than stone" (Pleasure-Dome, p. 240).

In the war period, Greene's fiction picked up these threads and began to show signs that it would not be given over entirely to religious concerns. The Confidential Agent, published in 1939, was in fact

³⁸Introduction to The Power and the Glory, Volume V, The Collected Edition (London, 1971), ix.
³⁹"Short Stories," Spectator, 5650 (October 1936), 606.

written at the same time as Brighton Rock, and primarily as a marketable "entertainment."⁴⁰ But the novel proved to be rather more than that: it marks a real progression in Greene's political philosophy from the hopelessness of It's A Battlefield to a more positive and balanced view of commitment. D., the agent betrayed by his own government as well as by the enemy, consents to a certain political allegiance but for personal reasons. He says:

You've got to choose some line of action and live by it. Otherwise nothing matters at all. . . . My people commit atrocities like the others. . . . But I still prefer the people they lead - even if they lead them all wrong. (p. 67)

The "people" D. is referring to are the "poor": a glance by Greene toward Communism but not an idealistic condonation of Communist methods. And D.'s compromise, in contrast to Drover's narrow allegiance, carries with it a small reward: a few days of happiness with Rose on the journey by sea home.

In The Ministry of Fear, too, the complexity of personal commitments is set against a background of political absolutes. As in The Confidential Agent, both personal and political allegiances have a measure of terror, hypocrisy, naivety; it is as easy, inadvertently, to betray a loved one as it is to be betrayed, in turn, by an individual or a system. But in The Ministry of Fear there is a frightening aura of claustrophobia which is exaggerated by the fact of Arthur Rowe's helplessness: his amnesiac state, his childlike ignorance, induced by

⁴⁰ Introduction to The Confidential Agent, Volume VII, The Collected Edition (London, 1971), vii.

a group of fifth columnists. The world, ideologies, personal convictions have all become too complicated to point to any simple course of conduct. But Rowe is rewarded, in the end, with his life and a certain amount of love - if only because he has learned that "Happiness should always be qualified by a knowledge of misery" (p. 214). This does sound gloomy: a sign, perhaps, that four years of war had begun to put a strain on Greene's emotional resiliency. But in a sense, what Rowe learned is what most adults learn, if, that is, they are sensitive to the facts of life.

At the same time as Greene was edging closer to a balanced view of commitment in his fiction during the war, he was taking an active part in the war effort. He joined the Ministry of Information in London in 1940, and from 1941-43 he served with the Foreign Office in Sierra Leone. It was this first-hand encounter with the machinery of institutional politics which, ironically enough, pushed Greene's philosophy of considered dissent to the point of maturity. If there is a dominant theme in Greene's accounts of the Sierra Leone period, it is the absurdity and pettiness of institutional rigmarole, the complete inhumanity of the bureaucratic mentality. Here is an example of what were, to Greene, the distasteful duties relegated to him as agent 59200 (Wormold, the vacuum-salesman-agent is 59200/5). Greene is speaking about his interrogation of a seaman who was thought to be a German agent:

I knew from a report about the girl he had loved in Buenos Aires - a prostitute probably, but he was really in love in his romantic way. If he came clean he could go back to her, I told him, if he wouldn't speak he would be interned for the duration of the war. "And how long do you think she'll stay faithful to you?" It was a police job, an M.I.5 job. I was angry that I had been landed with it. It was a form of dirty work for which I had not been engaged. I gave up the interrogation prematurely, without result, hating myself. He may even have been innocent. To hell, I thought then, with M.I.5.⁴¹

Now this is a very interesting piece of information. This experience is one which Greene recreated, almost to the letter, in his first post-war novel, The Heart of the Matter. Greene's reluctance, on personal grounds, to treat an individual problem with the callousness he felt to be inherent in the bureaucratic process is no different from Scobie's: it is the same temperamental quirk which prevents Scobie from moving up the ladder of the official hierarchy - an unfortunate quirk if one views that sort of success as desirable. But the interesting thing about Scobie's private convictions in a political, or occupational, context is that they provoke a crisis in the context of his faith. Scobie finds himself increasingly unwilling to trust the fate of individual souls to the hard and fast rules of some remote arbitrator. He cannot depend on the Church to judge each case, on its own terms, and with the same fund of pity that Scobie himself feels compelled to extend. Scobie becomes guilty, of course, of inordinate pride,

⁴¹Introduction to The Heart of the Matter, xi.

of taking justice into his own hands; but it is impossible to escape the impression that this kind of protest has some merit, and that it holds some promise of reward. Scobie's end is tragic, even if we cannot predict the extent of God's mercy; but we are left feeling that Scobie's gesture is forgivable in simple human terms.

If we compare The Heart of the Matter to Greene's two earlier "religious" novels, Brighton Rock and The Power and the Glory,⁴² we can say with some justice that with Scobie Greene puts the demands of his faith under a new sort of scrutiny - a scrutiny he had reserved, till now, for the demands of any given political system. Brighton Rock, no matter how much it explains a sinner like Pinkie in terms of his psychological motives, still tips the scales heavily in favour of Catholic doctrine; and The Power and the Glory, for all its pleading for simple humanity as opposed to religious piety, is still an apology for the Catholic faith. But in The Heart of the Matter, Greene dovetails two forms of commitment in one person, puts them both to the same test, and finds them both wanting. Greene had realized, in Sierra Leone, that he was unable to be an agent for a political system; he was forced, as a result, to assess his position as a mouthpiece for the Church. That this is a sound reading of the novel is made clear, in no uncertain terms, in a tract by Greene which appeared in the same year as the novel. I refer to Greene's

⁴²I discuss these novels in detail in subsequent chapters.

published correspondence with V. S. Pritchett and Elizabeth Bowen, Why Do I Write? This was Greene's first full-fledged critical statement of his political obsession, his first definitive pronouncement that iconoclasm - with regard to any sort of institutional authority - is the only ideology with which any artist should form an alliance. It is worth looking at this statement briefly (I discuss it at length, later) to see just how coherent his position had become in philosophical terms, even if it was still, artistically, a fledgeling.

Greene's major theme in Why Do I Write? is disloyalty and his argument is twofold. First, disloyalty to systematized beliefs or principles of conduct is the only means of sympathizing wholly with human nature. "It has always been in the interests of the State," Greene says, "to poison the psychological wells, to restrict human sympathy, to encourage cat-calls - Galilean, Papist, Crophead, Fascist, Bolshevik" (p. 47): justice in the hands of individuals or non-conformists simply clogs the machinery. The Church, too, can be viewed in this light: "There are leaders of the Church," Greene says, "who regard literature as a means to one end, edification . . . [but] Literature has nothing to do with edification" (pp. 31-32). Therefore, as Greene goes on to say, "the Catholic Church would present me with grave problems as a writer if I were not saved by my disloyalty" (p. 31). The second part of Greene's argument follows logically from this:

the artist is in the unique position of being able to promote disloyalty with impunity. Disloyalty is the artist's privilege; therefore, he says, the artist's task is "to act as the devil's advocate, to elicit sympathy and a measure of understanding for those who lie outside the boundaries of State sympathy" (pp. 46-47).

What is striking about these remarks is the confident way in which Greene is treating independence of spirit, and the way in which he has found a positive channel for rebelliousness in a kind of political humanitarianism. It is as if Greene has found a way to live on the border comfortably, surveying the iniquities of human affairs with a certain detachment but also with a sense of understanding and acceptance. He has, certainly, travelled a long way from the helplessness of his childhood, from the philosophical void of his post-analysis adolescence, and from the extreme dependence of his immediate post-conversion period. He has discovered that he cannot be part of any force of authority which desires only to devour individuals whole; but he has staked out a site from which he can deal with such forces, with his own sense of the form justice should take.

I have said that Why Do I Write? was Greene's first full articulation of his political stance and the resolution of the various parts of his philosophy. It was also a fair statement of the future of this philosophy, for it essentially did not change from this point on. Greene's fiction after The Heart of the Matter continues to explore religious commitment as well as

political, but there is in the novels, increasingly, the sense that blind faith, as much as spiritual nihilism, is restrictive: just as political extremism, as much as political indifference, makes one insensitive to the plight of ordinary men. Greene's characters live in a teeter-totter world. The determined atheist Maurice in The End of the Affair wrangles alternately with the spiritual goodness of Sarah and the aggressive piety of a Catholic priest. The staunchly uncommitted Fowler in The Quiet American ends up wishing there was someone to whom he could say he was sorry. Querry in A Burnt-Out Case has tried and rejected various forms and degrees of commitment and finds he simply cannot retire from the battleground. And the childlike Léon, in The Honorary Consul, tries to shed his religious beliefs for his new role of political activist, but ends up hopelessly, politically naive. But they are all, whatever their particular position on the continuum, given a measure of sympathy by Greene, and all are granted, in the end, a spark of insight into the value - and the shortcomings - of their respective sets of principles. It is as if Greene is saying: be committed, yes; otherwise (as D. had said) nothing matters at all. But hold your commitment tentatively, with your eyes open to the scope of its boundaries and the nature of its consequences in human terms.

* * * * *

I should like to close with a cameo portrait of Greene, one which shows the man unmasked, unsupported by the eloquence of his creative and critical pronouncements,

but touchingly faithful to the spirit of their message. The portrait is by Evelyn Waugh - Greene's exact contemporary and friend - and appears in Waugh's Diaries:

Sunday 11 January 1948

Mass at 12 at Farm Street where I met the shambling, unshaven and as it happened quite penniless figure of Graham Greene. Took him to the Ritz for a cocktail and gave him 6d for his hat. He had suddenly been moved by love of Africa and emptied his pockets into the box for African missions. Diana lunched with me. Both tired. Not a success. Slept. That evening I gave a curiously ill-assorted party at the Ritz - the Pakenhams, Daphne Bath, Elizabeth Cameron and Christopher Sykes. ⁴³

It is impossible not to see the quite startling, and perhaps unwitting, contrast Waugh is presenting between himself and his shambling friend. And it is impossible not to reflect that the "woebegone mask", the Pierrot front, that we have heard Peter Quennel apply to his friend is really not a disguise at all.

⁴³The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh, edited by Michael Davie (London, 1976), pp. 694-695.

CHAPTER II

LIFE AND ART

We have seen something of Greene's life, or that side of it he calls "a sort of life". It is time to pick up where the qualifier leaves off and consider what he refers to as his only reality: his art. Biographical facts are not without value, for our purposes and Greene's. He chose to record "scraps of the past" for the same reason that he chose to be a writer: he had a "desire to reduce a chaos of experience to some sort of order" (Life, p. 9). But Greene also says that these scraps present only a sort of life because, over the course of his career, he has "spent almost as much time with imaginary characters as with real men and women" (p. 9). For him, as for many artists, the world of action is oddly unreal, and prolonged periods of forced creative abstinence have the effect of sharpening the sensation of being adrift in a foreign sea. Recalling one such period, Greene says: "it was an escape from reality and responsibility. . . . Like the man suffering from ju-ju I had to go back to my proper region to be cured."¹

What is the nature of this proper region? What is it about art that makes it almost an obsession but also

¹Introduction to The Heart of the Matter, xii.

a kind of cure? If we explore these questions a little, we will begin to get an idea of how Greene looks at art: how he defines it in terms of its subject and purpose and how he uses it uniquely to fit his objectives. Take, for example, Greene's need to "reduce a chaos of experience to some sort of order". This is hardly original; indeed, we can infer from the statement two things that apply generally, no doubt, to most artists. First, we can assume that the artist finds it difficult to live peaceably in what he sees as a disordered world and that he feels compelled to do something about this disorder. Second, he finds that he can gratify his urge by constructing an artificial world which parallels the real world in essential ways but which is also something of his own making, open to his guidance, manipulation, whim. Perhaps all of us are compulsive arrangers to some extent; all of us would like to re-order the world in our own unique way. But of those who actively and publicly pursue this end, writers, as opposed to say politicians, educators, or religious leaders, do so with a freedom of invention which is inherent in their vocation. There is something of this idea in Greene's remarks in Why Do I Write?: that writers can, with impunity, play with a huge range of human idiosyncracies, can ply and stretch into novel forms what are considered normal behaviour patterns by the orthodox imagination. But the point I am trying to make is that artists often choose to be artists out of a need to postulate a world which satisfies their own sense of

what life is and should be. The act of creation can be, hypothetically, rather like playing a game of chess with yourself: you must deal with certain fixed characters and sanctioned moves, but you can also orchestrate the proceedings to achieve certain effects. You can, within the bounds of the basic ground rules, impose your own idea of the way things ought to happen.

Let me expand on this a little. It is a striking fact about artists that they share an extraordinary sensitivity to the events and circumstances of their lives and that it is this sensitivity that seems to push them in the direction of art. It is virtually impossible to read the biography (especially since Edmund Wilson's The Wound and the Bow) or an autobiography of a writer and not get a sense that the artistic urge has its genesis in some form of personal injury or conflict, some inner kernel of tension that roots itself with an unusual degree of tenacity. Many of Greene's near contemporaries (Robert Graves, Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell, to name a few) speak of the atrocities of the English public school system as having contributed dramatically to their desire to write. Greene's own admission that an urge for revenge against his classmate-torturers drove him to write to prove himself superior in some way is, in this light, not so extraordinary. But others, too, from a variety of backgrounds, such as Somerset Maugham, D. H. Lawrence, Henry James, Joseph Conrad (one can choose almost at random), testify to a real vulnerability which certain events of their lives

sharpened to an uncommon degree. Greene in fact speaks of James and Conrad in this way: James with his family background of borderline insanity and obscurely felt evil presences,² and the young Conrad, at the moment of his father's death, registering the atmosphere of "piety, resignation and silence"³ all around him, an atmosphere which was to give his art its "brooding note of sombre dignity" (p. 34). Greene's response to his own life might be rather more melancholic than others'; but it is nevertheless the same heightened sensibility to persons, events and impressions that lies at the bottom of his creative impulse. For Greene, writing is connected very much with his early discovery that he "belonged on the side of the victims, not the torturers" (Life, p. 63); but creation is a means of righting wrongs for many artists, whether or not they share Greene's characteristic gloominess. We might even go so far as to say that since artists' reactions to life tend to be channelled inward rather than aggressively outward, art is perhaps the prime means open to them of vindicating felt injustices. This does not mean that artists are passive or that art is escapist. On the contrary, art is vital and enterprising; but its way of coming to terms with life is exclusively a process of the mind. W. H. Auden once said that "A writer is a maker, not a man of action,"⁴ and I think this is a fair

²See "Henry James: The Private Universe" in Essays.

³Ibid. p. 33.

⁴A Certain World (London, 1971), vii.

statement of the point I want to make: that it is in the artist's relationship to the world of the imagination that one will find the true record of his life.

Let me go back to my game analogy for a moment to tease out another, more specific, conjecture about the nature of art. I said that the artist must play according to certain ground rules. His subject is, after all, "life", and if he wants to be anything more than a spinner of best-selling tales or a writer of pulp romances, he must be ready, always, for the question "Is life really like that?" However palpable the writer's own perception of what life is like, however strong his urge to impose through his art his personal idea of justice, he must, if he is to be good, show that he is rather more than a misanthropic eccentric or a misguided optimist. On the other hand, my hypothetical game of art allows a certain amount of idiosyncrasy. The artist takes his pieces, sets them up thus, and watches them react so. His rules do not necessarily negate all conventional ones, but they might bend them, in order that he can show forth a multitude of patterns instead of one.

Perhaps the best way to express the objective of the artist is to say that he attempts to make a version of reality that satisfies both a public perception of that reality and his own private vision. Frank Kermode makes this point about public and private "realities" in his Introduction to a series of interviews he conducted with seven modern British novelists, including Graham

Greene.⁵ Kermode says: ". . . our authors see the whole problem of the relation between fiction and reality in terms of their own struggle to be faithful to themselves as perceivers and to fact, as perceived by the eye of informed commonsense" (p. 62). He goes on to recall Henry James's description of the same premise:

Each [novelist] looks out, as if from one of the windows of James's house of fiction - "a number of possible windows not to be reckoned," as he said - and senses not merely that reality has the limited shape of his window, but also that he has a deep obligation to things as they are - on a not too extraordinary view of them. (p. 61)

Greene himself, speaking of James, borrows from Conrad to define art in terms of this double perspective:

'Art itself', Conrad wrote, 'may be defined as a singleminded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe', and no definition in his own prefaces better describes the object Henry James so passionately pursued, if the word visible does not exclude the private vision. (Essays, p. 23)

But definitions of art and statements about artists' aims are simple. We need to know how the artist goes about determining just what "reality" is and how he adjusts his reflector accordingly. Let us look, then, at how Greene sees the visible universe (as Conrad calls it) or the "truth" about human affairs, and how he sees art conforming to this truth.

* * * * *

⁵"The House of Fiction," Partisan Review, 30 (1963), 61 - 82. The other novelists interviewed are: Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Angus Wilson, C. P. Snow, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and John Wain.

The "aim of fiction," Greene wrote in an early review, "is to present the truth as honestly as possible."⁶ It is characteristic of him to use the term "truth" frequently but baldly; and one must dig into the lesser known regions of his non-fictional writing to unearth the details which specify this rather vague ideal. Greene's film criticism is a good place to start, for it is in the cinema - that most popular and wayward of art forms - that he consistently finds aberrations of truthfulness. The point that recurs so often in The Pleasure-Dome as to become the book's motif is that life as it is really lived has a kind of humble ordinariness and that the cinema insists on attributing to it a false glamour. Here are a few examples. Despite what the silver screen would have us believe, human affairs are seldom tragic; "human beings," Greene says, "are not made in [a] grand way" (Pleasure-Dome, p. 45). Speaking of a German film, Reifende Jugend, he says: "The truth may be sad, but it is nearly always grotesque as well, and the value of this film is that it catches the absurdity just as effectively as it catches the freshness" (p. 45). And in a review of the French film Second Bureau, Greene says that the real drama of human behaviour is the "lack of drama" (p. 47), the pettiness of individual actions and motives within the grand complex of humanity. Here is a specific example (from Greene's review of the

⁶"Fiction," Spectator, 5491 (September 1933), 380.

film True Confessions) of the way in which films can distort reality by attempting to dignify human nature to an extreme:

. . . the middlebrow screen is more and more dictating how people ought to behave - even at a deathbed. I remember lying in bed a few years ago in a public ward listening with fascinated horror to a mother crying over her child who had died suddenly and unexpectedly after a minor operation. You couldn't question the appalling grief, but the words she used . . . they were the cheapest, the most improbable, the most untrue . . . one had heard them on a dozen British screens. (p. 190)

Sex, too, according to Greene, is a ready-made subject for artificial glamorization of ordinary feeling. He fires volleys almost continuously at British and American film-makers because they will not treat sex honestly. "How much better they would have made Wuthering Heights in France," Greene says. "They know there how to shoot sexual passion; but in this Californian-constructed Yorkshire, among the sensitive neurotic English voices, sex is cellophaned; there is no egotism, no obsession" (p. 219). In fact it is to French film-makers that Greene turns to find realism in general: "It may be the function of the French cinema to teach us how to handle realism, as they taught it in the novel years ago . . . The Anglo-Saxon - whether English or American - always tempers the direct impact of life sooner or later with a laugh or a good cry" (p. 205).

Now Greene himself should not be excluded, perhaps, from this Anglo-Saxon laughter-and-tears tradition. After all, he is (by his own admission) prone to melodrama.

Although he uses it primarily as a means rather than an end, melodrama is, he says, a "poison" to which he is attracted by nature.⁷ We shall have to consider this rather carefully when we come to look at Greene's opinions on questions of form; but for now let us consider melodrama only in this present narrow context, as it affects Greene's "unheroic" truth. If we think for a moment about Greene's personal need for constant stimulation, for the heightened response to life, we might wonder about his capacity as a writer to see life as truly undramatic, commonplace, ordinary. But we remember, too, that Greene sees dramatic possibilities in the mundane, the seedy, the drab, and the shabby. This, for him, is the area of human affairs that fascinates, that holds a certain metaphysical appeal. One might expect to find men and situations of tragic proportions least of all in this part of the world. One might go so far as to agree with D. H. Lawrence (about whom Greene will have something to say) that "You can't put a great soul into a commonplace person."⁸ But for Greene it is precisely this realm that is worthy of drama, holding as it does the promise of some remote elementary wisdom or sensibility. Once we understand this, we can understand Greene's critical point that it is the petty

⁷Introduction to A Gun for Sale, Volume IX, The Collected Edition (London, 1973), v.

⁸Phoenix, second edition, edited by Edward D. McDonald (London, 1970), p. 226.

details of life which reveal the essential truth about existence and that pettiness is not necessarily synonymous with insignificance.

There is something of this idea in Greene's review of Storm Jameson's novel Delicate Monster,⁹ the story of a wronged wife, told from her point of view. Greene quotes the narrator:

"What is more ridiculous than a deceived wife? They sing comic songs about her. . . . The stages of her grotesque agonizing experience are squeezed between two phrases - 'jealousy is as hard as the grave' and 'Are you going to tell your missus when you get ho-ome, who you were with last night?'"
(p. 275)

There is here, Greene says, "a kind of common sense which is close to the poetic" (p. 275); and it is especially noticeable in a subject which could lend itself so easily to hysteria and melodrama. Greene says: "We believe in this agony as we are unwilling to believe in the mental storms of Lawrence's characters, just because Miss Jameson never makes an exaggerated claim" (p. 275).

Greene himself is not, of course, innocent entirely of what he would call Laurentian excess. One thinks of Scobie's God, like "the medieval war-horse bearing down upon him," delivering "his eternal sentence on the tongue" (Heart, p. 264); or of Greene's whisky priest praying "Oh God, send them someone more worthwhile to suffer for" (Power, p. 162), and his opposite, the

⁹"Fiction Chronicle," The Tablet (February 1937), 275.

lieutenant, like "a theologian going back over the errors of the past to destroy them again" (p. 23). Nevertheless, Greene's characters do have a humility, an ordinariness about them that Lawrence's do not. The first piece of information Greene gives us about Scobie is intentionally deflating. Harris, sitting on the hotel balcony, looks down at Scobie on the street below and says to the newcomer, Wilson: "look at Scobie. . . . He loves [the niggers] so much he sleeps with 'em" (p. 4). And the whisky priest, whatever saint-like qualities Greene may attribute to him, is almost painfully human: "He followed [the woman] meekly, tripping once in the long peon's trousers, with the happiness wiped off his face and the smile somehow left behind like the survivor of a wreck" (p. 71). In contrast, characters such as Birkin and Gudrun in Women in Love are almost superhuman: according to Lawrence's premise, they have to be so in order to be capable of articulating the grand ideas Lawrence wanted to hold up as the truth about human affairs.

There is another point we ought to consider when we hear Greene castigate the laugh or the good cry in the interest of truth. A substantial part of Greene's success as an artist rests with his ability to entertain his audience. It might seem rather disingenuous, then, for Greene to snub his nose at cinema sentimentality, even if, at his entertaining best, he never really matches Hollywood's effusiveness. Certainly there is some lack of candour here; when Greene wrote, many years

later, the Introduction to his collected film criticism, he confessed that he had always had a wanton love for the pleasure-dome, for that world of Cecil B. de Mille where "almost anything was likely to happen" (p. 4). Even long before that confession Greene had scripted several of his novels for film presentation,¹⁰ and although he was obviously aware that a film version distorts inevitably the tenor of its original, he nevertheless found this more glamorous medium attractive. But there is, too, in Greene's early review, evidence of his academic sobriety as a novice critic, a genuine conviction that art and entertainment are incompatible. In another review from the thirties Greene's staidness shows through even more. "It is odd, at first thought," he says, "that stories written purely for entertainment are almost invariably dull; less odd when one considers . . . that the mind persistently demands in a story something it can recognize as truth."¹¹ The entertainer's aim, he goes on to say, "is very different [to the novelist's] (sometimes flattery, sometimes excitement) and his methods are almost invariably deceitful" (p. 380). To add weight to his argument Greene quotes from Chekhov: "Fiction is called artistic because it draws life as it actually is . . . a writer is not a confectioner, not a cosmetician, not an entertainer; he is a man bound, under contract, by awareness of his duty and his conscience" (p. 380).

¹⁰The early ones were: Brighton Rock, The Fallen Idol, and The Third Man. Later came Our Man in Havana and The Comedians.

¹¹"Fiction," Spectator, 5491 (September 1933), 380.

When Greene wrote this review, he had published already his first "entertainment" (Stamboul Train) and not a great deal of time was to pass before he was to establish himself firmly as a writer of good thriller "entertainments". Of course there is no doubt that Greene's entertainments were rather more than deceitful confections. The difference between Stamboul Train, A Gun for Sale, The Confidential Agent, and The Ministry of Fear and his serious "novels" is so fine as to be almost imperceptible. Nevertheless, Greene had then a puritanical need to distinguish nominally between the two types, a curious critical inability to admit that entertainment could be a vehicle for truth. By the time he came to write Travels With My Aunt, a most entertaining story, his scruples had vanished for it was granted novel status.

At the opposite end of the truth spectrum to entertainment lies a mode which Greene treats in a more seriously ambivalent way. I refer to the use of mythical or legendary figures or ideas to illustrate truths about human nature, to transform ordinary, individual men and situations into something more abstract and universal in appeal. Miriam Allott, in Novelists on the Novel,¹² remarks on the propensity of many artists to use legend to give truth another, more profound dimension. But "legend" is notoriously difficult to define: one must almost resort to terms that are as ethereal as "legend" itself. Before we look at how Greene struggles with the

¹²London, 1959.

concept, let us listen to Mrs. Allott establish its rough outlines. Speaking of Dostoevsky's belief that truth "lies in the 'exceptional'" (p. 68), she says:

The vivid impression left by [Dostoevsky's] work does not derive solely from the use it makes of violent acts which were suggested to him by 'real' newspaper reports or by stories which he heard from his fellow-prisoners in Siberia. It owes as much to those strange elements - the hallucinations, nightmares and legends - which contribute to the feeling that his characters and events stand for more than themselves, that, as Mr. Forster says, 'infinity attends them', that their 'ordinary world reaches back'. (p. 28)

This is helpful, as far as it goes: "enlarging effect" and "symbols of universal value" have some use as descriptive currency in a vague sort of way. But we need to know rather more specifically how something is given this enlarged effect, what makes it truthful in a universal sense rather than (or as well as) truthful to a particular time, place or individual. We need to know this especially when a critic uses such terms with judgemental connotations - as Greene certainly does. Listen to Greene's comment on the film The Good Earth, a film which he says begins well but abruptly alters in tone mid-way:

The peasant is no longer legendary: he is no longer any peasant who marries and suffers and endures: he is a character called so-and-so who becomes astoundingly rich and loves a dancing-girl, who loves his son whom he turns out of his home, and so on and so on, plot running away with subject, life left behind on those magnificent earlier reels. (Pleasure-Dome, p. 14)

Here Greene equates "life" and "legendary", and seems to deny the particular, the individual (in other words, his

criteria for life as it is lived) any claim to truth whatsoever. Admittedly, realism and legend are two different modes. But they are, at the same time, fellow devices in the pursuit of artistic truth; they must, in some way, converge if they are not to be mutually undermining. Mrs. Allott makes this point when she says of Wuthering Heights that the "elements of character, setting, and incident possess the force of metaphor without losing their 'solidity of specification'" (p. 170). And I think that Greene, at least in this cursory treatment of the subject in the Good Earth review, has not worked out just how the two modes can function in brace.

When Greene discusses legend in the context of stage drama he is more specific about its contribution to truth, if only because, as he says, drama is simple, it is generically suited to depicting types. This discussion occurs in British Dramatists and it is worth looking at briefly to see how far Greene gets with the concept. Greene begins by stating that the essence of the drama lies in its sense of ritual: "the representation of something real abstracted from any individual element. It is the common touch in the human portrait . . ." (p. 33). He goes on to say that the first step to achieving this common touch is to simplify human nature: as the early morality plays did by making their "characters" abstractions of basic human vices and virtues. The next step in the process is to reconstruct

from this crude level, to add a certain individual realism so that the characters are characters, and not just ideas. This, according to Greene, was Shakespeare's real achievement. Unlike the abstract purity of Everyman ("the bones without the flesh", p. 8), Shakespeare's plays "refer to common, known life" (p. 12). But his characters are still more "mouthpieces for a mood, for an attitude to life . . ." (p. 12) than particularized human beings. In Shakespeare Greene sees the "watershed between the morality and the play of character: the tension between the two is perfectly kept" (p. 12).

British dramatists after Shakespeare and the Jacobean have little to recommend them, as far as Greene is concerned. From this point on, the theatre descended gradually on the scale of ritual to the level, in modern drama, of trivial domestic realism, "the flesh without the bones" (p. 8). Although Wycherley provides a brief glimmer of ritual (Lady Fidget is "silly charming Wantonness itself", p. 33), by the eighteenth century this dimension has all but disappeared. With Sheridan and Goldsmith, Greene says, a desire for happy endings and smug sentiments overrides any concern for serious truth:

. . . the author is going to fall in love with his own creations, identify himself with them, flatter himself by endowing them with all kinds of winning traits, so that we shall no longer watch Avarice, Lust, Revenge, Folly meeting the kind of fate which satisfies our sense of destiny.
(p. 33)

Just as the morality play had conveyed the most basic sense of ritual without providing a realistic context, so

the post-seventeenth-century drama had tipped the scales to their opposite extreme. Machinations of plot and character now, according to Greene, undermine simple notions of what human nature really is: "the illustration of the idea," he says, "has driven the idea itself out of the theatre" (p. 36). Of subsequent dramatists from that point to the present day, Greene finds a certain "mixture of poetic symbolism and realistic detail" (p. 42) only in Ibsen.

Now that we have a better idea of what Greene means when he uses the term "legend" or "ritual", let us see how he applies it to the novel. We must first admit that the quality of legend is perhaps more strenuously achieved in this form. The novel cannot resort so easily as the stage drama to a stylized exhibit of type characters and simple, abstract ideas. The narrative form, with its continuity, flexibility, and thoroughness, is designed for complexity and nuance. Realism is the novel's strong point: even if its situations can be made absurd or its characters made caricatures, the novel is still, essentially, prosaic. But how does this affect Greene? One of the novelists he discusses at length in the context of legend is Dickens and the novel he selects is Oliver Twist. Greene, not without admiration, calls Oliver Twist a "monstrous and complete . . . legend"¹³ and attributes this quality to the book's lack of realism. He compares it with Great Expectations thus:

¹³See "The Young Dickens" (1950) in Essays.

. . . these characters in Oliver Twist are simply parts of one huge invented scene, what Dickens in his own preface called 'the cold wet shelterless midnight streets of London'. How the phrase goes echoing on through the books of Dickens until we meet it again so many years later in 'the weary western streets of London on a cold dusty spring night' which were so melancholy to Pip. But Pip was to be as real as the weary streets, while Oliver was as unrealistic as the cold wet midnight of which he formed a part. (p. 104)

The "truth" of Oliver's myth, Greene goes on to say, is the horrible knowledge that Oliver's escapes will always be followed by "his inevitable recapture;" that "the whole world, and not London only, belongs to [the Jew and Monks] after dark" (pp. 109-110). The legend in Oliver Twist is almost a feeling, an atmosphere, and it is one that any child (as Greene says) will confirm as true: "safety depends not on time but on daylight" (p. 109). The legend works because it is unreal, because it appeals not to our objective sense of the way things happen but to our sense of what might happen in a nightmare world.

So far so good. But let us contrast what Greene has to say about Dickens's legend to what he has to say about the thrillers of Eric Ambler - a writer who is, according to Greene, "unquestionably . . . our best thriller writer" and whose "greatest asset" is his ability to create legends.¹⁴ Greene has nothing but praise for Ambler's Journey Into Fear and The Mask of Dimitrios; all the more reluctant is he, then, to admit that Judgment on Deltchev fails. And why does it fail? -

¹⁴"The Sense of Apprehension," The Month, 6 (July 1951), 49-50.

because it lacks realism. This is how Greene's curious reasoning runs:

Life has caught the thriller up. The politicians and the secret police have overtaken [Ambler]. We miss the old excitement of thinking, 'this might happen if we cross such-and-such a frontier or leave the train at such-and-such a station'; the imagination is no longer free because we know. Fact has killed legend. (p. 51)

Why, we ask, does the relentless and incredible evil of Fagin's underworld not suffer the same fate? Surely the facts of life of Victorian London, let alone the facts of modern-day London, should undermine our willingness to believe quite as much as do the political facts of the post-war Balkan scene. Why should Ambler's thriller be subject to standards of realism that Cliver Twist is not - or, more to the point, why is Dickens forgiven so much?

It is tempting to explain Greene's lenience toward Dickens by seeing Greene's idea of legend in a religious light.¹⁵ To go back to "The Young Dickens" essay, at the same time as Greene applauds Dickens's unreal legend, he laments Dickens's shamelessly cavalier approach to fictional probability. How, Greene asks, can "we really believe that [Dickens's] inadequate ghosts of goodness [Mr. Brownlow and Rose] can triumph over Fagin, Monks and Sykes? And the answer, of course, is that they never could have triumphed without the elaborate machinery of the plot disclosed in the last pages" (p. 108). What is so striking about Greene's

¹⁵Partly, too, his lenience is attributable to the fact that "The Young Dickens" was written as an Introduction to the Novel Library Edition of Cliver Twist (London, 1950).

assessment of Oliver Twist is that he sees in it a rupture between the abstract and the real, but he does not believe that this rupture undermines in any way the force of the legend. Dickens's "happy endings and unreal retributions," Greene says, "can never ruin the validity and dignity of that moment" of legendary truth (p. 110). They cannot do this, Greene says, because the truth of Fagin has a special sort of force behind it: it has "the eternal and alluring taint of the Manichee, with its simple and terrible explanation of our plight, how the world was made by Satan and not by God, lulling us with the music of despair" (p. 110). In other words, the religious metaphor travels gratis, without an obligation to wrap itself in any sort of realistic baggage. This is perhaps not surprising, coming from one who strongly associates legend or ritual with the abstractions of vice and virtue in the early miracle and morality plays. But it is something that makes for critical inconsistency, as we shall see even more forcefully when we come to discuss Greene's remarks on religion and art in detail.

My suggestion that religion underlies Greene's idea of legend is rarely borne out so explicitly in his criticism as it is in the Dickens essay. It is shown to be accurate, however, in some of his novels. An obvious example is The Power and the Glory - the only novel, we remember Greene saying, that he wrote to a thesis. In his interview with Frank Kermode Greene elaborates on this statement. He speaks of a mythical figure as one

"who represents some idea of reasonable simplicity" (p. 66) and goes on to say: "the nearest I came to hitting the mythical element was in The Power and the Glory, where I felt the plot was sufficiently simple for the main purpose of this story to remain clear throughout" (p. 66). Let us consider the whisky priest in this light. Very early on in the novel Greene sets up the mythical structure. We hear the story of the young Juan, a martyr for the cause of religious freedom in a country of forced atheism. Then we follow the trail of Greene's whisky priest who is, on the surface, hardly comparable with the saint-like Juan but who chooses, like the martyr, to forego escape (and the salvation of his own soul) in order that his people should not be deprived entirely of this last representative of their faith.

In a sense Greene's whisky priest is a much more convincing candidate for mythical stature than Juan: as the young boy, Luis, would say, how can one feel any interest in or admiration for someone so heroic and so good as Juan? Luis's reaction to Juan is rather like Greene's to Sir Henry Curtis and Allan Quatermain in King Solomon's Mines: they were men of such "unyielding integrity" (like "Platonic ideas"), that they could not really satisfy for long even the child's scant knowledge of life (Essays, pp. 16-17). The whisky priest, by contrast, is all too human. He is a drunkard, he has a wife and a child, he is pitiable in his continuous state of suffering; and yet he is, we feel, a truly good man

with an extraordinary capacity for compassion. But the whisky priest also lives according to a single conviction: that if he deserts his Catholic flock, he is consigning them, effectively, to hell. And it is this purely Catholic idea, coming from someone who is so patently human, that strains our willingness to consent to his actions. This is how the priest constructs his dilemma in his mind:

He thought: if I go, I shall meet other priests: I shall go to confession: I shall feel contrition and be forgiven: eternal life will begin for me all over again. The Church taught that it was every man's first duty to save his own soul. . . . If he left them, they would be safe, and they would be free from his example. He was the only priest the children could remember: it was from him they would take their ideas of the faith. But it was from him too they took God - in their mouths. When he was gone it would be as if God in all this space between the sea and the mountains ceased to exist. Wasn't it his duty to stay, even if they despised him, even if they were murdered for his sake? (p. 74)

This is rather more than a situation Greene has set up for dramatic purposes. In The Lawless Roads Greene indicates that for him, as for any Catholic, the priest's motives for staying are irreproachable. Greene speaks of how terrible the birth of their children must be to Catholic parents in Chiapis:

. . . you are robbed of the one blessing granted . . . in return for almost unbearable anxieties - the holiness of the child. You are lucky, the child may be baptized - if it lives - a few years later when a priest visits the village secretly; but that tardy baptism is not the same, after the world has taken its tarnishing account. The children have no bank of sanctity to draw on - the unstained Christian years - and we cannot tell what human nature may owe to that

past fund of holiness. It is not inconceivable that the worst evil possible to natural man may be found years hence in Mexico. (p. 190)

So the whisky priest stays, even when he hears of the murder of Pedro Montez, a hostage from his own town of Concepción. "Why don't they catch me?" he says: "The fools. Why don't they catch me?" (pp. 72-73). He stays, even though he comes face to face with the hostages in the prison yard:

There was Miguel, whom he had seen taken away; he remembered the mother screaming out and the lieutenant's tired anger . . . They saw him at the same time; he put down the heavy pail and looked at them. Not to recognize them would have been like a hint, a claim, a demand to them to go on suffering and let him escape . . . they looked on the ground and passed him . . . He prayed silently: Oh God, send them someone more worthwhile to suffer for. (p. 162)

To some extent the priest's reluctance to escape and put an end to the people's suffering can be seen as a personal challenge to totalitarian politics; he is evidence that the lieutenant's objective to destroy belief in anything but his own vision of a pure, controlling and controlled political state will not come to pass. But at the moment of escape, the priest returns voluntarily into the hands of the authorities he has eluded for so long. He returns to hear a confession from a thief and murderer, and the promise of his martyrdom is fulfilled.

It is, of course, unfair to put a novel of this sort - a thesis-novel - to the same test of believability or convincingness to which one subjects "realistic" novels,

novels that do not aim primarily to put across a single, profound idea. The two types differ in intent, and if one complains about a story that attempts to be legendary, one might just as well admit to a preference for realism simply on the grounds of taste and have done with it. But I began this discussion with a view to determining Greene's idea of artistic truth and if we are not to lose sight of this perspective, we must consider how far Greene's brand of legend fits in with this truth. Remember that critically Greene admires a piece of legendary art that, like Shakespeare's plays, combines simplicity of idea with fidelity to known life. No matter how remote, intangible, or abstract that idea might be, it should always have some foothold in commonly-shared values and notions of what life is like. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Farris, speaking of the "contrived" ending of The Power and the Glory when the boy Luis is set up to represent the "enduring nature" of the priest's values, say that a novelist need not "refrain from making his characters and their experiences symbolic of his vision of life . . . [but] . . . the nature of his vision may sometimes prevent the rescue of the material from the dangers of abstraction" (The Art of Graham Greene, p. 191). I would apply this point to the very essence of Greene's legend, the whisky priest's dilemma, and I would say that the purely Catholic nature of this dilemma makes it not only dangerously abstract but quite incomprehensible to non-Catholic readers. The dilemma is a most interesting one in theory; but as the very realistic narrative pulls

us more and more into the train of events, convincing us of the horror and suffering imposed on the priest and caused by him, we are less and less willing to consent to his idea of sacrifice for the sake of some insubstantial promise of future holiness.

Perhaps this view of the novel betrays a lack of imagination, but I cannot help thinking that it is a lack felt by many who do not share Greene's religious convictions. To a Catholic, or at least to a liberal Catholic who would agree with Greene that goodness is not synonymous with self-righteous piety, the whisky priest is unquestionably material for legendary status. For example, to Father Leopoldo Duran Justo, a critic who brings to the novel his own knowledge and angle of vision as a Catholic, it is the enveloping air of Catholicism in The Power and the Glory that gives it its "transcendent quality."¹⁶ The priest belongs, he says, "to all fallen humanity and comes within the province of ordinary human psychology, but a psychology open to and enriched by that more-than-human factor we call 'the grace of God'" (p. 96). But however "true", and therefore relevant psychologically, the grace of God may be to a believer, it can never carry the dramatic weight it is intended to for anyone whose view of behaviour does not include a belief in a spiritual force.

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¹⁶The Priesthood in the Writings of Graham Greene (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of London, 1971), p. 9. (This work was published in Spanish in 1974.)

It appears that we have already begun to confront very personal elements in Greene's response to art - or, rather, they have begun to confront us. Let us then take them up officially as it were; let us look at this other set of game rules which allows the artist to be true to his own ideas about how the game is, or ought to be, played. Here we will be dealing with Greene's religious obsession in depth, as well as with his obsession with the psychology of childhood and politics, although these will not take us away entirely from the visible universe, at least not so far as Greene's theoretical objectives are concerned. The term Greene uses to describe the personal element in art, "poetic", is intended to refer to recognizable emotions rather than to highly subjective raptures or torments. Greene uses "poetic", he tells us, in the sense that Ford Madox Ford defined it: "not the power melodiously to arrange words but the power to suggest human values,"¹⁷ although Greene's definition carries a definite proviso: that the "inner symbolism" of the poetic should not detract "from the reality of [the] story or characters."¹⁸ Of course, Greene's ideal legend - as in Shakespeare - had this same condition attached to it; so as we look at how Greene applies his poetic principle we should be careful to distinguish his theory from his practice.

¹⁷See Ford, The Critical Attitude, p. 94 and Greene,

¹⁸The Pleasure-Dome, p. 134.

"Fiction," Spectator, 5525 (May 1934), 786.

CHAPTER III

CHILDHOOD: POETIC ROOTS

There is an interesting theme running through much of Greene's literary criticism: the idea that success is dangerous, failure healthy. The theme need not surprise us, if we remember Greene's opinion of the slick and conventional way a civilized society conducts itself. If a man is contentedly successful, Greene would say, it is a sign that he has given himself over to accepted standards of conduct and measures of worth, a sign that, so far as he is concerned, all is right with the world and he can settle into a state of comfortable complacency. To be successful, moreover, is to be a public figure, and this gives one the anonymity that comes automatically with conformity. Failure, on the other hand, is individual: when one fails, it is because of some unique quirk, some irrepressible element in one's nature, that causes one to swerve from the common path and assert a private standard. In the case of the artist, the consequences of success are obvious. Success generates for him a public image which will never coincide wholly with his private one, and he will always be in danger of giving in to this public image for the sake of his professional reputation, for the sake of social security, or for the sake of financial comfort. Failure, if only by default, means

that the artist is still his own master; he is still - to use Greene's image of "seedy" - close to the natural, instinctive roots of his being. There are traces of this idea in several of Greene's essays, and in several others the theme is central. The titles of two in the latter category are giveaways: "Henry James: The Private Universe" and "The Public Life", an essay on Arnold Bennett. These essays are worth considering for the light they throw on Greene's view of childhood as a determinant of the poetic.

Greene's essay on Bennett is the briefer and more superficial of the two, being a review (of Arnold Bennett's Letters to his Nephew Richard Bennett). Greene begins by taking the line that Bennett's works can be categorized according to whether they cater to public taste or celebrate the personal vision; the former Greene refers to as documentary, the latter as poetic fiction. "No writer," Greene says, "has been more shaped by success [than Bennett]: genuinely shaped, for the literary conscience which was nurtured on Flaubert never allowed him in his serious work to write for the sake of popularity. Popularity simply overtook him" (Essays, p. 189). At the time that The Old Wives' Tale was published, Greene goes on to say, "the public life was not his first material" (p. 189); after this novel Bennett became increasingly a "public" novelist but

. . . he made one mysterious, because so unexpectedly successful, return, away from Lord Raingo, to the people for whom his sympathy had been deeper, who moved his creative brain, perhaps because they belonged

to his earlier years, in a far more poetic manner, in Riceyman Steps. (p. 189)

From the evidence in Bennett's letters Greene isolates the fact that the novelist's research for Riceyman Steps was far less time-consuming and strenuous than it was for Imperial Palace, "perhaps because it connected, as that excellent piece of documentary reporting did not, directly with his imaginative experience" (p. 189). The documentary skill, according to Greene, is not without value: "Again and again the character of places springs admirably alive . . ." (pp. 189-190). On the other hand, the "character of people" is too often missing: "popularity had robbed him of the only kind of people he really, deeply, knew" (p. 190).

As a sideline to this assessment of Bennett, it is interesting to note that Somerset Maugham, in The Summing Up (which appeared in 1938, two years after Greene wrote "The Public Life"), virtually reiterates Greene's point about success in general and Arnold Bennett in particular. He says:

Success . . . often bears within itself the seed of destruction, for it may very well cut the author off from the material that was its occasion. . . . No better example of this can be given than Arnold Bennett. He never knew anything intimately but the life of the Five Towns in which he had been born and bred, and it was only when he dealt with them that his work had character. When success brought him into the society of literary people, rich men and smart women, and he sought to deal with them, what he wrote was worthless. Success destroyed him. ¹

¹London, 1938, pp. 187-188.

Now I mention this only because Maugham and Greene themselves are quite obviously popular novelists, and if there were no other similarities between them at all, they would still share some common ground on the success scale as readable and entertaining: fairly sure bets in the mass fiction market. Of course, popularity was not always, or even often, their objective, although Maugham in his short stories and Greene in his "entertainments" can be accused of writing with at least one eye on saleability. Nonetheless, both cherished the sense of privacy they found lacking in Bennett. For Maugham, privacy was largely a consequence of his inability to be a social person, his constitutional dislike of any show of intimacy with his fellow-men. Greene is private perhaps more on principle, as evidence that he can be true to his own convictions about popularity and success. As for the separating effect they detect in Bennett's work, it is interesting that both Maugham and Greene exiled themselves physically from their root material, exiled themselves literally as Bennett did emotionally and spiritually. But this seems not to have had the same effect as Bennett's separation by success. Maugham's capacity - or need - to experience life vicariously, at one remove, in fact gives his art its characteristic observer quality or, as Greene puts it, that "humility" and detached honesty which in itself is a "form of sensitivity" (p. 193). And Greene's periods of exile, whether his permanent one to France or his compulsive periodic journeys to remote places, did

not sever his ties with his original material. Greene's travels in fact, grew out of his imaginative roots, and his ability to make his private symbols known in unfamiliar settings gives them their peculiar piquancy.

We can use this idea that self-imposed exile (as opposed to the forced exile of public life) does not dull the personal metaphor as we look at the second essay in which Greene explores the theme of failure, "Henry James: The Private Universe". James wrote, at the end of his first six years of living abroad: "My choice is the old world - my choice, my need, my life. . . . [an American artist] must deal, more or less, even if only by implication, with Europe; whereas no European is obliged to deal in the least with America."² This is no doubt genuine and perhaps even valid. Certainly the old world, as a contrast to the new, was a subject which James was to mine so extensively that it has almost become his trademark. But by removing himself from the American scene James did not remove himself from the material which was his true subject: moral corruption in all its forms and degrees. This is the premise on which Greene begins his analysis of James's private universe:

James has been too often regarded as a novelist of superficial experience, as a painter of social types, who was cut off from the deepest roots of experience . . . But James was not in that sense an exile; he could have dispensed with the international scene as easily as he dismissed with all the world of Wall Street finance. For the roots were not in Venice, Paris, London; they were in himself. (p. 25)

² The Notebooks of Henry James, edited by F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, second edition (New York, 1961), p. 24.

Greene goes on to speak of James's "ruling fantasy" as a "sense of evil religious in its intensity" (p. 23), and to suggest that James's best works - those following The Awkward Age - are the best precisely because they transmit this sense in a way that his earlier "light, lucid, and witty" novels did not (p. 27). It is no surprise, he says, that James omitted many of his early novels from the collected edition of his works; "How could he have done otherwise," Greene writes, "if he was to be faithful to his deeper personal fantasy?" (p. 27).

At this point Greene pauses to elaborate on his point by quoting James's remark regarding Flaubert:

. . . he stopped too short. He hovered for ever at the public door, in the outer court, the splendour of which very properly beguiled him, and in which he seems still to stand as upright as a sentinel and as shapely as a statue. But that immobility and even that erectness were paid too dear. The shining arms were meant to carry further, the outer doors were meant to open. He should at least have listened at the chamber of the soul. This would have floated him on a deeper tide; above all it would have calmed his nerves. (pp. 27-28)

Greene's inclusion of this remark is interesting. We can take it, I think, as a veiled acknowledgement of James as the source for the success-failure theme.

James says elsewhere in his essay "Gustave Flaubert" that "Successes pure and simple disconnect and dismiss [the artist]; failures . . . keep him in touch and in relation."³

³See The Art of Fiction and Other Essays, introduced by Morris Roberts (New York, 1948), p. 138.

But the quotation is the basis of a tribute, too, for Greene goes on to say that James, unlike Flaubert, did listen at the chamber of his soul: and the result is such studies of corruption as The Wings of the Dove. From the early "outer court" novels James advanced to the exploration of subtle psychological phenomena, from "murder [to] the more agonizing mental violence; instead of Mme de Bellegarde, Kate Croy; instead of the melodramatic heroine Mme de Cintré, the deeply felt subjective study of Milly Theale" (p. 28).

Having established the direction of his argument, Greene then goes on in the essay to speculate on the source of James's ruling fantasy. This is worth following because here, I think, Greene displays a certain innovative flair as a critic. He begins by pointing out James's distinctive marks: an obsession with moral disease as reflected in his characters (Peter Quint, Madame Merle, Charlotte Stant, to name a few) and a thematic preoccupation with betrayal (the betrayal of someone or something for personal gain is typical). Greene then speculates that in order to devote oneself to the artistic depiction of such phenomena, one must harbour a personal sense of both corruption and betrayed innocence: "to render the highest justice to corruption you must retain your innocence: you have to be conscious all the time within yourself of treachery to something valuable" (p. 28). Greene is convinced that James's proffered explanations of his story "germs" (elaborately described in his Prefaces) do little to reveal the genesis of his obsessions. He says:

". . . you have to go further back than the anecdote at the dinner-table to trace the origin of such urgent fantasies" (p. 29). Even James's autobiographical pieces, A Small Boy and Others and Notes of a Son and Brother, are evasive and Greene centers on two aspects of James's early life which must have been of "painful importance" to him but which receive little of James's attention (p. 30).

The first of these, which Greene refers to as James's "inheritance", is the sense of evil, of "daemonic possession" to which the James family appears to have been susceptible (p. 30). Henry James Sr. suffered attacks of terrified insanity during which possessed shapes followed him mercilessly. James's sister Alice was subject to suicidal tendencies and William James, although able to rationalize such terrors of the mind by devoting himself to the psychological study of them, was never wholly free of their influence. Although Greene does not mention it, James tells us in A Small Boy and Others that he too was a victim of a powerful nightmare experience, of a "visitant", an "awful agent, creature or presence."⁴ At any rate, this legacy of James's childhood, a capacity to sense spiritual evil, is for Greene "a more important background to Henry James's novels than Grosvenor House and late Victorian society" (p. 31). "It is true," Greene says, "that the moral anarchy of the age gave him his material, but he

⁴London, 1913, p. 363.

would not have treated it with such intensity if it had not corresponded with his private fantasy" (p. 31).

The second aspect of James's early life in which Greene detects the seeds of his artistic focus involves James's two younger brothers, Wilky and Bob. The significance of James's relationship with these two (again a subject James avoids) lies not so much in the fact that they were "commonplace, almost low-brow members of a family intellectual to excess" as in the fact that they alone "represented the family on the battlefields of the Civil War" (p. 34).⁵ Henry James, of course, escaped the war because of a mysterious, unexplained accident. Greene suggests that this accident represents an evasion of duty for which there was "insufficient excuse" (p. 35). Rejecting the interpretation of "some modern critics" that the nature of this accident is reflected in James's "castration complex" (p. 35), Greene puts forward the notion that it is the source of James's own sense of betrayal. "It is possible," he says, "that through Wilky and Bob . . . these ruined heroes . . . we can trace the source of James's main fantasy, the idea of treachery which was always attached to his sense of evil. . . . it is not hard to believe that James suffered from a long subconscious uneasiness about a personal failure" (p. 35).

⁵ Greene acknowledges Anna Robeson Burr's Alice James. Her Brothers - Her Journals as the source of his information about Wilky and Bob. "Henry James: The Private Universe" began as a review of Miss Burr's work (see Spectator, 28 September 1934). It was expanded to its present form in 1936.

Now it is possible that Greene gives inordinate weight to this incident in order to bolster his theory, but his speculations are not wholly unfounded. If one credits the view of James's biographer, Leon Edel, one must acknowledge the almost prophetic accuracy of Greene's conjecture.⁶ Edel, speaking of James's ambiguous references to his injury in Notes of a Son and Brother says: "in some way he seems to have felt that by vagueness and circumlocution he might becloud the whole question of his non-participation in the Civil War."⁷ Whether James's complaint was serious or not, Edel says, embarrassment in the face of urgent calls for war recruits probably dissuaded James from revealing its exact nature.

The biographical data which Greene puts into service, then, are sound enough. But what is striking about Greene's description of James's private universe is the extent to which it parallels Greene's own - not, of course, in circumstance but certainly in spirit (betrayal is an obvious common theme). In fact, in his essays as a whole, Greene tends toward psychological analysis when he deals with an author in whom he does see affinities with his own obsessions. This approach has certain advantages. When Greene attributes the unreality of Dickens's "good" characters to the events

⁶Greene's essay (in its full form) was written in 1936, predating by seventeen years Volume I of Edel's biography. Greene reviewed The Untried Years favourably in the New Statesman (18 July 1953).

⁷London, 1953, pp. 178-179.

of Dickens's childhood, he speaks with a knowing empathy. "It was not," he says, "that the unhappy child, with his hurt pride and his sense of hopeless insecurity, had not encountered human goodness - he had simply failed to recognize it in those streets between Gadshill and Hungerford Market which had been as narrowly enclosed as Oliver Twist's" (Essays, p. 106). The same sort of perceptiveness is evident when Greene discusses the sad poeticism of Hans Andersen, one of those "whose lives seem arguments for the existence of a conscious providence, lives fashioned as it were deliberately for one purpose with a cruelty that has deprived them of any obscure and friendly retreat" (p. 111).

But Greene's psychological bent can get him into trouble, too. In 1933 he wrote a rather long essay on Beatrix Potter in which he suggested that with the creation of "Mr. Puddle-Duck" Miss Potter's art seemed to take on a new, pessimistic flavour. "At some time between 1907 and 1909," he writes, "Miss Potter must have passed through an emotional ordeal which changed the character of her genius. It would be impertinent to inquire into the nature of the ordeal. Her case is curiously similar to that of Henry James. Something happened which shook their faith in appearance" (p. 236). He goes on in this vein, measuring her output after this period against this yardstick, even calling Little Pig Robinson her Tempest, her "escape from tragedy, the final surrender of imagination to safe serene fancy" (p. 240).

When Greene came to edit his Collected Essays, he added a note to this essay which said that Miss Potter had duly written him an "acid" response to his piece deprecating "'the Freudian school' of criticism" (p. 240). Now this is perhaps a trifling example of Greene's psychological excesses, even if it can be distinguished with so lofty a label as "Freudian". In fact, there is some question as to Greene's intention in the essay. Of those reviewers of the Collected Essays who mention the piece at all, most see it as a send-up, and a rather good one at that. But I suspect that, playful or not, it is another of Greene's tributes to those authors he reveres because they were his childhood favourites. Reviewing such authors in A Sort of Life, with the respect for his youthfulness I have already mentioned, Greene says of Miss Potter: "I have never lost my admiration for her books and I have often reread her . . ." (p. 50).⁸ At any rate, if we assume (as Miss Potter herself apparently did) that Greene is serious in the essay, we ought not to dismiss her complaint, especially since we know that Greene has a certain personal debt to Freud.

Perhaps Greene's analysis of Beatrix Potter is harder to swallow than his psychological probing of James's "ruling fantasy" only because it seems somehow inappropriate (and unnecessary) to probe the psyche of a writer of children's books. Even so, Greene moved away from this type of criticism after the thirties, as if he recognized that he ought not to push a good thing too far.

⁸It is worth noting that Greene wrote several stories for children himself, stories rather remarkable for their air of deference to children's perspicacity. (See Bibliography).

In a 1941 review of Herbert Read's autobiographical Annals of Innocence and Experience, for example, Greene criticizes Read as a "dry critic with his eyes fixed on the distinctions between the ego and the id" (Essays, p. 354). He says:

. . . [Read] has sometimes been at pains to adopt the latest psychological theories before they have proved their validity - rather as certain Anglican churchmen leap for confirmation of their faith on the newest statement of an astronomer. . . . I cannot share his belief that criticism with the help of Freud will become a science, and a critical opinion have the universality of a scientific law . . . (p. 353)

Greene feels, presumably, that he can now afford to level such a complaint at someone who, unlike himself, has not outgrown the fashionable trend to see Freudian implications in just about everything.

In an even later review, this time from 1951, Greene takes a hard line on John Berryman's "pseudo-Freudian analysis" of the works of Stephen Crane.⁹ For example, he cites, with evident distaste, Berryman's remark that "Crane's fantasy had to secure father-identification by drowning the actual mother-representative" (p. 628), and goes on to say:

We might be interested in a psychiatrist's report on Crane's books, though without the living man to question and study, the report would be very tentative and of clinical rather than critical value. But we are not prepared to treat seriously the badly written and muddled conclusions of a writer without the necessary medical qualifications and without the practical experience of a consultant. (p. 628)

⁹"The Badge of Courage," New Statesman, 41 (June 1951), 627.

This is fair enough: Berryman's use of psycho-analytical jargon alone is pretentious and distracting, even though his diagnoses might be sound. And although Greene's comments about Berryman's lack of medical qualifications can't help but bring to mind Greene's own credentials as Henry James's analyst, I think we have to admit that Greene, in the James essay, never loses sight of James's art as the starting-point for his speculations.

I began by looking at Greene's view that the artist should be faithful to his private symbols by refusing to conform with any public image gratuitously bestowed upon him. Now I should like to consider Greene's poetic from another angle. We know that for Greene the subjective impulse is crucial - personally, critically, and artistically. But we know, too, that on a personal level Greene found his psychological obsession - particularly his penchant for the instinctive, elemental side of one's nature - to be somewhat crippling when it came to dealing with the real world. If one is to act effectively and with some sense of emotional stability, one cannot stay forever in the world of "mindless sensuality" where thoughts, feelings, and actions have value only in so far as they gratify one's ego. This, for Greene, holds critically and artistically as well. He is opposed adamantly, for example, to the "monstrous subjectivity" (Essays, p. 150) of certain "stream of consciousness" (p. 149) writers who seem to think that "by mining into layers of personality hitherto untouched [they] could unearth the secret of 'importance' . . . (p. 116). In

his review of Dorothy M. Richardson's Pilgrimage Greene is particularly emphatic about this:

[Miss Richardson's] long trainload . . .
set out in 1915 with some acclamation,
carrying its embarrassing cargo - the
stream of consciousness - saluted by many
prominent bystanders - Miss West and Mrs.
Woolf, Mr. Wells, Mr. Beresford, Mr.
Swinerton, and Mr. Hugh Walpole . . .
There is no reason why the pilgrimage should
ever end, except with the author's life,
for she is attempting to represent the whole
effect of every experience - friendship,
politics, tea-parties, books, weather,
what you will - on a woman's sensibility.
(p. 149)

Aside from being intimate to the point of embarrassment, this subjectivity for its own sake is horribly tedious. As a contrast to Miss Richardson and her fellow pilgrims, Greene speaks of the vitality of Rider Haggard's books, a vitality which comes from the occasional "emergence of the buried man" (p. 212). Haggard was "a public author," Greene says, "and the private life remained the private life in so far as he could control it. The poetic element in Haggard's work breaks out where the control fails. Because the hidden man was so imprisoned, when he does emerge through the tomb, it is against enormous pressure, and the effect is often one of horror . . ." (p. 210).¹⁰ Self-revelation might be necessary to the poetic sense, then, but it is not sufficient.

This idea that poeticism is a matter of controlled, subtle revelation occurs again and again in Greene's essays, and since childhood figures so largely in Greene's

¹⁰It is interesting that Jung, in "Psychology and Literature," mentions Rider Haggard as a writer who is only superficially a mere inventor; he is, in fact, a writer for whom the "primordial" or "visionary" experience is the really significant artistic base (See Modern Man in Search of a Soul).

idea of the poetic, it is not surprising that in many of these essays Greene attributes private excesses to what he calls "The Burden of Childhood". The essay that takes this phrase for its title and that illustrates the idea most clearly concerns H. H. Munro ("Saki"). Greene introduces his theme by comparing Dickens and Kipling:

There are certain writers, as different as Dickens from Kipling, who never shake off the burden of their childhood. The abandonment to the blacking factory in Dickens's case and in Kipling's to the cruel Aunt Rosa living in the sandy suburban road were never forgotten. . . . How differently they reacted. Dickens learnt sympathy, Kipling cruelty - Dickens developed a style so easy and natural that it seems capable of including the whole human race in its understanding: Kipling designed a machine, the cogwheels perfectly fashioned, for exclusion. (p. 127)

Greene goes on then to point out similarities between the backgrounds of Kipling and Munro: the long separations from parents imposed by life in a colonial civil service and the cruel relatives who served as parental substitutes. But, Greene says, Munro saw in childhood "its humour and its anarchy as well as its cruelty and unhappiness" (p. 129). Unlike Kipling, he "did not protect himself. . . with manliness, knowingness, imaginary adventures of soldiers and Empire builders . . . [but] with epigrams as closely set as currants in an old-fashioned Dundee cake." (p. 129). There is certainly cruelty in Saki: Reginald and Clovis - the archetypal Saki characters - "are quick to hurt, before they can be hurt . . . the epigrams, the absurdities fly unremittingly back and forth . . ." (p. 129). But as far as Greene is concerned, "the victims . . . are sufficiently foolish

to awaken no sympathy - they are the middle-aged, the people with power; it is right that they should suffer temporary humiliation because the world is always on their side in the long run" (pp. 129-130). Kipling's victims, as he says in another essay exclusively on Kipling, are "unworthy of his obsession", and his hatred is simply confining and monotonous (p. 195). The cruelty of Munro's mind - the natural consequence of his childhood - was transformed, according to Greene, into an "exacting sense of justice" (p. 130); in Kipling it was bent on revenge.

It is worth pausing to consider more closely this notion of revenge as one of the burdens of childhood since we know that it was a desire for revenge which prompted Greene himself to take up writing.¹¹ Certainly the theme of revenge finds a place in most of Greene's fiction: Pinkie making good the debt owed him from the sordid years of his childhood, Conrad Drover exacting a personal justice by violating the social order, Scobie taking vengeance on God for the absence of pity he sees all around him - the list goes on. But I think we can see the revenge motif in its most blatant and crude form in Greene's first published novel, The Man Within: Greene's first opportunity to disembarass himself of this particular burden.¹² In his Introduction to the novel Greene

¹¹See my discussion in Chapter I.

¹²The first, that is, to have any success. He had, in 1925, published a collection of his poems under the title Babbling April, but their adolescent tone prevents them from being anything more than curiosities.

admits that the story is "shamefully romantic," youthful and morbid,¹³ and we must admit that this does limit the novel's artistic value. Nevertheless, it is helpful to see Greene's "ruling fantasy" in its primary state, to see clearly the prototype of Greene's later studies of treachery and retribution.

Greene's hero Andrews is characterized by a self-indulgent preoccupation with revenge and betrayal. The ostensible objects of Andrews's hatred are the band of smugglers whom he joined, after his father's death, to combat loneliness. Andrews hates the men because they compare his lack of manliness to the bravery and virility of Andrews's dead father, their former leader. Andrews hates the new leader, Carlyon, because although he has the romantic idealism and sense of compassion Andrews values most in men, he combines it successfully with a pragmatism and self-confidence which Andrews is incapable of emulating. But the real object of Andrews's obsessive hatred is the memory of his dead father, visions of whose cruelty and power follow him round like malevolent ghosts, mocking his impotence.

Andrews's revenge is simple: he betrays the smugglers, his father's living representatives, to the Customs officers. As a result, he himself becomes the object of revenge he is pursued by the band and, more importantly, by his own conscience, his stern inner

¹³Volume XV, The Collected Edition (London, 1976), v.

"critic" who questions the justice of his act of betrayal. Greene epitomizes Andrews's state of mind in the words of Sir Thomas Browne: "There's another man within me that's angry with me" (iii); and the whole of the narrative is steeped in the ponderous self-reproaches which this state of mind spawns. The only way Andrews can find to rid himself of his torturous sense of self-abasement is to decide to sacrifice his very life, to put himself forward as the murderer of the only truly pure person he knew, the saint-like Elizabeth. This done, his father's ghost "was laid at last, and [Andrews] need no longer be torn in two between that spirit and the stern unresting critic which was wont to speak. I am that critic, he said with a sense of discovery and exhilaration" (p. 230). It is a victory, in a sense, because Andrews has at last become his own master. But it is a Pyrrhic victory; like the suicide's, Andrews's self-annihilation justifies itself, proves his worth, only by exacting the highest price.

It is a striking thing about Greene's fledgeling treatment of this very personal theme that an act of revenge rebounds on the avenger: it is not so much the object as the agent who is the victim, who must suffer interminably the consequences of his hatred. Greene once criticized Léon Bloy as a novelist because Bloy "hated the world . . . because of what it did to him and not to others" (Essays, p. 132). "We read him," Greene says, "with pleasure to just the extent that we share the

hatred of life which prevented him from being a novelist or a mystic of the first order (he might have taken as his motto Gauguin's great phrase - 'Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge')" (p. 134). Greene's tone here is, naturally, ambivalent; but Greene's own sense of revenge differs from Bloy's in one important respect: it is directed upon himself more than upon the world around him. This does not prevent him, of course, from labouring this private symbol to the point of excess. Andrews's self-mortification is quite as embarrassingly subjective as Bloy's displaced "angers and hatreds and humiliations" (p. 132). But at least Andrews sees himself as partly responsible for his social clumsiness and his personal unhappiness. And there is something healthy about a personal sense of failure: it is more practicable to work toward changing oneself than to attempt to change the world. Andrews's two selves, his stern inner critic and his outward vengeful self, are in fact an early form of Greene's metaphor of the divided mind; and although Andrews was able to reconcile the two only by self-sacrifice, he is the original for Greene's later, far less romantic, characters whose actions depend upon a critical choice between conscience and expedience. To be sure, death often comes to them: to Scobie, to Querry, to Léon in The Honorary Consul; but they at least die for the sake of a hard-won conviction, not to purge themselves in their own eyes with a mannered gesture of self-martyrdom.

We might add, then, to Greene's idea that a personal sense of failure is necessary to the poetic, this qualifier:

that if this sense of failure generates only an urge to avenge past iniquities, or a blinkered self-pity, it cannot be creative in the true sense of the word. Perhaps my notion of self-imposed exile has some relevance here, too, if we view this kind of exile as an equivalent to artistic distancing. There is a trace of this idea in "Henry James: The Private Universe" when Greene, speaking of James's ability to "construct convincing masks for his own personality" (p. 25), goes on to dissect James's "The Jolly Corner", a story about an American expatriate. Spencer Brydon returns home after thirty-three years abroad and confronts his own ghost who is "evil, odious, blatant, vulgar".¹⁴ This hideous self-reflection is a symbol of Brydon's personal treachery: the egotism which drove him to abandon his natural destiny in America for the sake of "a selfish frivolous scandalous life" abroad (p. 205). Brydon "followed strange paths and worshipped strange gods" (p. 205); he cultivated, in short, a polished second self which would turn eventually to face his original self as if it, too, were a stranger. Of course, Brydon can feel only revulsion at the sight of his ghost - but the woman he loves feels only pity. "Ah, I don't say I like him better," she says; "But he's grim, he's worn - and things have happened to him. He doesn't make shift, for sight, with your charming monocle" (p. 232).

¹⁴Volume XII, The Complete Tales of Henry James, edited by Leon Edel (London, 1964), p. 226.

This is a characteristic theme of James: Brydon, rather like John Marcher in The Beast in the Jungle, holds himself in a suspended state of existence, avoiding direct participation in life only to discover at some point that life, his life, in the form of some dreadful beast of prey, will force itself upon him. And the theme certainly gives weight to Greene's speculations about James's own personal treachery, his abandonment of America and the man he might have been. But the interesting thing about James's treatment of Brydon's ghost and Brydon himself, as Greene points out, is that they are both given a measure of sympathy: the one because he has suffered, the other because he hasn't. It is as if James, by recreating the situation of the expatriate, was able to accept and evaluate his obsession, to look upon it with a detached honesty, and to show, with pity rather than hatred or self-pity, the torments of egotism. Greene's conclusion is that James's sense of self-treachery only sharpened his compassion for fellow-sufferers. "If he had been guilty himself," Greene says, "of the supreme egotism of preserving his own existence, he left the material, in his profound unsparing analysis, for rendering even egotism the highest kind of justice, of giving the devil his due" (p. 39).¹⁵

What can we say about Greene himself in this light? Does this idea of exile help us to understand Greene's

¹⁵This idea was to form part of Greene's notion of disloyalty as expressed in Why Do I Write?: that it is the artist's duty to "act as the devil's advocate" (see my discussion on p. 87)

progression from The Man Within to the later novels in which he shows - to use his words about James - a "facility for covering up his tracks" (p. 29)? I think it does to some extent. Greene told an interviewer, in 1970,¹⁶ that he had, a few years earlier, begun a novel about a schoolboy who was bullied by his fellows and who turned for friendship to one of his masters. The theme of betrayal was to figure largely, again, but the important points about the novel are that it was to have been set in Berkhamsted, and that it was never completed.

"I went there to refresh my memory of the classrooms and of the geography of the place," Greene says; "And I found it too painful to continue" (p. 544). Perhaps, too, Greene sensed that everything about the proposed novel conspired against objective treatment. Interestingly enough, Greene goes on in this interview to speak of another novel he had recently planned but had given up, only this novel had no obvious connections with his personal origins. "The hero," Greene says, "was a member of the Secret Service who was spying for Russia and the villains of the piece were the M.I.5 types who were pursuing him, and the excitement at the end was whether he would escape in time from England" (p. 545). Greene abandoned the novel when the truth about the Kim Philby affair came to light and seemed, to Greene, to overshadow his fantasy. Since that interview, the novel has appeared

¹⁶See Bryden interview.

under the title The Human Factor; but it contains rather more than its original plot: it borrows its setting from the abandoned school novel.

Now the history of The Human Factor might have more interest value than analytical value, but I think it tempts one to speculate thus: that Berkhamsted matched with the bullied schoolboy and the befriended-then-betrayed schoolmaster touched the private nerve too closely, but Berkhamsted matched with the adult, secure in his convictions and operating in a worldly political context, touched that nerve with just the right amount of pressure. The pain is just barely there, below the surface, ready to break out (as Greene said of Haggard) where the control fails. As with James, if Greene could use his exile to construct a convincing mask for his personality, he could resist the clamorous appeals for attention that his vengeful childhood associations made. I think that The Human Factor demonstrates that Greene could do just that; but before we let the novel prove itself, let us look at Greene's opinions on art and life from the point of view of his second (chronologically) obsession, religion, and see how far the burden of childhood finds a counterpart in his faith.

CHAPTER IV

A SPIRITUAL POETIC

The religious element in Greene's writing has always been for critics the most problematic. There are some who see it as the most characteristic, and therefore the most successful, of his literary themes. There are others who are convinced that Greene's faith is of secondary importance only in his outlook; that it is a peg upon which Greene hangs his other obsessions, a handy metaphorical resource for dramatizing a life-view that was formed in childhood and did not change essentially from that point on. In my opinion the truth lies somewhere in between these two poles. It is probably fair to say that the most powerful of Greene's novels are those that deal with religious themes. But it is the case, too, that these novels are the most flawed, even if we take into account the fact that flaws in good books are more noticeable than flaws in mediocre books (which have the dubious honour of being consistent at least). Curiously, this fact tends to justify a de-emphasis of the religious element - or the sense of an orthodox religious stance - in Greene's art. The rough spots occur when the weight of his general outlook shows itself to be far greater than

that which the peg is designed to hold; that is, when he tries to squeeze his personal convictions into the mould of the Catholic creed. Greene's religion is almost always present in his art, but it is so often there as a consciously contrived prop that we are left wondering just how much real feeling lies behind it. The true spirit of Greene's faith, a concern for tormented and oppressed souls, is so often muddied by doctrine: muddied only because we feel the doctrine does not spring from a purely committed source.

When I spoke of Greene's treatment of legend, his seemingly religious interpretation of truth in the abstract, I suggested that it was more faithful to Greene's private vision of "truth" than to common, shared ideas about life. In other words, it was a sign that in a novel such as The Power and the Glory Greene's view of the visible universe would be coloured by his position as a believer, and as a Catholic believer, and that in the novel his management of character and situation would be conditioned by Catholic ideas about human nature. But there is a sense in which Greene's Catholic precepts are not private at all: in as much as they are taken from a system of beliefs not of his own making. This, of course, does not make them necessarily more faithful to known life in an objective sense; in fact, it forces Greene to supplement this superstructure of systematized belief with his own personal system of values and ideas of the way people behave. There is a level on which

Greene's faith is distinctly his, an undercurrent of Greenian theology which insists, for example, that the true saint is a shabby sinner, a border inhabitant who has one foot in the orthodox hell and the other in Greene's heaven.

It is this curious layering of orthodoxy and home-grown belief that gives rise to much confusion about Greene's "religious" writings. It is difficult to discuss Greene's faith and its effect on his art and his criticism and not get bogged down in conditions and qualifications. Even Greene himself finds it hard to keep the various strata of his outlook in lucid working order. Here, for example, is the critical statement which expresses most accurately the orthodox side of his religious sense, a statement made in 1938 with reference to Somerset Maugham's The Summing Up:

The nearest Maugham comes to a confidence is in the description of his religious belief - if you can call agnosticism a belief, and the fact that on this subject he is ready to speak to strangers makes one pause. There are signs of a muddle, contradictions . . . hints of an inhibition. Otherwise one might trace here the deepest source of his limitations, for creative art seems to remain a function of the religious mind. Maugham the agnostic is forced to minimize - pain, vice, the importance of his fellowmen. He cannot believe in a God who punishes and he cannot therefore believe in the importance of a human action . . . Rob human beings of their heavenly and their infernal importance, and you rob your characters of their individuality. . . . It has never been Maugham's characters that we have remembered so much as the narrator, with his contempt for human life, his unhappy honesty. (Essays, pp. 204-205)

Now leaving aside for the moment the question this raises about Maugham, the points made here are somewhat puzzling. First, Greene's claim that only the religious mind can recognize the importance of individual human actions certainly does not fit with Greene's own experience. If we can believe what he tells us - in, for example, "The Lost Childhood" or A Sort of Life - he formed a sense of the importance of human acts in childhood, in a state of effective agnosticism, and long before religious conversion even entered his mind as a possibility. The "pattern was already there," as he says in "The Lost Childhood": "perfect evil walking the world where perfect good can never walk again" (Essays, p. 18). It was a faith of sorts, yes; and one to which Catholicism later added dramatic weight. But it was a faith completely without dogma, without a real belief in anything but human fallibility. Second, Greene's point that only the religious mind can produce truly creative art certainly betrays a narrow view of art over the course of history. Ten years after this Maugham review, in Why Do I Write?, Greene was to admit the limitations of his claim, implicitly at least. The artist, he said then, should be loyal to no system of belief save his own. But the indictment of Maugham is still on Greene's record as a critic; and if his choice of Maugham as a focus for his remarks is a little unfair (of all Maugham's works, perhaps only Of Human Bondage can be called profound in any sense), it shows that Greene was prepared at that time to strike, however easy the target.

Let us examine more closely Greene's definition of the religious mind. In the same year that Greene wrote his critique of Maugham, his own first "Catholic" novel, Brighton Rock, appeared. It seemed an almost deliberate attempt by Greene to prove valid his charge that the agnostic cannot "believe in the importance of a human action". The point of the novel turns on the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong: a distinction that only Catholics are supposed to be capable of making. George Orwell put the point rather well when he said, deprecatingly, in reference to Catholic novels in general and Greene's in particular, that "the Catholics retain their superiority . . . [though they be] drunken, lecherous, criminal, or damned outright . . . since they alone know the meaning of good and evil."¹ Orwell was reviewing The Heart of the Matter, but he might just as easily and with more justice have pointed his finger at Brighton Rock. At the end of the novel there is a dialogue between Rose and the priest which illustrates the justice of Orwell's criticism very nicely. Rose says of Pinkie: "'He's damned. He knew what he was about. He was a Catholic too,'" and the priest replies: "' . . . a Catholic is more capable of evil than anyone. I think perhaps - because we believe in Him - we are more in touch with the devil than other people'" (p. 309).

¹"The Sanctified Sinner," in Graham Greene, A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Samuel Hynes (Englewood Cliffs, 1973), p. 107.

Pinkie's opposite is Ida Arnold, a robust, promiscuous, jolly atheist whose moral code is quite simple: "'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'" (p. 51). For her the affairs of men have nothing to do with the mysterious workings of some supernatural force. "'I believe in right and wrong,'" (p. 51) she says; and her decision to set out to determine the circumstances of Kolly Kibber's ugly death is based on a kind of good-natured altruism. "'It's going to be exciting, it's going to be fun, it's going to be a bit of life . . .'" (p. 51): she conjures up Greene's image of hearty Anglicanism - "a big brass eagle, an organ voluntary . . . the distant music [of Mendelssohn]" (Lawless Roads, p. 3). Pinkie, on the other hand, is closer to "Péguy challenging God in the cause of the damned" (Roads, p. 3). He is unquestionably evil, as Rose knows; but, as she says, because he is evil "what did it matter . . . whether he was right or wrong?" (p. 248).

The dice, then, are clearly loaded. Catholics have a monopoly on affairs of the spirit, on the heightened response to life, and this makes them immune to conventional standards of conduct. It is odd, though, that in the novel this Catholic bias - what Orwell calls the "high-class night club" of the Catholic damned ("Sinner," p. 107) - leans so heavily on the opposition of good and evil to right and wrong. Where, one asks, are the ethical imperatives so sternly implied in the notions of Heaven and Hell? It is certainly not clear that

Pinkie is destined for eternal punishment; no-one can conceive, says the priest, "'the . . . appalling . . . strangeness of the mercy of God'" (p. 308). Why does Greene build up a case for seeing Pinkie's acts as significant, because Catholic, and then pull the rug out from under him, allow him an escape clause which effectively cancels any eternal reverberations his life was supposed to have?

The answer, of course, is that Pinkie, aside from being a Catholic, is a Greene child, a child whose moral precepts are based quite as much on his first innocent encounters with the sordid facts of life as on the guidelines of his faith. The one memory Pinkie has of his home in Paradise Piece is the Saturday night routine: "the frightening weekly exercise of his parents which he watched from his single bed" (p. 108). The only kind of love he ever knew was lust. "That was what they expected of you . . . That was how they judged you . . ." (p. 108); and that was what Pinkie set out to challenge. His test was "whether you had the guts to kill a man, to run a mob . . ." (p. 108) - to prove your manhood by committing pure, nihilistic, emotionless acts of destruction. There is, then, a good reason why Pinkie's moral sense, such as it is, deviates from the norm. As Greene explains in his Introduction to A Gun for Sale, Pinkie and his prototype Raven

have something of a fallen angel about them, a morality which once belonged to another place. The outlaw of justice always keeps in his heart the sense of justice outraged - his

crimes have an excuse . . . Whatever crime he may be driven to commit the child who doesn't grow up remains the great champion of justice. 'An eye for an eye.' 'Give them a dose of their own medicine.' As children we have all suffered punishment for faults we have not committed, but the wound has soon healed. With Raven and Pinkie the wound never heals. (viii)

It is curious that Pinkie's concept of justice, phrased thus, is not so very different from Ida Arnold's, and yet in the novel Pinkie's is rationalized, Ida's mocked. The discrepancy between them lies ostensibly in their respective positions as Catholic and atheist; but the real discrepancy, one feels, is that Ida is an adult: cerebral, no, but civilized, tame. She has no store of primitive sensibility, she is no longer in touch with that base, instinctive germ of innocent wisdom. Here, I think, is evidence that Greene's use of Catholic doctrine is artificial: it is tacked on to explain behaviour that is explicable in natural terms, or at least in terms of psychology as Greene sees it. He tries hard to discredit Ida's shallow morality, but never quite succeeds in convincing us that the good intentions of a simple person have no real value. By the same token, he never quite succeeds in convincing us that the Church has the last word on Pinkie. Greene's distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, we feel, is spurious. The world of absolutes seems almost an escape from the world in which right conduct and wrong really do have some import, where vitriol and razor slashes do matter to the pathetic victims and one woman's desire for retribution on behalf of a dead acquaintance does hold some meaning. That is to interpret

the point of the novel crudely, of course. But it seems to me that Greene's absolute good and evil are actually not absolute at all, that they are an expression of some more metaphysical, even literary, habit of mind, and that they are perhaps unconscious evasions of everyday ethics, reminiscent of the confused and unorthodox morality which attends childhood.²

The doctrinaire pronouncements so obvious in Brighton Rock and the Maugham review reappear in many of Greene's critical discussions. One especially is worth mentioning. This is an essay on Fielding and Sterne, written in 1937; and it seems a kind of testing ground for the full-blown definition which was to come the following year. Greene begins in the essay by making a point which he amplified five years later in British Dramatists: that the eighteenth century was devoid of the passionate religious and political convictions so characteristic of previous centuries. When Dryden died, Greene says,

. . . he left the new age, the quieter, more rational age, curiously empty. Not until the romantics at the end of the century was politics again to be of importance to the creative, the recording mind, not until Newman and Hopkins orthodox religion.

² John Bayley, in The Uses of Division (London, 1976), objects to writers like Greene who arrange society according to their "own specification" - in Greene's case, according to Catholic precepts. His "spiritualities are . . . deadening," Bayley says, "because they can only repeat, in novel after novel, the same image of a world, and no dialogue with him is possible because there is no contract between us on which one could be based." (p. 83).

All that was left was the personal sensibility
or the superficial social panorama . . .
(Essays, p. 84)

"One cannot separate literature and life," Greene goes on to say; "if an age appears creatively, poetically empty, it is fair to assume that life too had its emptiness, was carried on a a lower, less passionate level" (p. 84). The one bright light of the eighteenth century, according to Greene, was Fielding; for although he lacked the "poetic mind", he offered a new form to replace the dying heroic drama, a fictional form "which could attract the poetic imagination" (p. 86). The quality which Fielding possessed which makes him the benefactor of twentieth-century prose poets is a certain "moral seriousness" (p. 90). Greene writes:

When we admire Tom Jones as being the first portrait of 'a whole man' . . . it is Fielding's seriousness to which we are paying tribute, his power of discriminating between immorality and vice. He had no high opinion of human nature: the small sensualities of Tom Jones, the incorrigible propensities of Booth . . . prove it no more certainly than his quite incredible picture of virtue, the rectitude of Mr. Allworthy, the heroic nature of the patient Amelia. (p. 90)

And yet, for all his worth as a technical innovator and a classicist in terms of values, Fielding was still a product of his age: "his books do represent a moral struggle, but they completely lack the sense of supernatural evil or supernatural good" (p. 92). The "moral life in Fielding," Greene concludes, "is apt to resemble one of those pictorial games of Snakes and Ladders. If the player's counter should happen to fall on a Masquerade

or a ticket to Vauxhall Gardens, down it slides by way of the longest snake" (pp. 92-93).

So far Greene seems to be regretting primarily a lack of passion in Fielding, a want of poetic feeling. But then he brings us up abruptly with this:

Mr. Eliot has suggested that 'with the disappearance of the idea of Original Sin, with the disappearance of the idea of intense moral struggle, the human beings presented to us both in poetry and in prose fiction . . . tend to become less and less real', and it is the intensity of the struggle which is lacking in Fielding. (p. 92) ³

- a sudden, startling appeal to one whom Greene perhaps saw as having more authority, and possibly more conviction than he had himself. This is one of the earliest of Greene's critical references to Eliot, and it seems to indicate that Greene's orthodox tendencies gathered some strength from Eliot's "religious" essays: obviously, in this instance, from After Strange Gods, and probably from "Religion and Literature". In the latter, for example, Eliot had stated that it was theological, not moral standards, that one ought to use to define "religious" literature. The fact that "moral judgements of literary works are made only according to the moral code accepted by each generation" merely provides "evidence of what unsubstantial foundations peoples' moral judgements have" (Selected Essays, pp. 388-389). As readers and critics, Eliot had said, we ought to judge literature by its awareness of "the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life" (p. 398). Of course, Eliot, in

³From After Strange Gods (London, 1934), p. 42.

After Strange Gods, felt no compunctions about taking this argument to its logical conclusion: to a literal application of the doctrine of Original Sin. But Greene's use of it must have been accompanied by some misgiving.

Greene's definition of the religious sense includes another, slightly different point of interest, one which raises as many questions about his personal-institutional ambivalence as does the subject of sin. This is the notion of eternity, an abstraction which entails in simple terms a concern for death and an afterlife. In "The Dark Enemy", a review of Walter de la Mare's The Wind Blows Out, Greene says: "our awareness of life bears a direct relation to our awareness of its end."⁴ Death is important: it is the moment at which the quality of one's life is put to the test, given ultimate significance. Everyman, Greene says in British Dramatists, has "all that fear of death's heavy responsibility which belongs to the Age of Faith and lay on Hamlet's will as much as Everyman's" (p. 9). It is hardly surprising, then, that in Ida Arnold's opinion the idea of an after-life is quite unacceptable:

Death shocked her, life was so important, She wasn't religious. She didn't believe in heaven or hell, only in ghosts, ouija boards, tables which rapped and little inept voices speaking plaintively of flowers. Let Papists treat death with flippancy: life wasn't so important perhaps to them as what came after: but to her death was the end of everything. (Brighton Rock, p. 40)

There was a time when death seemed the end of everything for Greene, too; but it was a desirable end -

⁴Spectator, 5649 (October 1936), 556.

to the boredom and ennui which had hounded him for so much of his young life. Death seemed, moreover, the only way to give some meaning to his life: one could dramatize life by flirting with complete and absolute obliteration. The Roman Catholic view that self-imposed death was sinful Greene never accepted. By the same token, the Roman Catholic view that death's aftermath gave life its real significance was a view that only sharpened a response to life that was already passionate and intense. Greene never did treat death with Papist "flippancy", as a mere natural phenomenon signalling the beginning of one's eternal sentence. He treated death - or suicide, at any rate - as a logical escape from intolerable suffering.

There are two essays in particular in which Greene's real attitude toward death is brought sharply into contrast with that of the Church. In the first, an essay on de la Mare which probably grew out of the 1936 review, he is faithful to his personal, deep-seated convictions. He speaks of death as de la Mare's obsession; and it is an obsession quite without religious undertones.

He says:

What an odd world, to those of us with traditional Christian beliefs, is this world of Mr de la Mare's . . . That obsession with death that fills Mr de la Mare's poetry with the whisper of ghosts, that expresses itself over and over again in the short story in the form of revenants, has never led him to accept - or even to speculate on - the Christian answer. Christianity when it figures in these stories is like a dead religion of which we see only the enormous stone memorials. (Essays, p. 144)

This does not trouble Greene. The obsession itself qualifies as poetic: we do not expect, with all de la Mare's "wild speculation" about the state after death, that he should resolve it, glibly, with "our easy conscious Christian answers" (p. 148). His characters have something resembling childish fearfulness and vulnerability:

. . . how they continually seek their snark, his characters - in railway trains, in deserted churches, even in the bars of village inns. Listen to them speaking, and see how all the time they ignore what is at least a fact - that an answer to their question has been proposed: how intent they are to find an alternative, personal explanation: how they hover and debate and touch and withdraw, while the boojum waits. (p. 146)

"We are wooed and lulled . . . by the beauty of the prose," Greene says: until suddenly the obsession, the poetic energy breaks through "and we look up and see the terrified eyes of our fellow-passenger, appealing, hungry, scared, as he watches what we cannot see - 'the sediment of an unspeakable possession' . . ." (p. 148). It is really a tribute to de la Mare, this essay; throughout, the obsession is described by Greene in a manner that is gentle, probing, almost loving.

Greene has good reason to treat de la Mare so respectfully. For one thing, he met de la Mare ("the poet I most admired at the time," he says in A Sort of Life, p. 97) at the home of Kenneth Richmond and at a time in his life when he experienced, fleetingly, an unusual sense of well-being. More important, Greene seems to have used de la Mare's theme as a model for some of his own first ventures into creative writing. His first published work, Babbling April,⁵

⁵London, 1925.

was a very slight collection of verse in which almost all the poems deal with the agony of being young and the contemplation of death.⁶ "Sensations," for example, is an unashamed reference to his suicidal games:

How we make our timorous advances to death,
by pulling the trigger of a revolver,
which we already know to be empty.
Even as I do now.
And how horrified I should be, I who love
Death in my verse, if I had forgotten
To unload. (p. 1)

"If You Were Dead" is an embarrassingly romantic tribute to the adolescent love he felt for his sister's governess.⁷

"Death and Cosmetics" again treats of the frustration of unfulfilled, youthful passion; and "The Gamble" returns to the theme of Russian roulette. "Whether the end of the game is life or death," so the poem closes, "It is a gamble which I cannot lose" (p. 32).

It is little wonder, then, that Greene should capitalize on any opportunity to express, in the form of critical praise, the kinship he felt with de la Mare. The year before Babbling April was published, Greene reviewed Ding Dong Bell for the Oxford Outlook and, defending de la Mare against complaints that he is a poet of escape, said very boldly that he was so perfect as to defy criticism. About de la Mare's preoccupation with death Greene wrote:

. . . it is almost the last state left which keeps that bite of mystery that is essential for man. We have mapped out the world and

⁶ Many of Greene's early short stories, too, are about death, although they tend to fix on its grotesque rather than its romantic side. See, for example, "The End of the Party," "The Second Death," "A Little Place off the Edgware Road". (I discuss Greene's use of the grotesque in his stories in Chapter VIII.)

⁷ Greene discusses this at length in A Sort of Life, pp. 123-125.

the body and the mind, and so with a kind of timorous hesitancy, that is itself a delight, man creeps towards it. Columbus could lose himself in a New World; modern man can hope for the same relief only in this unknown.⁸

This is certainly a spiritually neutral description of death. Death is a kind of adventurous journey, a half-dangerous escapade: and very much in keeping with Greene's own experience. His adopted faith might have added a new twist, another dimension to the mystery: but it did not alter its essential form.

The second essay I wish to discuss briefly starts out on the same footing, even though its subject matter is Catholic. It was written as an Introduction to John Gerard: The Autobiography of a Hunted Priest.⁹ Here Greene speaks of the "sense of excitement, of immediacy," in this exiled priest's account of his return to Elizabethan England under the threat of persecution (Portable, p. 574). The effect, Greene says, is due to the very real danger of torture and eventual death facing a "heretic" such as Gerard: "the danger in the familiar lane, death lying in wait in all the peaceful countryside" (p. 574). Interestingly, Greene had described John Buchan's thriller, The Thirty-Nine Steps, in much the same way some years earlier: "murder in 'the atmosphere of breeding and simplicity and stability'" - and, he says, what "enormous dramatic value" it had (Essays, p. 223): But after highlighting the various events and personalities recorded by Gerard, Greene moves on to a description

⁸Oxford Outlook, 6 (June 1924), 244.

⁹This essay remains uncollected but appears in The Portable Graham Greene. Gerard's Autobiography, translated by Philip Caraman, was published in 1951 by Longman's, Green.

of Gerard's final torture period for which Francis Bacon was in part responsible; and at this point the essay lurches abruptly onto another track:

For a moment one would like to imagine oneself a follower of the Baconian heresy and to believe that it was William Shakespeare who faced Gerard across the board, for isn't there one whole area of the Elizabethan scene that we miss even in Shakespeare's huge world of comedy and despair? . . . the martyrs are quite silent - one might say that the Christians are silent except for the diplomatic tones of a Wolsey or Pandulpho or the sudden flash of conscience in Hamlet's uncle at prayers. (p. 578)

He goes on:

One might have guessed from Shakespeare's plays that there was a vast vacuum where the Faith had been - the noise and bustle of pilgrimages have been stilled; we come out of the brisk world of Chaucer into the silence of Hamlet's court after the Prince's departure, out of the colours of Canterbury into the grey world of Lear's blasted heath. An old Rome has taken the place of the Christian Rome - the pagan philosophers and the pagan gods seem to have returned. (p. 578)

We remember Greene's comment about Hamlet's "fear of death's heavy responsibility"; and then we get:

If Shakespeare had sat where Bacon had sat and given the orders for the torture, one wonders whether into the great plays which present on the inner side, however much on the outer Lear may rave or Antony lust, so smooth and ambiguous a surface, there would have crept a more profound doubt than Hamlet's, a sense of a love deeper than Romeo's. (p. 579)

Elouqently persuasive but not a little unfair, especially when Greene had reserved highest honours for Shakespeare in his discussion of British dramatists - a discussion which was certainly sympathetic to moral issues. "Religion was better left alone for the time," Greene had said then; "so that Shakespeare only allowed himself occasional

glancing lines (Hamlet's prayer, the papal nuncio rebuking Philip of France) which showed just the fin of the dangerous thoughts moving below the surface" (Dramatists, p. 12).

This, then, is the sort of uncertainty of focus that characterizes Greene's descriptions of the religious sense. What about his rationale for insisting that the religious sense lies behind the truly creative imagination? If we return to where we left Somerset Maugham wilting under the charge of agnostic aridity, we can pose now the question this charge so obviously raises: does the absence of a religious sense in Maugham make his work shallow and superficial, as Greene seems to believe? Or is Maugham to be excluded from the ranks of "great" novelists on the basis of some other deficiency? Maugham himself says: "never having felt some of the fundamental emotions of normal men, it is impossible that my work should have the intimacy, the broad human touch, and the animal serenity which the greatest writers alone can give" (Summing Up, pp. 80-81). A matter of temperament, perhaps, more than anything. And yet Maugham is capable of some penetration; and isn't an awareness of our own limitations something to be valued, in a Christian (or any other) sense? The Summing Up is, as Greene admits, a compelling testimonial to one man's personal honesty; and if Maugham's quest for a meaningful life, so candidly recorded in this book, has little to show for itself in his art, it would be difficult to accuse Maugham of want of serious purpose.

But let us get a taste of Greene's argument first. He justifies his statement that "creative art seems to remain a function of the religious mind" primarily on these grounds: that "The idea of life as it ought to be is never far from any work of literature,"¹⁰ and that only the imagination which refers itself to some higher, spiritual authority can know what life ought to be. There is something of this in a review of three novels Greene wrote for The Tablet in 1937 in which he singles out for praise Ignazio Silone's Bread and Wine:

All the novels on my list are concerned with social justice, and they all avoid the merely political approach. The trouble is: what approach can you have but the political or the religious? However objectively you write, you cannot avoid criticism, and to criticise, you must compare. The strength of Signor Silone is that he writes - as "a disappointed lover" - from a religious angle: he has a basis for comparison if not in the Church today, which in his view tolerates cruelty and injustice, then in the Church of yesterday.¹¹

In other words, a systematized theology provides a sound measure of real and ideal behaviour.

The striking thing about this position is the extent to which it calls to mind, again, Eliot's "religious" essays, particularly "Religion and Literature," and to some extent "The 'Pensées' of Pascal". Eliot had argued, in the first, that "Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint" (Selected Essays, p. 388). A work of

¹⁰"Fiction," Spectator, 5811 (November 1939), 662.

¹¹"Fiction Chronicle," The Tablet (January 1937), 162.

literature, he said, necessarily affects readers' values; therefore

For literary judgment we need to be acutely aware of two things at once: of 'what we like', and of 'what we ought to like'. Few people are honest enough to know either. The first means knowing what we really feel: very few know that. The second involves understanding our shortcomings; for we do not really know what we ought to like unless we also know why we ought to like it, which involves knowing why we don't yet like it. It is not enough to understand what we ought to be, unless we know what we are; and we do not understand what we are, unless we know what we ought to be. The two forms of self-consciousness . . . must go together. . . . It is our business, as readers of literature, to know what we like. It is our business, as Christians, as well as readers of literature, to know what we ought to like. (p. 399)

In the "'Pensées'" Eliot carries this point a step further, to an indictment of those who cannot sort out what they like from what they ought to like because they choose not to avail themselves of the ethical guidelines of the Christian faith. Pascal, as an example of "the intelligent believer",

. . . finds the world to be so and so; he finds its character inexplicable by any non-religious theory; among religions he finds Christianity, and Catholic Christianity, to account most satisfactorily for the world and especially for the moral world within; and thus, by what Newman calls 'powerful and concurrent' reasons, he finds himself inexorably committed to the dogma of the Incarnation. (p. 408)

"To the unbeliever," Eliot goes on,

. . . this method seems disingenuous and perverse: for the unbeliever is, as a rule, not so greatly troubled to explain the world to himself, nor so greatly distressed by its disorder; nor is he generally concerned (in modern terms)

to 'preserve values' . . . he would, so to speak, trim his values according to his cloth, because to him such values are of no great value. (p. 408)

Here there is a definite tone of religious superiority: the same, I think, that underlies Greene's objection to Maugham's agnosticism. It is the same imputation of laxity that causes Greene to see in Maugham "signs of a muddle, contradictions . . . hints of an inhibition": because Maugham does not affiliate himself with an external authoritative source of correction, his conduct remains subject to the vagaries of personal criteria.

The obvious difficulty which Greene's - and Eliot's - position poses is this: it presumes that the agnostic mind is incapable of embracing a value system at all, let alone one that is in any sense worthwhile. I have said that Maugham's The Summing Up shows how seriously he set out to fashion his life pattern, how conscious he was that one ought to seek out and live by some set of principles which could be called just both for individuals and for society at large. It is true that Maugham placed much emphasis on his personal estimate of a principle's worth: his values had to be "right" for him. But it is also true that he brought to bear on his choices some intelligence and a good deal of diligent study. His search for a meaning in life did not lead him to the materialistic and egotistic vacuum implied in Greene's label "agnostic" or in Eliot's "unbeliever".

I do not want to labour my point about Maugham, or to exaggerate his profundity. But since he is one of

Greene's main targets on the subject of religion, he ought to be allowed a brief rejoinder. He could not, he tells us, believe honestly in anything supernatural; but neither could he accept the logical alternative that life is meaningless. Unlike those who do not question or speculate, those who "accept their presence in the world . . . [and strive] to satisfy their natural impulses" (p. 284), Maugham was not content to rest at a null proposition. The ultimate value which life had demonstrated to him, he says, is "goodness": a form of love of humanity which transcends sexual love and takes, as its prime quality, "loving-kindness" (p. 314). With an admirable sense of self-irony, Maugham writes:

Goodness is the only value that seems in this world of appearances to have any claim to be an end in itself. Virtue is its own reward. I am ashamed to have reached so commonplace a conclusion. With my instinct for effect I should have liked to end my book with some startling and paradoxical announcement or with a cynicism that my readers would have recognized with a chuckle as characteristic. It seems I have little more to say than can be read in any copybook or heard from any pulpit. I have gone a long way round to discover what everyone knew already. (p. 315)

He makes it clear, too, that respect for this objective is as much the province of art as the duty of personal conduct. "Art," he says, "if it is to be reckoned as one of the great values of life, must teach men humility, tolerance, wisdom, and magnanimity. The value of art is not beauty, but right action" (p. 310). There seems to be a quality of mind here that really challenges Greene's belief that "the agnostic . . . is

forced to minimize . . . the importance of his fellowmen". We might wish that Maugham had allowed a little more of this into his art; but we might also wish that Greene had allowed a little more of this reasoned tolerance into his criticism.

There is another reason Greene gives for linking creative art to the religious mind: a belief in things spiritual, he claims, is a prerequisite for technical realism. The point was made in the Fielding and Sterne essay with the help of Eliot; it is elaborated in a later essay on François Mauriac. Here Greene begins by lamenting the state of the post-Jamesian novel: it was one-dimensional, it had no material actuality, and it had no spiritual depth. The characters of writers such as Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster "wandered like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper-thin" (Essays, p. 115). Victorian novelists such as Trollope, materialistic though they were, at least were "aware of another world against which the actions of the characters are thrown into relief" (p. 115). Unlike Mrs. Woolf's Mr. Ramsay, Trollope's characters are palpable because they exist, not only in the eyes of other characters, but also "in a God's eye" (p. 115). Dickens's characters, too, though very dependent on plot and physical setting for their substance, were at least "given the right to exist as they were, distorted, if at all, only by their observer's eye - not further distorted at a second remove

by an imagined character" (p. 116).¹² But in a subjective novel such as Mrs. Dalloway, even the material world has disappeared. "Mrs. Dalloway," he says, "was aware of the glitter of shop windows, the smooth passage of cars, the conversation of shoppers, but it was only a Regent Street seen by Mrs. Dalloway that was conveyed to the reader" (p. 116).

It is with relief, then, that Greene turns to Mauriac. (He is reviewing La Pharisienne, but his assessment is general.) Here the characters have "the solidity and importance of men with souls to save or lose" (p. 116). Unlike Dickens, Mauriac can afford to be lax with plot construction because his characters are convincing personalities. Greene says: "their particular acts are less important than the force, whether God or Devil, that compels them . . . [and] . . . We are saved or damned by our thoughts, not by our actions" (p. 119).

Now we know that Greene had a high regard for French realism: it shows clearly in his film criticism, for example. But this essay is a tribute to Mauriac's faith, perhaps even an unconscious tribute to the faith of one to whom Catholicism was, so to speak, a birth-right. Such a speculation certainly fits with the fact that, for Greene, faith is a rather strenuous business:

¹²Eliot had said, in After Strange Gods, that Jane Austen, Dickens, and Thackeray were "still observers: however superficial . . ." and that "the standards by which they criticized their world, if not very lofty ones, were at least not of their own making." (p. 58)

his professions of belief have something of the adamant quality, the need to justify, that understandably accompanies late conversion. Such a speculation fits, too, with Greene's frequent metaphorical linking of spiritual initiation with inoculation: as with Pinkie's christening, when "the holy water didn't take" (p. 156), or with the ingenious revelation in The End of the Affair that Sarah was baptized a Catholic ("I always had a wish that it would "take"" says her mother; "Like vaccination" - p. 179). At any rate, Greene seems to admire the naturalness of Mauriac's treatment of the spiritual dimension, his ability to convey with absolute conviction that Catholics have the copyright on the reality of individual existence. As Mauriac says in God and Mammon, for a Catholic the slightest touch counts; all the time the statue is taking shape; everything he does adds something to its moulding, and it is watched with censure or with love by the Almighty."¹³ Greene was later to question the rigid morality Mauriac displayed in God and Mammon; but there is no doubt that Greene respects the pressure his faith exerted on his art.

Greene had begun to work out his idea of spiritual realism much earlier than the Mauriac essay in three short essays on Frederick Rolfe. Two were written in 1934 and seem to draw some sustenance from Eliot's "Baudelaire," which appeared in 1930. The last was

¹³London, 1946, p. 39.

written in 1935 and quite definitely was influenced by After Strange Gods. The first Rolfe essay, a review of A. J. A. Symons's The Quest for Corvo, Greene titles "Edwardian Inferno": he apparently could not resist the opportunity to strike a rebel note on behalf of his post-Edwardian sentiments. He notes, to begin with, the effect of reading Rolfe's letters:

It is . . . with a shock of startled incredulity that we become aware on occasion even today of eternal issues, of the struggle between good and evil, between vice that really demands to be called satanic and virtue of a kind which can only be called heavenly. . . . it is disquieting to remember how in the outside world Mr. Wells was writing Love on Wheels, the Empire builders after tiffin at the club were reading 'The Song of the Banjo', and up the crowded stairway of Grosvenor House Henry James was bearing his massive brow; disquieting too to believe that Miss Marie Corelli was only palely limping after truth when she brought the devil to London. (Essays, pp. 172-173)

This is not unlike what Eliot had to say about Baudelaire in his age, an age of "bustle, programmes, platforms, scientific progress, humanitarianism and revolutions which improved nothing . . ." (Selected Essays, p. 427). Baudelaire, Eliot says, had the sense to perceive "that what really matters is Sin and Redemption"; and if he was damned, he at least had "an immediate form of salvation" for damnation itself "gives some significance to living" (p. 427).

Rolfe, in his time, really did bring the devil to London. He was a convert to Roman Catholicism (but "born for the Church," according to one of Mr. Symons's correspondents - Greene, Essays, p. 174), although his bid for the priesthood was unsuccessful. That Rolfe was rejected by the Church was natural and justifiable, says Greene,

because by the terms of convention Rolfe was the anti-thesis of virtue. His life, on the surface, seemed a passionate expression of the force of evil, but it demonstrated, in fact, an almost impossible aspiration to be good. The paradox of Rolfe, as Greene phrases it, reminds us of what Orwell calls Greene's "sanctified sinners": "The greatest saints have been men with more than a normal capacity for evil, and the most vicious men have sometimes narrowly evaded sanctity" (p. 173).

Again, one is impressed by Greene's affinity with Eliot. Baudelaire, Eliot had said, was "To the eye of the world . . . thoroughly perverse and insufferable" but

He was one of those who have great strength . . .
He could not escape suffering and could not
transcend it, so he attracted pain to himself . . .
such suffering as Baudelaire's implies the
possibility of a positive state of beatitude.
Indeed, in his way of suffering is already
a kind of presence of the supernatural and
of the superhuman. (pp. 422-423)

Unlike Rolfe, Baudelaire did not affiliate himself with any systematized belief; but his sense of evil, according to Eliot, "implies the sense of good" (p. 427).

Greene had made the same point when he quoted from Péguy for his epigraph to The Heart of the Matter: "Le pécheur est au coeur même de chrétienté . . . nul n'est aussi compétent que le pécheur en matière de chrétienté. Nul, si ce n'est le saint" - although Pinkie is rather closer to the Rolfe type than Scobie.

Echoes of Brighton Rock sound in Greene's second essay on Rolfe, "From the Devil's Side". Here the paradox

is elaborated. Because Rolfe was "alive" in a spiritual sense, ethical judgements are both unnecessary and inappropriate:

It is the measure of the man's vividness that his life always seems to move on a religious plane . . . The difficulty always is to distinguish between possession by a devil and possession by a holy spirit . . . But the devil, too, is spiritual, and when Rolfe wrote of the spirit . . . he wrote like an angel; our appreciation is hardly concerned in the question whether or not it was a fallen angel . . . (p. 177)

Pinkie, we remember, was not to be judged in terms of right and wrong. In him the serum did not "take", he "never howled the devil out" (Brighton Rock, p. 156); but he at least had the devil. So, too, would say Eliot; and Greene finally acknowledges Eliot in the third essay of the trilogy, "Frederick Rolfe: A Spoiled Priest". Rolfe is, Greene says,

. . . an obvious example to illustrate Mr. T. S. Eliot's remark¹⁴ in his study of the demonic influence: "Most people are only a very little alive; and to awaken them to the spiritual is a very great responsibility: it is only when they are so awakened that they are capable of real Good, but that at the same time they become first capable of Evil." (p. 181)

What can we say about Greene's artistic and critical treatment of this idea, beyond the fact that it is derivative? It is true that much of the credit for the dramatic force of Scobie's predicament, or Pinkie's, must go to the spiritual landscape against which the actions are played out. But it is true, too,

¹⁴From After Strange Gods, p. 60.

that Scobie and Pinkie, even Greene's whisky priest, are realized partly in terms of a quite different force which we might dare to call humanist (a position about which Eliot had serious reservations). Remember that Greene wanted to throw doubt on the notion of Hell as a logical end for Pinkie. He does the same with Scobie. "'For goodness' sake, Mrs. Scobie,'" says Father Rank at the end; "'don't imagine you - or I - know a thing about God's mercy'" (p. 320). Greene wants to forgive his characters their sins (how could he do otherwise, having such an unorthodox conception of sin himself?¹⁵) and this robs his doctrinal testing ground of much of its power. It is no wonder that Mauriac accuses Greene of "a secret complaisance" on the subject of sin; as Philip Stratford tells us, Mauriac finds that "the idea of sin seems to reassure Greene, and that, on the other, he makes himself too readily the accomplice of Grace".¹⁶ Greene openly admits his complaisance: "Mauriac's sinners," he says, "sin against God whereas mine, however hard they try, can never quite manage to . . .".¹⁷ But there is here little sense of

¹⁵In several interviews Greene is quite candid about this. To Philip Toynbee, for example, he said: "I find it very difficult to believe in sin" ("Graham Greene on 'The Job of the Writer'"). See also my discussion in Chapter IX, p. 302.

¹⁶See Stratford's Faith and Fiction, p. 237. His discussion of Mauriac's views is based on his interview with the novelist in 1957. See "One Meeting with Mauriac," The Kenyon Review, XXI (Winter 1959), 611-622.

¹⁷Interview with Martin Shuttleworth and Simon Raven, published as "The Art of Fiction: Graham Greene," in Hynes, p. 161.

remorse.¹⁸

Perhaps Greene is too generous with Mauriac, for why should he admit to a complaisance which might just as easily, from another point of view, be called a sense of compassion? At times Greene is quite clear about the artist's obligation to treat his fictional creations with sympathy. In Why Do I Write? he insists that he should be allowed to write "from the point of view of the black square as well as of the white" (p. 32). He invokes Newman as the ideal patron of Catholic novelists who might be tempted to propagandize on behalf of their faith and at the expense of individual justice. He quotes from The Idea of a University: ". . . if Literature is to be made a study of human nature, you cannot have a Christian Literature. It is a contradiction in terms to attempt a sinless Literature of a sinful man" (Why Write, p. 32). But even here, we feel, Greene would stretch the orthodox definition of sinfulness. In contrast to his remarks on spiritual realism, we get, in Why Do I Write?, this comment:

The very act of recreation for the novelist entails sympathy: the characters for whom he fails in sympathy have never been truly recreated. Propaganda is only concerned to elicit sympathy for the innocent, or those whom the propagandist likes to regard as

¹⁸Mauriac and Greene have agreed to disagree: Mauriac by concluding, simply, that he doesn't "like much of Greene's work" (Kenyon Review, p. 618) and Greene by concluding that he doesn't "see the resemblance [between them] that people talk about" (Shuttleworth and Raven, p. 161).

as innocent, and this he does at the expense of the guilty: he too poisons the wells. But the novelist's task is to draw his own likeness to any human being, the guilty as much as the innocent. Isn't our attitude to all our characters more or less - There, and may God forgive me, goes myself? (p. 48)

There is a note of humility in this that would be hard to detect in Mauriac; a sense that, as Greene said of Henry James, to treat corruption with justice, one must be conscious always of one's own treacherous instincts. Mauriac is aware of the dangers of imposing, God-like, judgements on his fictional creations. The novelist, he says in God and Mammon, should not draw "creatures who are sublime and angelic but not human . . . [but concentrate] on the wretched and human elements in their characters that sanctity allows to subsist" (p. 60). But, he concludes,

I give the last word to the . . . humblest priest [who] would tell me, like Maritain: "Be pure, become pure, and your work too will have a reflection in heaven. Begin by purifying the source and those who drink of the water cannot be sick . . .". (p. 63)

This is a far cry from Greene's "There, and may God forgive me, goes myself". One wishes only that Greene had had, especially in his essay on Mauriac, the sense to rejoice in the difference, and the confidence to let the truly Christian spirit of his personal faith stand on its own.

To sum up what might be called, crudely, Greene's religious phase, it is perhaps best to think of it as a time when he was still something of a fighting convert, at pains to justify his chosen creed and reluctant (or

unable) to treat his instincts with anything but timidity. As I have said, it was only with the help of his political obsession that Greene allowed his temperamental iconoclasm full rein; and as we look at this next stage in the development of his poetic, we should keep in mind two things: that Greene was edging closer, in the forties, to the kind of self-confidence that naturally accompanies personal and professional maturity, and that this self-confidence allowed - indeed, forced - him to expand his horizons beyond the morality of literature to the morality of life in general. That Greene took on, more and more, the role of a writer engagé, of a journalist with facts to uncover and biases to expose, shows, I think, that he was ready to put some of his borrowed convictions to the test, to see how they stood up to "reality" in a larger sense and to the lessons of cold, hard experience.

CHAPTER V

A WORLDLY POETIC

I said in my Introduction that Greene's faith reached a turning point in 1937. There were things happening, as he says in his Introduction to Brighton Rock, that seemed to make Catholicism no longer a symbolic-ritual, or a matter for philosophical debate, but something closer "to death in the afternoon" (ix). There was the nightmare world of pre-war England, the struggle going on in Spain - revolution and counter-revolution into which the Church was drawn inevitably, and, less close to home, the horrors of religious persecution in Mexico to which Greene was witness, first-hand. He set out for Mexico with the intention of examining the relationship of faith to politics; but the trip signalled the beginning of a pattern that was to affect his outlook in a rather unexpected way. He says, again in this Introduction, "A restlessness set in then which has never quite been allayed: a desire to be a spectator of history, history in which I found I was concerned myself" (ix). From that point on, his life was fashioned to satisfy this desire: Indochina, Kenya

Cuba, Haiti, Russia, Chile - the opportunities for involvement were endless, the varieties of borders to cross almost infinite. And Greene found, more and more, that a journalist's card was a ticket to exciting and dangerous ventures. To what point, now, were arguments for and against the existence of God? The emotional bond to his faith was born in Mexico, and it continued to support and comfort him; but the trip was a stimulant in a more general sense too, an enticement to explore a variety of foreign territories and to seek some ever new challenge.

If we look at Greene's "political" writings over the course of his career, we can see that they reflect his increasingly wide range of interest. In the thirties and during the war, he was, as a critic, a literary critic pretty well exclusively, and his political focus then was a characteristic one for writers and critics in general: to consider the role social consciousness ought to play in art. Day Lewis remarked in 1935 that "It is already becoming more evident to serious writers that the prevailing 'consciousness' of the times is a political consciousness, and this is increasingly manifest in their work".¹ In the same year W. H. Auden wrote, in a poem to Christopher Isherwood,

So in this hour of crisis and dismay,
What better than your strict and adult pen

¹"Controversy," Left Review, 1 (January 1935), 128.

Can warn us from the colours and the consolations . . .
Make action urgent and its nature clear?²

to which Isherwood had already responded, in an incidentally, if not deliberately political sense, with Mr. Morris Changes Trains. Greene himself, a year previous, had published It's A Battlefield: a novel intended to reflect the "violence and confusion" of English society at the time and the "injustice of men's justice" in a more general way.³ And his literary reviews and essays were very much permeated with the air of social responsibility. But the end of the war brought a change. It was possible, at last, for Greene to begin to satisfy his urge to be involved on a grander scale. His post-war writings were, increasingly, journalism for its own sake: records not of how politics affected - or should affect - art, or how politics affected faith, but how politics affected people. To a degree that was uncommon among writers whose talent had been nurtured on the revolutionary pre-war spirit, Greene's fascination with politics persisted. It turned out to be more than just a response to a particular set of circumstances; it turned out to be, really, an obsession, with roots going so far back as the border world of his childhood. To follow this development closely, it is helpful to put his writings into their two natural groupings: those written more or less from the point of

²Poem XXX ("August for the people and their favourite islands") in Look, Stranger! (London, 1936).

³Introduction to It's A Battlefield, ix.

view of a critic of art, and those written, ostensibly at any rate, from the point of view of a political journalist.

ART AND THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

It is possible to single out four issues with which Greene was preoccupied in the thirties, issues which attracted, as I have said, most writers at the time. These are: the subject of the Establishment (or, more precisely, the Edwardian attitudes of a social and literary nature entrenched still in most of England's institutions); the subject of aesthetic prose; the question of propaganda in art; and the nature of "popular" art. Greene hesitated not at all in deciding that the first of these, what he saw as hopelessly conservative values left over from generations past, must be the first to be dealt with. Preservation of the status quo, particularly one which was fast losing relevance in the light of extraordinary circumstances, clearly needed to be questioned as an objective - for artists or anyone else.

To this end, in 1934, Greene pulled together, edited, and contributed to a collection of essays by some of his contemporaries which he titled The Old School.⁴

⁴The Old School. Essays by Divers Hands, edited by Graham Greene (London, 1934). The other contributors to this volume were: W. H. Auden, H. E. Bates, Elizabeth Bowen, Arthur Calder-Marshall, L. P. Hartley, Harold Nicolson, Sean O'Faoláin, Anthony Powell, Stephen Spender, and Derek Verschoyle.

Greene's own pieces in The Old School have none of the bite that his later remarks on the subject were to have; but they do show the direction in which his social sympathies were beginning to move. In his Preface to the work, Greene described the collection as a memorial to the educational system of post-World War I, a system which was, he felt, bound to die. He went on to say that the system was doomed because it was too class-oriented and socially rigid. He objected to the main characteristic of the public school system, its snobbery; but, he argued, how could it be other than snobbish in the hands of masters who continued to uphold the social codes of pre-modern England? He offered an alternative: state-run enlargements of the old village schools which would force a mixing of sexes and classes. Any conservative biases conveyed by headmasters would then have to compete with the facts of life as they are learned first-hand, in the "field". It is a common-sensical kind of proposition, with no pretensions to educational expertise, but with a strong sense of the value of community spirit, of sharing the hard knocks of life with those who feel them most.

In The Old School there is nothing much stronger than a mild distaste for a system which had, after all, served Greene rather well from the point of view of academic training. (He is surprisingly easy on Berkhamsted School, remarking that it was unusually "progressive and innocent" - about sexual matters at least.) But in his literary criticism of the time, particularly in his remarks on English humour, this mild distaste is

transformed into a real repugnance to old-style conservatism. One of Greene's reviews, of Yvonne Cloud's Mediterranean Blues, is quite caustic on this point. Here Greene castigates the tone of such "humorists" as A. A. Milne and the writers of *Punch*; their humour, he feels, reeks of class-bias, a sense that they are in the right, that they are defending the "prevailing social codes from which it should be the function of humour temporarily to release us."⁵ He goes on to say:

The inferior humorist flatters his public, he laughs with them at what they do not understand, thus easing their self-distrust, but the material for this kind of humour changes with every generation. The material of the good humorist does not change. (p. 728)

Mediterranean Blues provides welcome relief. Its humour, he says, is "the only form of humour which does not date" because its target is individual - not class - idiosyncrasy; it gives "a sense of sudden release from the sexual taboo", a taboo which can hardly be said to be the rightful property of any given social group (p. 730).

It is interesting to note that Greene was to develop, later, his own alternative to disingenuous flattery: the practical joke. Those who know Greene personally testify to a joker streak in Greene, and to the fact that it is cultivated as a kind of weapon. Greene delights, as V. S. Pritchett tells us, in "risky pranks with a thrill in them. . . . He likes belonging to the opposition, to be the odd man out . . .

⁵"Fiction," Spectator, 5409 (November 1933), 728.

And to laugh. The world is too complacent. Let us catch it out."⁶ In 1939 Greene had justified this brand of humour rather bluntly in a short essay called "A Hoax on Mr. Hulton". Here he showed no sympathy for the victim (an elderly London printseller) of a clever but merciless practical joke. "Perhaps Hulton," he said, "by his careful prosperity, had aroused the same balked malice of men who sympathize with the defeated and despise the conqueror and dare do nothing but trivial mischief to assert their independence . . ." (Essays, p. 275). Shades of the revenge theme, perhaps, but as Greene had said in his discussion of Saki's cruelty, there is some justice in victimizing those with power.⁷ In his own play The Complaisant Lover, a sense of humour is the only weapon the cuckolded Victor has: but it is something, at least. The butt of Victor's jokes, the humourless lover Clive, says dryly: "jokes like this must be a compensation for something. When we are children

⁶"Graham Greene into the light," p. 7. Douglas Jerrold also gives evidence of this streak in Greene in his article "Graham Greene, Pleasure Hater," Harper's Magazine (August 1952), pp. 50-52. It is probably by now well-known that Greene has, at various times, won "parody" competitions sponsored by literary magazines - the subject for parody being, of course, Graham Greene.

⁷John Gross makes this interesting point in The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: "for many English left-wing intellectuals at the time the Revolution was not so much a practical proposition as a boy's own adventure, a way of revenging themselves on the Headmaster . . ." (p. 260). He is speaking of artists with definite party commitments - among whom Greene cannot be counted; but there is perhaps a spark of truth in the revenge charge so far as Greene is concerned.

we're powerless and these jokes make us feel superior to our dictators. But now we're grown up, there are no dictators . . .".⁸ That, of course, is where he is wrong.

The same sort of democratic instinct that causes Greene to take shots at the power bases of English society causes him to object to what he sees as an artistic manifestation of old-style complacency and snobbery: extreme aestheticism. In 1934 Greene wrote a long essay, "The Seed Cake and the Love Lady," in response to Charles Morgan's "A Defence of Story-Telling". The two appeared in consecutive issues of Life and Letters: it was as if Greene could not resist the opportunity presented by Morgan's doggedly old-fashioned stance to further the development of his new-found social conscience.⁹ Here Greene takes issue with Morgan's denigration of social consciousness in art, with his claim that art ought to be polished, refined: in other words, fashioned to appeal to a cultured élite. To be fair, Morgan's intent was to point out how foolish the popular cliché mentality was: an opinion with which Greene could not disagree entirely. Morgan objected to "the tendency of the human imagination . . . particularly in a modern world . . . to congeal" into uniform blandness, into mindless materialism (p. 397). But his alternative is

⁸London, 1959, p. 6.

⁹See Life and Letters, July 1934 (389-401) and August 1934 (517-524). Greene's argument is also made on technical grounds, of which I speak in Chapter VII.

"imaginative meditation" (p. 397), a resurgence of "romantic individualism" (p. 392); and in this regard he finds many - "particularly very young people, belonging generally to the political left" - shamelessly wanting (p. 392). Morgan believes that "man's happiness or unhappiness, his value of worthlessness, depends upon his private philosophy . . . [on] his secret imagination . . ." (p. 393). Therefore he will have no truck with art which aims to appease collective values. He says, with obvious disdain:

The catchword is social-consciousness. Social consciousness has been dragged in to do service as an aesthetic value. Truth and Beauty are considered to be old-fashioned tests in the estimate of a work of art, which must, to be regarded seriously, have a social revolutionary core. (p. 393)

Morgan's argument up to this point has a certain insight (one thinks of Day Lewis in the thirties and Solzhenitzyn today); but the lengths to which it leads him are really quite silly:

Story-telling and poetry . . . lead men to say that they would rather have written Gray's Elegy than take Quebec; they lead men to think that since eternity is long and youth short they would rather win their lady than the Bastille. Prisons, say the great story-tellers, are always rebuilt; ladies, unfortunately, are not. Prisons, say the story-tellers again, are not set up by a man's environment but by himself, by his fears, his hatreds, his jealousies, his weaknesses, and there is no escape from them except in his own contemplative wisdom or in the three great acts of transcendence - love, poetry, and death. (p. 393)

One can almost visualize Greene jumping for the bait, and justifiably so. Greene is not one to propound, as

he puts it, "the extreme social preoccupations of the latest Russian novelist" (p. 517); but neither is he one to extol the virtues of romantic abstraction. He claims that Morgan's universals - Truth, Beauty - are so subjective as to be meaningless as measures of artistic merit. But he objects primarily to Morgan's artistic ideal on the grounds that it is escapist, it will not recognize the poetic force which gives shape to the art of any age. He says:

Mr. Morgan's objection to the political consciousness of the modern novel (and one does not need to go so far as Countess Markievicz who wrote from prison, 'To-day life is politics . . . I can't invest my money without politics, buy clothes without politics', to feel that Mr. Morgan is an extreme admirer of the literature of escape) is equally an objection to the social consciousness of the eighteenth-century writer, to the religious consciousness of the Jacobins, to the moral consciousness of the Victorians. (pp. 523-524)

Of course, Greene goes on to say, not every age had the advantage of a profound "ruling passion"; but that does not excuse one from dealing with whatever driving force was there:

. . . in the days when politics meant the party manoeuvrings of Liberal and Conservative, of Free Trader and Protectionist, the ruling passion could hardly be concerned with something so superficial; but to remove the moral consciousness from the Victorian novel, which in effect the aesthetic novelist did, was to leave it weak indeed, as weak as a Jacobean play without its questionings on death and eternity. (p. 524)

Aesthetic novelists (Greene points his finger at Landor, Pater, George Moore) have only a decorative style to proffer in lieu of a social consciousness: ". . . it is

only natural that they should have tried to make a virtue of a defect and believed that they had, by merit of their style alone, the secret of 'lending wings to the imagination'" (p. 524). This style, as far as Greene is concerned, is no more truthful, no more tied to life as it is really lived, than the sloppy, sentimental, and hackneyed style of the popular romance.

Greene's opinions here are strongly felt. Perhaps he is remembering his own unhappy experience, in his first three published novels, with "romantic" and "pretentious" prose. That is how he came to describe The Name of Action and Rumour at Nightfall, at any rate, much later, when he wrote his Prefaces for the collected edition of his works. But in "The Seed Cake and the Love Lady" Greene is also aligning himself with the main critical tendency of the thirties to react against the intellectual and aesthetic excesses of the twenties in favour of an art which was more democratic and accessible. Michael Roberts, in his Preface to the influential (in its time) anthology New Signatures, had stressed, in 1932, the value of directness in art. "The poets in this book," he wrote, "represent a clear reaction against esoteric poetry in which it is necessary for the reader to catch each recondite allusion."¹⁰ He foresaw the possibility of writing "popular" poetry again, poetry which would "express [the poet's] newly-found attitude in terms of a symbolism which happens to be of exceptionally wide validity . . ." (p. 11). The

¹⁰London, 1932, p. 12.

same sort of distaste for obscure style and refined subject matter is apparent in many novelists of the time, too: Isherwood, the camera, recording "the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair";¹¹ or Orwell, in his documentary The Road to Wigan Pier showing the intelligentsia what it really meant to be working-class.

Of course, this new directness was taken up by many as a means to promote their own ideological causes: exceptionally wide validity, in stylistic terms, meant broadening the range of potential converts in political terms. For Greene, social consciousness in art did not go so far. He kept a clear head about where to draw the line between art and propaganda: not, at the time, an insignificant achievement. Auden had challenged the artist to "make action urgent and its nature clear", although he tempered this somewhat by saying, in a critical context,

Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.¹²

Nevertheless, much of the critical terminology evolved at the time was a reflection of his - and others' - attempts to realize this challenge artistically.

¹¹Goodbye to Berlin (London, 1940), p. 13.

¹²Introduction to The Poet's Tongue, An Anthology chosen by W. H. Auden and John Garrett (London, 1935).

"Reportage", "documentary", and "propaganda" were now seen as relevant literary terms, and "the authority of sheer fact", as Samuel Hynes puts it, argued for a place alongside "the authority of the imagination".¹³ Greene accepted the authority of sheer fact: "Literature," he wrote, "is always the best propaganda because literature is accurate".¹⁴ But he would not accept that propaganda should have any place in art. The right province of art is human nature, and the right vehicle is the imagination. "The novel of ideas," he said, "always seems to mean a novel of rather dull ideas . . . ideas which may be excellent for an essayist have not the intensity of suggestion that the novel demands".¹⁵ Or again: "the theme of a story should never be expressed so plainly [as a propagandist opinion]; argument is valueless in fiction unless it is dramatic and individualized" (Pleasure-Dome, p. 240). And if he had shown in his own novel, It's A Battlefield, that his imaginative world could not help but be conditioned by the social realities of the time, he had shown, too, that there were no easy answers, no pat ideological solutions to the problems then facing individuals and society.

So far Greene had established what, for him, social consciousness in art was not: it was not a re-working

¹³The Auden Generation (London, 1976), p. 208.

¹⁴"Domestic War," Spectator, 5883 (March 1941), 350.

¹⁵"Fiction," Spectator, 5545 (October 1934), 498.

of an old value system, a dressing-up of established patterns of thought and conduct to suit a new age. Nor was it a retreat into abstract contemplation of tired, meaningless "universals": Love, Death, Beauty, Truth - to what point in the crazy real world of "purposeless suffering"? (Pleasure-Dome, p. 53). And, finally, it was not an insistence on platform ideals, an appeal to party affiliation in the name of freedom, justice - whatever. Those enticements sounded too much like the hollow promises of honour and glory in the name of patriotism that had been proffered to an unfortunate generation only twenty years before. The thirties generation spoke of "popular" art, art that recognized its audience for what it was and appealed to it on its own terms. But how far was this possible: how far sacrifice artistic integrity for the sake of community spirit? On this subject Greene was particularly loquacious and adept by virtue of his own "popular" tendencies as an artist. He had no high opinion of popular art as it was: a vulgar counterpart to sloppy aestheticism. But he did foresee (after some initial squeamishness) the possibility of a good popular art, and devoted much effort and space to working out just what form that might take.

Remember that in 1933 Greene had set very narrow limits for art: no excitement, no sentimentalism, only "the truth as honestly as possible". In 1937, in an article on the theme "Reaching the Public", he is more circumspect, willing to see a compromise between serious

art and entertainment. He still, in this article, laments the fact that popular art - especially the cinema - has reduced popular taste to a craving for "the conflict - in terms of sub-machine guns - between the plainest Good and the plainest Evil".¹⁶ But, he asks, can't one inject into such art some aesthetic sense without losing popular appeal? Must the artistic conscience be synonymous with social and intellectual élitism, and must the social conscience reduce to a concept of the "huge amorphous mass" (p. 894)? Surely, he says, popularity could be directed successfully toward a kind of "trench kinship" with a "selected public," rather than attempt to appeal to the lowest common denominator (p. 894). To some extent Greene's proposition here owes something to his increasing easiness with his own love of melodrama. In 1936 he objected to a "didactic note . . . in a film which promises to be peculiarly carefree and irrational" (Pleasure-Dome, p. 76). In 1938 he admitted his vulnerability to what the cinema does so well: appeal to "the fallible human heart . . . that great soft organ with its unreliable goodness and easy melancholy and baseless optimism" (Pleasure-Dome, p. 204). But these concessions were partly, too, a recognition of the film's potential, as a popular art form, to reach a wide public with something more than baseless optimism. By 1939 Greene was ready to argue that if it were to embrace a social consciousness, the cinema could use its wide appeal as a

¹⁶"Ideas in the Cinema," Spectator, 5708 (November 1937), 894.

lever for truth. It is wrong, he said then, "to despise popularity in the cinema - popularity there is a value . . ." (Pleasure-Dome, p. 228).

Just as Greene had arrived at this position, war broke out, and suddenly "social consciousness" was not so much something to be defined, debated, given rhetorical substance, as something to be accepted as a fact of life. The populace was mobilized and popular sentiment found its own voice. Greene reacted by pushing his view that popular art had latent affiliations with social consciousness to its logical extreme: to the point of insisting that aestheticism is especially irrelevant, even tasteless, at a time of national crisis. "This is a people's war," he wrote in September, 1939, in a review of news films; "we don't want the old commentators, with their timid patronizing jokes . . . America is more likely to listen to the rough unprepared words of a Mrs. Jarvis, of Penge, faced with evacuation, blackouts, a broken home, than to the smooth-handled phrases of personalities" (Pleasure-Dome, p. 243). In 1940 he reviewed J. B. Priestley's Postscripts and said that Priestley's merits as a novelist are questionable but that his war-time broadcasts are so astute and moving as to make literary standards irrelevant. He wrote: "There were many of us who, before war made such disagreements seem trivial, regarded Mr. Priestley with some venom".¹⁷ Now,

¹⁷"A Lost Leader," Spectator, 5868 (December 1940), 646. Just over a year previous Greene had reviewed Priestley's Let The People Sing and remarked: "It is a confession of failure when an author has to point out in so many words the moral of his story". (Spectator, 5811, November 1939, 662.)

he felt, Priestley must be seen on a plane with Churchill: both are "great" men in as much as they helped to provide England at war with an ideology. And then, two months later, Greene made the point most emphatically:

The popular writer in war-time - or at any period of social convulsion - comes into his own. He knows how to speak to people who are not interested in aesthetic problems; nobody will waste his time analysing the literary qualities of Uncle Tom's Cabin - the book belongs to history and not to literature.¹⁸

Greene's "popular" argument in the war period was not directed at the artistic conscience only: the war seemed to justify, for him, the revolutionary social spirit of the pre-war years. Greene said, in 1940, that reading such novels of the Edwardian rich as Osbert Sitwell's Two Generations and F. Compton Mackenzie's More Than I Should "makes one more reconciled to the cement floor [of the bomb shelter]: this [war] had to happen".¹⁹ In the same year his essay "At Home" appeared, and it too had the unmistakable ring of "I told you so". "Violence comes to us more easily," he wrote, "because it was so long expected - not only by the political sense but by the moral sense. The world we lived in could not have ended any other way" (Essays, p. 447). One feels "at home" in bombed London "because life there is what it ought to be. If a cracked cup is put in boiling water it breaks, and an old dog-toothed civilization is breaking

¹⁸"Through American Eyes," Spectator, 5879 (February 1941),

¹⁹²³⁴"Escape," Spectator, 5858 (October 1940), 344.

now" (Essays, p. 450). Finally, in 1942, Greene wrote his most complete statement of the point he had begun to work toward, tentatively, in The Old School: that to evade the realities of common life, to cling blindly to the notion that privilege means truth or integrity or propriety, is to sign the death warrant of a society, socially, morally, and artistically. This full-scale indictment appeared in British Dramatists: Greene seemed to find the world of English theatre a subject particularly suited to his purpose.

I have said that in British Dramatists Greene finds little of value, in terms of legendary art, after Shakespeare and the Jacobean playwrights. The sense of known life he found so pleasingly combined, in Shakespeare, with abstract idea was lost with the Restoration: from that point on the public or common life was either ridiculed or simply ignored. When plays returned after the demise of the Puritan rule, Greene says, they returned - at first - as private, "drawing-room" entertainments (p. 26); but even when public theatres eventually opened their doors, the private aura held sway. The first successful public play, Tuke's The Adventures of Five Hours, was successful only with the court; "the poor, in the theatrical eye, did not exist, and when the bourgeois began reluctantly to enter the playhouse it was to see himself mocked, for he was now of the losing party . . ." (p. 27). He goes on to compare Jonson's Bartholomew Fair with Shadwell's Epsom Wells: Jonson, he says, "was writing about human nature for a public

as wide as his subject: the Restoration dramatist with his infinitely more graceful instrument was fashioning an amusing bijou for the drawing-room - a witty and scandalous joke against an unpopular and rather stupid neighbour" (p. 28). Of course, the influence of popular taste would not be held off for long; by the time of Sheridan and Goldsmith the "bourgeois, who had been the butt of the theatre, ruled the stalls and boxes: respectability must be the hero now . . ." (p. 34). But if this is a reflection of a growing kinship between playwright and audience, Greene says, it is also a reflection of the bland, conventional idiom of what was becoming the new ruling class - the bourgeoisie. Whatever political and economic pitfalls pre-Cromwellian monarchical England had, the passion, vitality, and communal sense of its bear-baiting mob was preferable, in Greene's view, to the gray, complacent, and conventional flavour of the new "aristocracy". And if the bourgeoisie were excluded from the private entertainments of the early Restoration period, they had their revenge - at the expense of the poor - in a very short time. That revenge, according to Greene, is still extant and is what characterizes English theatre even now.

In his closing remarks in British Dramatists, Greene speaks of the contemporary situation and brings in a comparison with American theatre: ". . . over here we write perhaps just as many good plays, but in New York they have a good audience. There is in the air an interest, an excitement - at any moment, you feel, the great dramatist may appear again because the audience

is ready to receive him" (p. 46). In England there is a kind of spectator apathy; "theatre-going [is] the privilege of an economic class and of middle age" (p. 46). This indifference to "living art" Greene goes on to say, "has been the indifference of a class, of the well-to-do and the professional man cut to pattern by his education" (p. 47). But there is hope, he concludes, - and here is the war-time perspective - because "Now we are heading either for chaos of such long duration that the theatre will not survive our civilization, or a world so new and changed it may well be that in the theatre it will seem as though Elizabeth were on the throne again" (p. 47).²⁰

For the arts there was neither death nor a second renaissance after the war, no immediate changes, at least, while England addressed herself to the slow, tedious job of recuperating and rebuilding. Greene, too, now found himself settling into a period of recovery, of taking stock, and of reassessing opinions which, under the strain of war, had seemed to require urgent and passionate expression. He took time to evaluate what

²⁰ It is interesting that the theatre critic Clive Barnes, writing in 1978, should make the same observation, even though the British theatre had undergone a revolution along the lines Greene had hoped it would. Barnes says: "I . . . find myself wondering how interested Britain is in the theatre. In New York a theatre strike sends half the town into mourning, shows are discussed at every level and there is not a newspaper or television station in the city that does not lavish space or time on theatrical reviews and news." (See The Sunday Times Magazine, 26 November 1978, p. 37.)

had amounted to a special pleading, in war-time, for an art form that would reflect the national crisis - even generate chauvinistic sentiment. (In 1940 he even went so far, apparently, as to propose to the Ministry of Information a scheme whereby he and fellow artists - Evelyn Waugh among them - would act as official writers for the war effort.²¹) But now he had the benefit of knowing something about the bureaucratic machinery that had, for most people during the war, been a symbol of salvation from the Nazi horror. The "great" political figures, whose appeals to patriotism Greene had praised, he could now put into perspective, having had a taste of the real, dispassionate manner in which they kept their human cogs in smooth working order. Greene's term of service for the Foreign Office in Africa had taken him away from the rhetorical force which spurred on the war effort at home and had opened his eyes to the monstrous power the State had over individual lives. It was a sobering experience.

In 1948 Greene was ready to pull together the bits and pieces of his experience over the previous fifteen years and to make a statement of the position he now found himself in. He chose to make this statement in the letter format of Why Do I Write?: a format he and his correspondents (V. S. Pritchett and Elizabeth Bowen) chose deliberately as an informal, spontaneous way of

²¹See Christopher Sykes, A Biography of Evelyn Waugh (London, 1975), pp. 205, 235.

expressing their respective views. It was not to be, as it might have been in the thirties, a manifesto. It was, as V. S. Pritchett says, an attempt to "avoid the sterility of debate, the banalities of taking sides" (p. 10). It was a form that suited Greene's new sense of the value of considered dissent, for one of the points he wished to make was that the artist should use whatever means he has at his disposal to assert his independence of the State. He says, for example:

The kindness of the State, the State's interest in art, is far more dangerous than its indifference. We have seen how in time of war there is always some well-meaning patron who will suggest that artists should be in a reserved class. But how, at the end of six years of popular agony, would the artist be regarded if he had been reserved, kept safe and fattened at the public expense, too good to die like other men? And what would have been expected of him in return? In Russia the artist has belonged to a privileged class: he has been given a better flat, more money, more food, even a certain freedom of movement: but the State has asked in return that he should cease to be an artist. (pp. 30-31)

Greene is careful, then, to point out that we in the West must not pride ourselves on being immune to bribery in the guise of privilege. "The bourgeois state, too," he says, "has its gifts to offer . . . One thinks of the literary knights, and then one turns to the plain tombstones with their bare hic jacets of Mr. Hardy, Mr. James and Mr. Yeats" (p. 31). The circle of appeals to loyalty is ever-widening: from the political state, through one's religious group, to one's occupational ties. All entice the artist more and more away from the only loyalty he ought to retain - loyalty to his "fellow

human beings" (p. 31). It is too easy to fall victim to one form of loyalty or another; if artists "don't become loyal to a Church or a country," Greene says, "they are too apt to become loyal to some invented ideology of their own, until they are praised for consistency, for a unified view" (p. 47). Only a kind of detachment permits a clear view; and for Greene this view is one which embraces all varieties of human nature:

If we can awaken sympathetic comprehension in our readers, not only for our most evil characters (that is easy: there is a cord there fastened to all hearts that we can twitch at will), but of our smug, complacent, successful characters, we have surely succeeded in making the work of the State a degree more difficult - and that is a genuine duty we owe society, to be a piece of grit in the State machinery. (p. 48)

To be a piece of grit in the State machinery: this is the goal Greene appears to have set for himself from this point on. But he did not stop at England: restlessness, the excitement of politics, a journalist's instinct, all lead him to examine the working of other states, to be an active international agent for the principle of disloyalty. More and more Greene's social conscience began to centre on political, not artistic questions, and more and more his journalism and his novels took on a worldly air. With The End of the Affair Greene quit for a time the domestic situation of post-war England and found new fronts for his campaign. In The Quiet American we get his picture of Indochina under the yoke of the American military machine; in Our Man in Havana, farcical espionage in the real-life terrors of

pre-revolution Cuba; in The Comedians, Papa Doc's Haiti; and in The Honorary Consul, a pitiable band of revolutionaries mimicking the methods of South American power politics. All these were manifestations of Greene's commitment to the struggle of individuals against the State, be it frankly totalitarian or totalitarian under the name of "democracy". But, curiously, as Greene's field widened, as the physical trappings and ideological issues contained in his writings became more varied, the convictions which lay behind the effort seemed more and more to hark back to Greene's private world. It was a private world somewhat transformed, to be sure: betrayal was now disloyalty, despair now a healthy uneasy conscience, revenge now directed justly at those who torture fellow human beings physically as well as emotionally. But it was, still, a world in which the salient feature was the divided mind: the divided mind confirmed, justified, and mastered.

POLITICS AND THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

Looking over Greene's "political" pieces from the post-war period on, one would find it difficult to describe Greene as an expert political commentator in the pure sense; he is no historian, pundit, or political philosopher. His journalism is journalism with a slant, not, like Fowler's in The Quiet American, reportage. "I wrote what I saw," says Fowler; "I took no action - even an opinion is a kind of action" (p. 22). For Greene

the journalist's duty, like the artist's, is to challenge; and to do that, he must take a stand. Greene set out to be a piece of grit, to be not only a living example of the divided mind but also an outspoken champion of it. And so vigorously did he exercise the right to be disloyal that his commentaries very often seem apologies - for "the other side". But his apologies are tools only, paradoxes - rather like his saintly sinner - used for effect, to startle us out of our complacency.

A good example of this is his "Letter to a West German Friend," published originally in the New Stateman. He speaks of the fascination a frontier holds, a fascination which, like the mystique of religious faith, challenges one to relinquish all the convictions one has become accustomed to cherish. Referring to the Berlin Wall, he says:

To take the few steps beyond Checkpoint Charlie can be compared with the acceptance of the last difficult dogma - say the infallibility of the Pope. There are moments when the possible convert is in a state of rebellion; he can see the wall and nothing but the wall. There are moments when he will gladly stretch his faith to the furthest limits. Perhaps there is always one moment when he shuts his eyes and walks into the wide ruined spaces beyond the checkpoint. He looks back, over his shoulder and the dogma has suddenly changed. What had been a threat can even appear like a protection . . . (Portable, p. 601)²²

²²It is worth noting Stratford's remark in his Preface to the section titled "Commitments" in this collection: "The title and design of this section are Greene's idea. Instead of the usual "Letters and Essays" he wanted something more pointed, something that would reflect his current concern for repressed and miserable countries and people, and his hatred of injustices and intolerance" (p. 582).

Greene crossed the frontier and came back with impressions that would indeed challenge Western notions of Communist Berlin. He says: "when I passed Checkpoint Charlie returning west, I felt as if I were leaving something simple behind me and coming out again into the complex world of Bonn" (p. 602). He admits there have been "scandals on the other side"; "but they have been ruthlessly cured: the sore does not continue to run there indefinitely. In West Germany one hesitates to probe the past of any man in his fifties or sixties. I felt no such hesitation in the East" (p. 602). There is no doubt that this is a somewhat naive view, in political terms. The simplicity, one might even say the innocence, Greene finds in East Berlin is perhaps similar to the primitive quality he found in Liberia: it has far more to do with an imaginative vision than with a factual situation. Still, as Greene would argue, there ought to be some room for vision, for simple ideals, in politics.

The note of apology, and of challenge, is evident too in Greene's essay on Kim Philby, "The Spy".²³ Here again there is a paradox, for Greene admires Philby's loyalty to an ideology because it implies disloyalty to his own culturally ingrained viewpoint. Speaking of My Silent War, Greene says:

²³This essay appears in the Collected Essays but was written, in a slightly shorter version, as an Introduction to Philby's My Silent War (1968).

We were told to expect a lot of propaganda, but it contains none, unless a dignified statement of his beliefs and motives can be called propaganda. The end, of course, in his eyes is held to justify the means, but this is a view taken, perhaps less openly, by most men involved in politics, if we are to judge them by their actions, whether the politician be a Disraeli or a Wilson.
(Essays, p. 415)

Because the divided mind, or in Philby's case the betraying mind, is itself a kind of virtue, the varieties of bias it surveys have no place in an ethical hierarchy:

. . . moral judgements are singularly out of place in espionage. 'He sent men to their death' is the kind of stock phrase which has been used against Philby and Blake. So does any military commander, but at least the cannon fodder of the espionage war are all volunteers. One cannot reasonably weep at the fate of the defecting spy Volkov, who was betraying his country for motives perhaps less idealist than Philby's. (p. 415)

Greene had made a similar argument in Brighton Rock, though the point, when applied to religion, could be made only if this moral vacuum were compensated for by metaphysical absolutes. But the argument is rather more convincing now, in this context; it is as if Greene felt none of the pressure to conform in a political scheme that he felt in his adopted religious system. Interestingly, as Greene goes on to give a personal reason for interest in the Philby affair, he emphasizes - almost wistfully - his admiration for a belief strongly held:

I saw the beginning of this affair - indeed I resigned rather than accept the promotion which was one tiny cog in the machinery of his intrigue. I attributed it then to a personal drive for power, the only characteristic in Philby which I thought disagreeable.

I am glad now that I was wrong. He was serving a cause and not himself, and so my old liking for him comes back
(p. 418)

It is interesting, too, if we remember Greene's respect for Mauriac, that Greene balked at the rigidity of Mauriac's moral scruples. In Philby Greene seems to have found a satisfactory combination of acquiescence to collective ideals and fidelity to individual integrity.

In 1969, one year after Greene wrote "The Spy", he was awarded the Shakespeare Prize by the University of Hamburg. His acceptance address he titled "The Virtue of Disloyalty". He used the occasion to restate the theme he had formulated in Why Do I Write?, but also to give it a new, bold twist. He took a direct hit at one of the most sacrosanct of English institutions, the epitome, as he says, of the instinct to be loyal: Shakespeare. "Surely if there is one supreme poet of conservatism," he says, "of what we now call the Establishment, it is Shakespeare" (Portable, p. 606). In the history plays, Shakespeare began with Henry VI and "then worked backwards, receding from the dangerous present, the England of plots and persecutions, into the safer past" (p. 606). Greene admits that Shakespeare is "the greatest of all poets," but he goes on to say,

. . . we who live in times just as troubled as his, times full of the deaths of tyrants, a time of secret agents, assassinations and plots and torture chambers, sometimes feel ourselves more at home with the sulphurous anger of Dante, the self-disgust of Baudelaire and the blasphemies of Villon, poets who dared to reveal themselves whatever the danger . . .
(p. 607)

There was a hint of sacrilege, a "note of outrage" in the later plays, Timon of Athens and The Tempest - enough to make us hope that if Shakespeare had lived longer

. . . we could have seen the great poet of the Establishment defect to the side of the disloyal, to the side of the poet Southwell disembowelled for so-called treason, to the side of those who by the very nature of their calling will always be "troublers of the poor world's peace" - Zola writing J'accuse, Dostoevsky before a firing squad, Victor Hugo following Dante into exile, the Russian writers in their labour camps. (p. 608)

Shakespeare's real tragedy, Greene concludes, was his own: "the blind eye exchanged for the coat of arms, the prudent tongue for the friendships at Court and the great house at Stratford" (p. 610).

Here again Greene falls heavily - rather too heavily in this case - on the other side to drive home his point. But again we must take his desire to jangle our complacent nerves with a grain of salt. In Why Do I Write? Greene had given a fairer estimate of Shakespeare's contribution to the cause of disloyalty. He had said then:

In the days of the totalitarian monarchy, when a sovereign slept uneasily with the memories of Wyatt, Norfolk, Essex, in his dreams, it was an act of justice to trace the true source of action in Macbeth, the murderer of his king, and Shakespeare's play has for all time altered our conception of the usurper. If at times we are able to feel sympathy for Hitler, isn't it because we have seen the woods of Dunsinane converging on the underground chambers of Chancellory? (p. 47)

However complacent Greene finds Shakespeare's rhetorical appeals to patriotism and smugness (he singles out John of Gaunt's "England" speech), he is clearly sensitive to the ironic variations Shakespeare plays on the kingly theme, to the question of misplaced loyalties. His treatment of Shakespeare in "The Virtue of Disloyalty" is inconsistent; but his intent is to blaspheme and to rankle, even at the risk of overstepping the mark. Here he seems quite deliberately to be stimulating, exciting: forcing us to react.

So many of Greene's later writings are exercises in calculated dissent, though not all seem so stridently to assert the value of disloyalty for its own sake. There are other pieces, of a more orthodox journalistic sort, in which he concentrates on the real purpose of disloyalty: to defend the individual against any form of institutional oppression. Those who need such support, of course, are those who are without the resources - material, mental or emotional - to defend themselves: the poor or the meek, the common people. It is not surprising that Greene respects the philosophy and the ideals of Communism (though certainly not the methods); just as it is not surprising that he respects the humane objectives of the Church (though not its rigid doctrine). In 1966 Greene interviewed Fidel Castro - the "Marxist Heretic", as he calls him admiringly - and proposed to him that Catholicism and Communism might, to advantage, join forces in the fight for individual justice. The brand of Communism he had in mind, of course, was Castro's:

an "empirical" Marxism, played "by ear and not by book" (Essays, p. 410). And the kind of Catholicism he had in mind was a very liberal one. Fidel, he says, had no desire to prevent such a union; the "enemies of the Church in Cuba," Greene says, "are not the Communist leaders: they are Cardinal Spellman and Bishop Fulton Sheen, those doughty champions of cold war and counter-revolution, churchmen for whom Pope John XXIII seems to have lived in vain" (p. 411). Greene likened the atmosphere of Fidel's Cuba to an "Athenian forum": the people were "consulted, informed, confided in" and the leaders always present, mingling, ready to listen" (p. 411). It was a kind of political heaven, Greene might have said, aspiring to the sort of trust and compassion of which the Church, or the true spirit of the Church, is capable.

Ten years before his meeting with Castro, Greene had interviewed Ho Chi Minh: "Un homme pur comme Lucifer," as he was described to Greene - in terms which Greene must have relished (Essays, p. 402). Ho Chi Minh was a heretic of sorts, too, a heretic to the outward, political form of Communism as distinct from the original philosophy of the cause. In his account of this meeting, as in the piece on Castro, Greene linked an ideal Communism with an ideal Catholicism. He says of Ho Chi Minh: "this was a man who gave orders and expected obedience"; but he also gave and expected love (p. 402). His people enjoyed a privilege which few Western eyes

would care to perceive as possible. Greene says:

We talk so glibly of the threat to the individual, but the anonymous peasant has never been treated so like an individual before. Unless a priest, no one before the Commissar has approached him, has troubled to ask him questions, or spent time in teaching him. There is something in Communism besides the politics. (p. 404)

Ho Chi Minh's counterpart in Saigon, President Diem, presented an unhappy contrast; he "is separated from the people by cardinals and police cars with wailing sirens and foreign advisers droning of global strategy, when he should be walking in the rice-fields unprotected, learning the hard way how to be loved and obeyed . . ." (p. 404). Greene could not accept the "rules" of Ho Chi Minh's Communism, but neither could he accept the particular brand of Catholicism and "democracy" to which Diem was faithful:

One pictured him there in the Norodom Palace, sitting with his blank, brown gaze, incorruptible, obstinate, ill-advised, going to his weekly confession, bolstered up by his belief that God is always on the Catholic side, waiting for a miracle. The name I would write under his portrait is the Patriot Ruined by the West. (p. 404)

Greene is very hard on America, here and in his Indochina novel, The Quiet American. He is so mainly, I think, because he sees America as the self-appointed keeper of Western "chastity" and the epitome of Western complacency. And he is right, of course, to cast a suspicious eye on American intrigues in South America and Cuba, and to condemn outright the American effort in South East Asia. It is only by arming ourselves with

irreverence, by not hesitating to question the sanctity of our cherished icons, that we, as individuals, stand a chance to survive with any sort of decency intact. A moral view of politics, so politicians and political scientists would say, is hopelessly naive; but as Greene would say, should not we, the cannon fodder, be granted at least some gesture of protest as we go to the rice field, the little grey government office, to the war front, or to the torture chamber?

* * * * *

How can we best summarize Greene's political obsession; how can we best tie together the various bits of experience and lines of thought which led Greene to a more or less settled attitude? Philby, the spy who betrayed his country, Shakespeare the poet of the Establishment, Castro and Ho Chi Minh - pseudo-priests, father-confessors, Communists with an unusual fidelity to the humanitarian ideal: all are public figures, with established reputations, whom Greene has used to carve out a personal response to human nature at large. It is significant, I think, that in his most recent novel, The Human Factor, Greene has come close to giving a comprehensive statement about the various themes we have surveyed: the associations of childhood, religious faith, political expedience, and the humanistic ideal. Perhaps we could do no better, for summary, than to consider this novel; for if it is his last, major full-length work of fiction (though one hopes not), it deserves

the attention it will thus receive from future generations.

The Human Factor, perhaps more than any of Greene's novels excepting The Quiet American, is stylistically simple, economical, and dry. Its tone is one of detachment; it gives the impression of consummate craftsmanship. And yet, for all that, the obsessions still lie, naked and unashamed, just below the surface. Here, for example, is how the main character, Maurice Castle, thinks of Berkhamsted Common, the secret fortress of his childhood days: "How many guerrilla campaigns he had fought there as a child against overwhelming odds."²⁴ Castle has returned to his native town, as an adult, and with the knowledge that his boyish fears were all too valid: ". . . the days of the guerrilla had returned, day-dreams had become realities. Living thus with the long-familiar he felt the security that an old lag feels when he goes back to the prison he knows" (p. 20). But Castle, the adult, has a distinct advantage over the boy he used to be, the child who had to invent a magical dragon to protect his from the enemy: he is a double agent, serving in name only his MI5 superiors and faithful for purely personal reasons to the Russian state.

To trace the process by which Castle arrives at this position is to watch Greene considering and discarding, one by one, the various attitudes which he

²⁴London, 1978, p. 20.

himself had experienced over his lifetime, rather as one peels off, layer by layer, the skin of an onion. There is, for example, the old "African fixation", a theme he treats a little nostalgically but on the whole with political pragmatism. There is a romantic tinge to his South African hatchet-man, Cornelius Muller, who is stereotypically evil: evil, that is, in a pure sense, as an idea and not as a psychological possibility. But his portraits of the civilized, "cerebral" types, particularly those of the MI5 establishment, are rather more convincing. It is as if Greene's familiarity with those who are "on our side" as it were prevents his treating them with abstract abandon. In fact, these men, with their false joviality, their smug sense of superiority, their murderous deceptions, are all the more evil for being familiar, home-grown, defenders of the national interest.

Greene is perhaps conscious of the lingering legacy of the black-and-white world of Journey Without Maps, for he attributes the African fixation, with some irony, to Castle's MI5 chief, "C". "C" speaks to Castle of the need to ostensibly support the Americans' "realistic" policy toward South Africa, all the while making it clear that he himself cannot agree with it.

He says:

. . . realism never got anyone very far in the kind of Africa I used to know. My Africa was a sentimental Africa . . . chiefs and witch doctors and bush schools and devils and rain queens . . . like the Africa of Rider Haggard. (p. 65)

It is ironic, too, that "C" should exhort Castle to follow the pragmatic American line. For Castle, Africa meant only BOSS; he had already, a long time since, sorted out its political realities and determined on a course of action that, to him personally, was the ultimate in pragmatism: to get his South African wife Sarah and her child out of the country, and to ally himself with Russia in order to make this possible.

In his treatment of religion, from Castle's point of view, Greene is similarly cynical. The Church of England, not surprisingly, is still hearty, complacent, and easy. Castle, lying in bed, relives his experience that day of Sunday worship: "He remembered the bourgeois voices, as sedate as the owners in their Sunday clothes, singing in the flinty church, expressing their weekly moment of belief" (p. 72). But there is no more comfort to be found in the Catholic creed. At one point Castle feels the need to confess, to anyone, and by chance comes upon a Catholic Church in which a priest is hearing confession:

Castle said, 'I want to talk to you.'
'What are you standing there for like that?' the profile said. 'Have you lost the use of your knees?'
'I only want to talk to you,' Castle said.
'You aren't here to talk to me,' the profile said. There was a chink-chink-chink. The man had a rosary in his lap and seemed to be using it like a chain of worry beads. 'You are here to talk to God. . . . You are wasting my time.'
(pp. 233-234)

Castle's confessor-substitute turns out to be his control, Boris; and it is interesting that Greene's description

of this confession is reminiscent of his own sessions with Kenneth Richmond. With Boris, Castle "felt the enormous relief of speaking without prudence to someone who, he believed, understood him. The blue eyes seemed to offer complete friendship, the smile encouraged him to lay down for a short time the burden of secrecy" (p. 151). He leaves the meeting, like "a manic depressive," feeling that he "had had his outbreak, the recurrent boil had broken, and he felt a relief he never felt elsewhere" (p. 154).

But even this affiliation falls short of substituting for faith. Castle's intimacy with Boris is based on Boris's goodness as an individual, not on what he stands for as a representative of Communism. "I give you all the information you want in my section," Castle tells Boris; "I've never pretended that I share your faith - I'll never be a Communist" (p. 153). When Castle made the decision to "go over" to the enemy camp, he was motivated then, too, by a sense of loyalty to an individual: to Carson, a Communist agent who arranged for Sarah's escape. Castle says to Sarah:

'Perhaps I was born to be a half believer. When people talk about Prague and Budapest and how you can't find a human face in Communism I stay silent. Because I've seen - once - the human face. I say to myself that if it hadn't been for Carson Sam would have been born in a prison and you would probably have died in one. One kind of Communism - or Communist - saved you and Sam. I don't have any trust in Marx or Lenin any more than I have in Saint Paul, but haven't I the right to be grateful?' (p. 135)

If Castle has a faith at all; it is a very tenuous one, directed at an elusive hope of emotional salvation. One night he lay awake until Sarah was safely asleep,

Then he allowed himself to strike, like his childhood hero Allan Quatermain, off on that long slow underground stream which bore him on towards the interior of the dark continent where he hoped that he might find a permanent home, in a city where he could be accepted as a citizen, as a citizen without any pledge of faith, not the City of God or Marx, but the city called Peace of Mind. (p. 161)

Knowing, of course, what the dark continent really holds, Castle knows too that he will never find "Peace of Mind". But he at least, in the final event, is sure in his conviction that individual integrity is worthwhile, is perhaps the only worthwhile standard of conduct by which one ought to live in a world that seems calculated to destroy it at all costs. When Castle is forced to escape to Moscow, the verdict of his countrymen is the same verdict levelled at Greene's heroes of disloyalty - Zola, Dostoevsky, Philby: "'He's a traitor to his country'" (p. 338). But to Castle, and to his wife, the divided mind has at least one virtue. "'Oh, his country,'" Sarah says in despair at all the easy clichés which go to form a judgement; "'He said once that I was his country - and Sam'" (p. 338).

The overall impression one gets from The Human Factor is that it is the fullest, the most balanced, expression of Greene's life-view. This has a lot to do

with the fact that it encompasses all the major themes he has dealt with, in his fiction and non-fiction alike, over his career. Even the setting, as I have said, seems to indicate that Greene was at last prepared to go full circle to face the primary symbols which shaped his outlook from so early on: symbols and associations which were, naturally, painful to expose to public view. But the effect of the book has something to do with an entirely different aspect of his development, one which I have scarcely mentioned so far. This is, of course, his technical evolution; and as we shall see, Greene has quite as much to say, critically, about artistic technique as he does about subject matter and poetic content. As we look at this side of his work, we will be reminded, again and again, of points that have been developed here: of his obsessions, to put it simply. And what this will demonstrate is not that his obsessions quite overwhelm any of his other concerns, but that both lines of interest - content and form - demand the same amount of attention, so far as Greene's character as a writer is concerned.

CHAPTER VI

LIFE INTO ART

We have a good idea, now, of what Greene has in mind when he speaks of "truthfulness" in art. Pared down to its simplest form it means accuracy of perception and sincerity of emotion: two quite common standards in tests of literary excellence. It is easy to see, though - and Greene's remarks prove it - how much room there is for personal taste and interpretation in judging "truthfulness". One could debate almost endlessly how far any given writer's representation of life measures up to this standard: how far, say, Jane Austen's portraits of eighteenth-century maidenhood, or Joyce's vision of Dublin's Nighttown, or Greene's picture of colonial Africa, fit a definition which is, after all, pretty fluid. But in one sense the debate is purely academic and has very little to do with the question of whether or not we are actually persuaded by, or drawn into, the "realities" presented to us in fiction. For it is one of the pleasures of fiction that it deludes, that it entices us to believe, temporarily, in characters and events which in real life might appear

fantastical. One doesn't put down C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia or Greene's Travels With My Aunt with the impatient remark: "But that sort of thing never happens in real life!" To be sure, even the most improbable of stories has, if it is good, some connection with the facts of life as we know them. But fiction is still fiction, and it is one of the artist's functions to make us forget that fact. He is something of a conjurer. He will tempt us to believe in his illusion, in the pretence of his story; and once he succeeds in this he can aim to impress us with whatever serious or "truthful" insights he has to offer.

Let us listen for a moment to the opening "speech" of a character Greene once toyed with as the narrator of The Heart of the Matter. This character, of course, never came to be; he existed only in a rough first draft of the opening sequence. But what he has to say about literal truthfulness in art is worth noting. The narrator tells us that what he is about to present is a transcription of the documents of one Father _____, the power of whose "haunting presence" compelled him to put his testimony on record. He goes on to say:

In the reviews I have read novelists are praised or blamed for their success or failure in creating a character, but such characters usually seem to bear about the same relation to life as the pictures in the country that you see painted on the mud walls of the native huts. A train is represented by a row of rectangles, each rectangle balanced on two circles. So a 'character' is simplified by the novelist: the contradictions you find in human beings are pared or explained away. The result is

Art - which is arrangement and simplification for the purpose of conveying a mental condition. This book cannot pretend to be art because the compiler has left in all the contradictions . . .¹

Now what is interesting about this statement of purpose is, first, that it assumes that it is possible to leave in "all the contradictions" and, second, that it contradicts its own assumption. By the very act of putting pen to paper, the writer is forced to select, arrange, condense, simplify. Moreover, he at once puts himself into a position in which he must justify, or explain, his interest in Father _____ and the method by which he proposes to unfold his case. My point is, that art is by definition artificial; and far from taking this narrator's statement as a matter of fact, we must take it as the first manoeuvre in what will be a long and intricate exercise in deception. "The credibility of a book is more important than its truth,"² Greene said in a very early review; and although he was perhaps overstating the case, the claim has some merit. Greene's short-lived narrator clearly took it to heart, establishing his own credibility as "teller" by professing his tale to be literal truth. -

Even if our clever narrator could give us a complete picture of one man's life, with all the contradictions, would we want to hear it? Probably not. We go to fiction prepared - and desiring - to suspend disbelief.

¹Introduction to The Heart of the Matter, viii.

²"Strange Worlds," Spectator, 5420 (May 1932), 705.

No one will bother to read a fictional account of, say, the life of a Yorkshire coal-miner if it does no more than record facts which can be acquired just as handily, with less fuss, from a sociological textbook or even a newspaper. The "life" presented to us in fiction is attractive for the very reason that it is coloured by one person's temperament and transformed by one person's artistry: that it is, in short, jostled about - exaggerated, rearranged, condensed - in a unique way each time it is fitted into the confines of a work of art. "What a relief," Greene says in a 1939 review, "to open a novel and be immediately immersed in a complete other-person's-world! Is there any other reason for reading novels?"³

How, precisely, does the novelist construct his web of illusion, persuade us to enter his world, or, as E. M. Forster put it, "bounce the reader into accepting what he says"?⁴ Greene's narrator in the first draft of The Heart of the Matter used only one of a vast range of technical tricks. Had he been allowed to continue, he might have bolstered the credibility he is at pains to establish initially by using a certain gravity of style, by relating an authentic sounding series of events to which Father _____ is party, or by creating certain characters whose lives cross the Father's at various points. In a sense, it matters less that the variables he juggles correspond to those of

³"Fiction," Spectator, 5805 (September 1939), 450.

⁴Aspects of the Novel (London, 1927), p. 75.

"real" life than that they correspond to one another. In other words, they must seem to have an internal logic, or follow rules which are circumscribed primarily by the kind of reality the narrator sets out to present. For "perfect delusion," Greene says, "the reader's imagination [must] be liberated" ("Seed Cake," p. 523): liberated from the conventions of the objective world and free to enter into the conventions of a hypothetical world. The reader knows that fiction is a game; but if the games-master sets up the rules with authority and executes them with skill, the reader will be inclined to play.

Though formal devices, or game rules, are the most obvious agents of delusion, they are not the only ones. Technique is necessary, but not sufficient to the creation of a "complete other-person's-world". In fact, a virtuoso display of technical skill on the part of the artist might just as effectively interfere with the construction of an illusion as contribute to it, just as a detailed transcription of facts (of "clumsy Life . . . at her stupid work", in the words of Henry James⁵) might well jeopardize rather than enhance a story's sense of the way things happen. Nowadays, for example, we tend to think of the epistolary novel as rather too obvious a contrivance, though one such as Clarissa was considered, in its day, something of a coup for realism. One might say, too, that

⁵The Art of the Novel, introduced by Richard P. Blackmur (New York, 1934), p. 121.

Greene's abandoned narrator builds up his pretence as a mere recorder of documented evidence a little too ostentatiously. Perhaps Greene was conscious of this when he chose not to stick with that format. At any rate, he makes it amply clear in his criticism that technical ingenuity can easily prove too much of a good thing.

Just one year before the publication of The Heart of the Matter, at a time when he was in the process of writing that novel, Greene wrote a rather long review of Robert Liddell's A Treatise on the Novel in which he makes this point:

Fielding, and James after him, have made us so conscious of the value of the 'pure novel' that we forget there are other values other writers have pursued, that the novel's purity, like the chastity of Clarissa, may involve too great a price.⁶

The idea crops up again and again in his essays and reviews, for it is, really, another version of his poetic principle. The artist, Greene would say, must use the tricks of technique with enough cunning to perpetrate his deception but not with so much cunning as to overwhelm whatever "truth" or observations about life that deception is meant to serve. How close this is to his belief that detachment from one's material, or the ability to construct a picture of life which satisfies one's sense of the way things happen, is valuable in so far as it prepares for the occasional abandonment of the realistic pretence, the sudden emergence of the personal voice from beneath the surface

⁶"Books in General," The New Statesman, XXXIV (October 1947), 292.

of the illusion. Our image of the creative writer playing a game of chess with himself is useful here, for playing the technical game in fiction involves the same sorts of constraints - and degrees of freedom - as do the various other ingredients that go to make up the artistic whole. There must be rules, for without them there is no form and no delusion. But there must be spontaneity, too, for without that there is no emotional force, no energy, and no real communication between writer and reader.

It might seem curious that Greene should implicate James in the conspiracy to promote the "pure novel", for we know that it is in James, perhaps more than in any other writer, that he finds emotional force. The fact is that Greene's complaint is aimed not at James but at certain of his successors who took James's concern for form to be doctrine. This is made clear in Greene's essay on Mauriac, and it is worth noting for the light it throws on the question of technique and poetic voice. In this essay, Greene points an accusing finger at Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster - writers, he claims, who uphold the tradition of "the dogmatically 'pure' novel founded by Flaubert and reaching its magnificent tortuous climax in . . . Henry James" (Essays, p. 116). He goes on:

I am not denying the greatness of either Flaubert or James. The novel was ceasing to be an aesthetic form and they recalled it to the artistic conscience. It was the later writers who by accepting the technical dogma blindly made the novel the dull devitalized form (form it retained) that it has become. (p. 117)

Greene is too hard on Forster, and he neglects to give any real evidence to support his attack (except to imply that Forster's world is a world without spiritual depth). But the point I am after rings clear: that to seek after formal chastity is to blind oneself to the existence of other virtues.

Both the Liddell review and the Mauriac essay come rather late in Greene's critical career, but it is possible to see him working toward the idea put across in these pieces as early as 1935 - in a review, appropriately enough, of James's Prefaces. Perhaps this piece, though very short, has even more claim than the later ones to being considered central to Greene's approach to technique, for it was written when he was only beginning to work out his own peculiar blend of formal "realism" and personal rhetoric. The clarity of Greene's perceptions on technique and substance in this essay is of especial value, given that he was, then, still something of a novice. Greene titled the essay "The Lesson of the Master", though a more accurate title might be "The True Lesson of the Master"; for Greene's aim is to deflate the fashionable (at the time) critical view of James as merely a clever technician, "beautifully portraying the surface of civilized society".⁷ He begins by pointing out that James's subject matter was only

⁷The Lost Childhood and Other Essays, p. 49. Greene's targets are H. G. Wells, Van Wyck Brooks, and Desmond MacCarthy.

superficially "civilized". Behind the walls of "The Ivory Tower" lay "cruelties and deceptions . . . the 'black and merciless things'" of which James, with his "nose for the Pit", was only too conscious (p. 49).

A clever technician he was; but, as Greene says, his technical strategy was founded on the requirements of his subject. Greene speaks, for example, of the rationale for one of the most characteristic features of James's method, his use of a central consciousness:

The violence he worked with was not accidental; it was corrupt; it came from the Pit, and therefore it had to be fully understood. Otherwise, the moral background would be lost. This, too, helped to determine his method, for fully to understand, unless the author indulged in tiresome explanation, in the 'platitude of statement' you had to be yourself inside the story, within a consciousness of unusual intelligence. (p. 49)

Greene goes on then to direct his attention specifically to the question of rules; and here, I think, is the key to Greene's own attitude toward technique.

"No novelist," he says, "can begin to write until he has taken . . . rules into consideration; you cannot be a Protestant before you have studied the dogmas of the old faith" (p. 50). By the same token, however, rules, or means, ought never to become more important than the end. James, as Greene says, "never hesitated to break his own rules, but he broke them with a full consciousness of his responsibility, shivering a little with the temerity of his 'exquisite treacheries'" (p. 50). In a comparison of James and Thomas Hardy, Greene drives his point home:

Hardy wrote as he pleased just as any popular novelist does, quite unaware of the particular problems of his art, and yet it is Hardy who gives the impression of being cramped, of being forced into melodramatic laocoon attitudes, so that we begin to appreciate his novels only for the passages where the poet subdues the novelist. In James the poet and the novelist were inseparable. (p. 50)

Two years after "The Lesson of the Master" appeared, Greene wrote his essay "Fielding and Sterne". Here, as we have seen, he made the first of his explorations into "moral seriousness" in art.⁸ The sentiments in the essay were to harden soon into quite definite ideas about "the religious sense" - a counterpart of sorts to the dogmas of technique. Even later, of course, Greene's ideas would soften again, and hark back to the value of "'exquisite treacheries'". But the point I want to make is this: that in this essay, the first in which he alludes to T. S. Eliot's literary application of the concept of Original Sin, Greene reserves a special place for James. In the novels of James, he says, we see "the metaphysical poet working in the medium of prose fiction" (Essays, p. 86). "Metaphysical poet": it is the same tribute as Greene had made in "The Lesson of the Master" and the same tribute he would make, implicitly at least, ten years later in Why Do I Write? His religious ardour in the intervening years never allowed him to abandon his respect for the heterodoxy of James's poetic. James had

⁸See my discussion in Chapter IV, p. 148.

referred to the art of fiction as the "sacred office"⁹; but as Greene realized even as he wrote "The Lesson of the Master", the prose poet has to be adept at both piety and betrayal. As we look at the specific aspects of technique about which Greene has much to say - style, plot and structure, and narrative voice - we will be struck by the degree to which this idea shapes Greene's own method.

⁹"The Art of Fiction," in The Art of Fiction and Other Essays, p. 5.

CHAPTER VII

STYLE

It is a good idea to start with style because of all the aspects of technique Greene discusses, style is the one to which he attaches the most importance in terms of creating a truthful delusion so to speak. Listen to the definition of truth he gives in Why Do I Write?:

I don't mean anything flamboyant by the phrase 'telling the truth'; I don't mean exposing anything. By truth I mean accuracy - it is largely a matter of style. It is my duty to society not to write: 'I stood above a bottomless gulf' or 'going downstairs, I got into a taxi,' because these statements are untrue. My characters must not go white in the face or tremble like leaves, not because these phrases are clichés but because they are untrue. (p. 30)

Now we can construe this passage in such a way as to say that Greene has two things in mind when he speaks of stylistic truth: that a description be a verbal equivalent to fact (which "a bottomless gulf" is not) and that it have the power to evoke an imaginative picture of that reality ("go white in the face" does little to explain the mental reaction it is meant to convey). If I seem to be reading between the lines a little here, it might help to make the point clearer if we see how Greene uses these criteria in a specific

context. In British Dramatists he speaks of Shakespeare's style as being factually precise, "the exact expression of a mental state: the exact description of a scene" (pp. 18-19). But it also is poetic: Shakespeare was able to place "the right phrase at the right moment [with] a mathematical accuracy as if [he] could measure his words against our nature" (p. 19). We remember Greene's comment that Shakespeare's plays are exceptional for their ability to depict "common, known life" at the same time as they are conveying a larger "truth" - an "attitude to life"¹; and in a sense, Greene's description of his style makes the same point in miniature.

It is important, I think, to connect Greene's demand for factual truth or, say, physical accuracy, to his admiration for Shakespeare's sense of "common, known life", for we have seen already the significance Greene attaches to the ordinary, mundane, even "seedy" aspects of life. It is here that he finds evocative potential, and this, perhaps, is as much an indication of where his moral sympathies lie as where his technical preferences tend. Greene's comparison of Ben Jonson and Dryden, also in British Dramatists, illustrates this point rather well. Dryden's classical plays, he says, were highly sophisticated; the "technical dexterity of the verse" was suited perfectly to the "complex ideals of honour . . . [the] exaggerated unities, . . . [the]

¹See my discussion, Chapter II, p. 105.

exalted sentiments" (p. 27) that formed an essential part of Dryden's approach to art. But the style was so polished, so lacking in "human passion" (p. 27), that it appealed only to an educated élite. Jonson, on the other hand, belonged to the people. With his "concrete common image" (p. 20), his "man-in-the-street poetry" (p. 20), he alone was able to present "on the stage the full rich enjoyment of life" (p. 26). There are traces here, incidentally, of T. S. Eliot - in his essay "Ben Jonson" and more particularly in "The Metaphysical Poets". In the latter, Eliot had said that Milton and Dryden "performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of others. . . . while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude" (Selected Essays, p. 288). And as for Jonson, Eliot had suggested that the apparently forced rhetoric in a play such as Volpone "conveys in the end an effect not of verbosity, but of bold, even shocking and terrifying directness" (p. 155). The echoes of Eliot in Greene's discussion are not coincidental, as we shall see more and more as we go on; but Greene's approach to Dryden and Jonson from a value standpoint is certainly consistent with what we know of Greene's own sympathies.

If we look a little more closely at what Greene means in a technical sense when he talks of concrete common images or "downright poetry", we find that what he is really after is simplicity: saying what one means

and meaning what one says. Of course, simplicity must not be confused with banality, for banality leaves little room for poetic suggestion. But the advantage of a simple style is that it creates the proper conditions - sets up a well-controlled atmosphere - to prepare for the emotional jab. It is not surprising that Greene finds much to admire in the style of Chekhov, a good example of a writer whose simple prose is remarkable for its ability to contain layers of subtle meaning. In an early review, Greene quotes this piece of Chekhovian advice: "Beauty and expressiveness in nature are attained only by simplicity, by such simple phrases as 'The sun set,' 'It was dark,' 'It began to rain,' and so on".² The simplicity is calculated, of course. To Greene, the importance of Chekhov's "accumulation of objective detail" lies in the fact that "it precedes the sudden abandonment of objectivity" (p. 424). Still, without the concrete picture, there can be no value in abandoning objectivity; vague descriptions generate only vague emotions.

Simplicity and suggestiveness, then, go hand in hand. Greene's early reviews quite consistently turn on this idea: as this comparison of John van Druten's And Then You Wish and Julian Green's Midnight shows. Of the first, he says:

²"Short Stories," Spectator, 5516 (March 1934), 424.

A dramatist should know better than to write like this: "Her panic flooded away and left behind it nothing but emptiness, a void, an echoing hollow which was her life from now on." All Mr. van Druten's words mean less than they say, like the words in a leading article; they are the opposite of true poetic writing where words are used concretely as symbols, with layers of meaning.³

For contrast, Greene quotes this passage from Midnight, a passage in which the prose is decidedly unadorned but nonetheless evocative:

"Towards the end of a winter day, beneath a grey sky swept by an icy wind, a carriage was slowly rolling its way along a track bordered by ploughed fields. It was the sort of conveyance which is never seen anywhere nowadays, save in the provinces, a sort of black box perched above wheels that were far too big for it, with cloth blinds covering the windows, and two big metal lamps to right and left of the coachman." (p. 575)

This, to Greene, is "poetic writing". "No voids and echoing hollows here," he says; "the wintry scene, the old cab and the cloth blinds, all M. Green's images are objective, and like the 'black box' which immediately puts us in mind of a coffin, they awake implications" (p. 575).

It is interesting to note that George Orwell, too, reviewed Midnight and although he did not concern himself with its style particularly, his opinion of the book is, as one might predict, quite different from Greene's. Orwell makes the point that the atmosphere of the story - one of "horror and mystery" - is worked up as it were

³"Fiction Chronicle," The Tablet (October 1936), 575.

because it depends on events, psychological and otherwise, that seem arbitrary.⁴ "The truth is," he says, "that ours is not an age for mysterious romances about lunatics in ruined chateaux, because it is not an age in which one can be unaware of contemporary reality" (p. 249). Of course, Orwell's judgements, astute though they are, are always conditioned by his political turn of mind. When, therefore, in a later essay, "Inside the Whale", he seems to be hinting at a "Catholic-feudal" mentality in writers like Julian Green (p. 523), we feel that Orwell's objection to Midnight is based perhaps more on philosophical grounds than on artistic ones. Still, his reaction to the book is worth keeping in mind, especially when we come to look at Greene's own technique. What Orwell has hit upon in his review is something that can't be overlooked as a possible reason for Greene's praise of Midnight: it is melodramatic (quite shamelessly so), and we know that Greene is drawn to melodrama as to a magnet. His admiration for the prose of Midnight is justified: it is simple, objective, and suggestive all at once; but we have to wonder just how much it is gothic suggestiveness in particular that he finds appealing. We will get onto the subject of melodrama later, when we look at Greene's approach to plot; but for now we might do well to remember Peter Quennell's description of Greene's sensibility as romantic and "medieval".

⁴See The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume I (London, 1968), p. 249.

To get back to style specifically, Greene makes it clear that simplicity of language, like any other technical device, should not be cultivated as an end in itself. If one aims to write simply and precisely ad infinitum, allowing for regular but brief doses of pregnant imagery, one ends up being a mere mechanic, and one's subject ends up being merely monotonous. Style, Greene says, is not "something which you apply as decoration on top of your subject"⁵; it is not, in other words, something that can be slotted into a given groove, wound up, and pushed off on a predetermined course, heedless of where it is going and why it is going there. Recall, for a moment, Greene's objection to the stylistic preference of Charles Morgan. Morgan's aim was to "unfreeze the imaginative stream," to "make man aware of the universals"; and to do this, he said, art must awaken "the aesthetic passion" ("Defence of Story-Telling", p. 398). Greene's impatience with Morgan has to do not only with the vagueness of his desired end - the revelation of Truth, Beauty, and Love - but also with the fact that this sort of subject seems to invite a style that is merely stylish. Though Greene does not mention it, the very words Morgan uses in his essay illustrate Greene's point. To take just one example, Morgan says of art, and of "aesthetic story-telling" in

⁵Review of Ernest Hemingway's Green Hills of Africa, The Fortnightly, CXXXIX (May 1936), 633.

particular, that it "does not create beauty; it reveals beauty, the universal, by making statues, stories, pictures which have the effect of lifting the darkness, as it were a curtain, from the glass through which man sees" (p. 400).⁶ A pretty description, certainly; but as Greene points out, "the jewelled phrase, the numinous word" too often serve only to conceal the obscurity of the subject ("Seed Cake," p. 519).

Let us look a little deeper into Greene's response to Morgan to see how he elaborates his idea that style ought to serve and amplify subject, not decorate it. As an example of the type of aesthetic writer Morgan would admire, Greene points to Robert Greene and characterizes his style as a kind of "verbal music" operating through his "trick of alliteration" (p. 519). Here is part of the passage Greene quotes from Robert Greene to make his point:

'Can the flaxe resist the force of the
fire? Can a lover withstand the brunt
of beautie? Freeze, if he stand by the
flame: pervert the lawes of nature, or
eschew that which is framed by the fates,
or flie from the force of fancie?' (p. 519)

The trouble with this kind of verbal music, Greene says, is that its objective can only be "hypnosis" (p. 519). Since "it is quite unconnected with subject . . . [it lends] 'wings to the imagination', only after first putting the mind asleep" (p. 519). Greene takes

⁶This sort of old-fashioned, flowery prose is typical of Morgan's fiction, too. In a novel such as The Fountain, with which Greene was probably familiar, the effect is especially odd because the wartime setting begs to be dressed in ordinary, realistic clothes, not wrapped eloquently in meditative, Platonic garb.

another example, this time from Nash, to illustrate by contrast an appropriate use of stylistic tricks. Nash's particular device, the use of what Greene calls "duplications", is apparent in this passage:

'Now I beseach God love me so well as
I love a plaine dealing man, earth is
earth, flesh is flesh, earth wil to earth,
and flesh unto flesh, fraile earth, fraile
flesh, who can keepe you from the worke of
your creation?' (p. 519)

Here, Greene claims, the style - especially the rhythm - helps the meaning along: "His words couple like men and women. The attempt to catch the very note and trick of life has kept his diction upon its feet" (pp. 519-520).

Greene goes on then to give another comparison, this time of passages from the two works alluded to in the title of his essay. The "Love Lady" passage (from George Moore's Héloïse and Abelard) he offers as an example of aesthetic prose; the "Seed Cake" passage (from Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the end of Joyce's Ulysses) he uses to illustrate a style that is in keeping with its subject. Greene quotes from the first:

'Dost think of me differently now? Not so differently, Héloïse, that I have forgotten thy soul. But can we think of the soul and body at the same time? When thou comest to me, the lamp held high, to learn all the sports of love from me, thou wilt not think of my soul - not then - but of thy pleasure, as I shall think of mine. Yet let it not be said that the soul and the intellect of the woman is forgotten by the man, though he cannot love body and soul at the same time.' (p. 520)

Moore's prose, according to Greene, is like Robert Greene's; it is "hypnotic, it has no relation to subject, it does not vary with the subject . . ." (p. 521). This is not surprising, he says, for Moore's purpose was "to preserve an even texture of prose throughout a book, 'the strange irregular rhythm of life' was consciously avoided" (p. 521).⁷ The prose style of Molly's soliloquy, on the other hand, is indispensable to an understanding of both the woman and the scenes she is recalling. Here is an excerpt from the passage which Greene quotes at length:

. . . first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth and it was leapeyear like now yes 16 years ago my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you to-day yes that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is . . . (p. 520)

Here, Greene says, "the rhythm of Mr. Joyce's prose 'savours', as Hazlitt wrote of Burke's, 'of the texture of what he describes, and his pen slides or drags over the ground of his subject, like the painter's pencil'" (p. 521).

Greene is loading the dice here a little, for by choosing Molly's soliloquy he is choosing one of the

⁷Morgan, in his Epitaph on George Moore (London, 1935), said of Moore that his aim was to write "an absolute prose . . . a prose independent of every colloquialism, every trick of phrase, every contemporary allusion that might make it obscure or tedious in the future (p. 46).

finest passages in all of Joyce's work. But if we think of some of the extremes to which Joyce carried his experiments in technique - especially in Finnegans Wake (not, of course, published when Greene wrote "The Seed Cake" essay), but even in Ulysses - we must admit that there is a fine line between a helpful style and a style that gets carried away with its own ingenuity. We might be dazzled by the audacity and genius of, say, Joyce's imitation of headline prose in the newsroom scene of Ulysses, or the catechismal structure of the scene in which Bloom and Dedalus make their way to Bloom's house. But this does not mean necessarily that we will be in a position to say what the words mean without going through some pretty fancy mental contortions of our own. As for Moore, he would be the first to admit that Héloïse and Abelard is an exercise in "pure" style; but he was as capable of writing something akin to "Seed Cake" prose⁸ as Joyce was of writing "Love Lady" prose in modern dress: prose, that is, that draws attention to its own special tricks.

Of course, one of the points Greene wants to make when he compares "Love Lady" prose to "Seed Cake" prose is that the former is not only "stylish" but also "divorced from the social consciousness" (p. 522). The rhythm of life it attempts to catch, Greene would say, is not the "strange, irregular" rhythm of common,

⁸I am thinking of Moore's naturalistic fiction, A Mummer's Wife and Esther Waters being good examples.

known life but the regular, predictable rhythm of life in the abstract. Here we have less reason to quarrel with Joyce, for it is part of his remarkable achievement that he opened up in an art form what Freud opened up in a more scientific discipline: wholly new ways of looking at life through previously unrecognized forms of consciousness. It is with "writers who want to by-pass their own times and arrive quickly at Truth and Beauty . . ." (p. 521) that Greene finds fault.

We can see in this remark, incidentally, the influence of the thirties: the taste for art that dealt with contemporary issues in a straightforward, almost literal way. But Greene had a personal reason, too, for stressing simple and appropriate style. As he admits, his first three published novels are examples of prose which is poetic in the worst sense; and part of this is due to the fact that they have to do with places and events about which he had no first-hand knowledge. In The Man Within, nineteenth-century England; in The Name of Action, a revolutionary struggle in Trier; and in Rumour at Nightfall, Spain at the time of the Carlist uprising: all very much the stuff of romance but not necessarily the stuff of good fiction. When he came to write Stamboul Train, he says, he "was determined to . . . abandon, until old age, all reading of Conrad's books . . . and the setting of my novel was to be realistic and contemporary."⁹ In his enthusiasm

⁹Introduction to Stamboul Train, x.

to emulate Conrad, to capture the flavour of exotic adventure all enfolded in symbolic, sombre prose, he had overlooked the fact that he had not the experience with "romance" that Conrad had and therefore could not describe his scenes in a vivid way. Later, he would make it part of his lifestyle to find adventure in strange places; but it is only because he had by then acquired the skills of a good observer that he could transform these experiences into good art.

It is worthwhile looking at Greene's own evolution in some detail - especially while we have his ideas about stylistic simplicity and suggestiveness fresh in our minds - to see how it fits with his critical aims. One of Greene's problems as a novice stylist had to do with creating the feeling of physical excitement. In a discussion of The Name of Action in his autobiography, Greene addresses the problem of how to put across the feeling of physical excitement - something this novel failed at dismally. He says:

Now I can see quite clearly where I went wrong. Excitement is simple: excitement is a situation, a single event. It mustn't be wrapped up in thoughts, similes, metaphors. A simile is a form of reflection, but excitement is of the moment when there is no time to reflect. Action can only be expressed by a subject, a verb and an object, perhaps a rhythm - little else. Even an adjective slows the pace or tranquillizes the nerve. (pp. 198-199)

He goes on to regret that he did not take Robert Louis Stevenson as a model in this regard and quotes this description from Kidnapped to show the sort of thing

he should have been aiming at: "'It came all of a sudden when it did, with a rush of feet and a roar, and then a shout from Alan, and the sound of blows and someone crying as if hurt. I looked back over my shoulder, and saw Mr. Shuan in the doorway crossing blades with Alan'" (p. 199). Then he concludes:

No similes or metaphors there, not even an adjective. But I was too concerned with 'the point of view' to be aware of simpler problems, to know that the sort of novel I was trying to write, unlike a poem, was not made with words but with movement, action, character. Discrimination in one's words is certainly required, but not love of one's words - that is a form of self-love, a fatal love which leads a young writer to the excesses of Charles Morgan and Lawrence Durrell . . . (p. 199)

Now if we look at what Greene might consider an offending passage from The Name of Action and compare it to a passage from a later work - The Confidential Agent - in which he was trying to simulate physical excitement, we will see what he means. This, from The Name of Action, forms part of a longish scene in which the main character, Chant, is being pursued by police through the streets of Trier:

Before him down the street, as he began to run, the light symbolized all the safe, unappreciated, kindly things of life. Not even the dark and intensely alive image of Ann-Marie Demassener could so allure him. Smooth lawns and trees, rivers and deserted hills, sleep and the murmur of familiar voices were all held momentarily fixed as a panorama of peace in that radiance. He ran with pricking spine and ran the faster when beneath the lamp appeared the police officer from whom, he thought now, it had been the height of folly to escape.¹⁰

¹⁰London, 1930, pp. 95-96.

Three things stand out here. First, it is difficult to imagine that symbols of light, "smooth lawns and trees", the "panorama of peace", are images that would occur to a man running in terror to save his life. Second, the active verb "ran", repeated twice in the last half of the paragraph, and the sharp phrase "pricking spine" are the only concessions to the physical nature of the action. Finally, the last clause has the effect of dulling what little excitement there is. "Beneath the lamp appeared the police officer" is inverted and "appeared" is passive: both syntax and diction tend to drag an image that ought to flash suddenly and fearfully onto the scene. And "the height of folly" - an oddly old-fashioned, formal phrase - has a similar effect.

Consider now this passage from The Confidential Agent, part of the scene in which D. escapes from the police and the enigmatic enemy agent L.:

D. ran. He had a few yards' start: the yard looked empty. He heard a shout and a crash behind him - the constable had slipped. A voice said, 'This way mate,' and he swerved automatically into an outside lavatory. Things were going too fast. Somebody said, 'Give him a leg up,' and he found himself being propelled over a wall. He fell heavily on his knees beside a rubbish can, and a voice whispered, 'Quiet.' (p. 206)

What we get here is closer to what Greene has in mind when he says excitement is "of the moment when there is no time to reflect". We get D.'s actions: running, swerving, being propelled, and falling. And we get his

fleeting perceptions: the empty yard, a shout and a crash, anonymous voices, and a brief sensation that all was happening "too fast". Greene reduces his description primarily to subject, verb and object, and the almost rhythmical repetition of these elements - "D. ran", "He heard a shout", "A voice said", "He fell heavily", and so on - propels the action forward and gives it a crisp immediacy.

Creating this sort of effect of course involves more than simple structure and concrete diction. Another difference we notice in the two passages is the extent to which they make you feel you are there, seeing the scene and events from the point of view of the character who is actually going through the motions. When Greene wrote the passage I have quoted from The Name of Action, he used style in what he later would call an inappropriate way: he used it in a way that distracted from, rather than intensified, the events he was describing. Specifically, he was intent on giving his scene poetic overtones, on heightening it in a vaguely metaphysical way. As a consequence, the facts about what was happening to Chant in an empirical sense got muffled. In the passage from The Confidential Agent, we see, hear, feel, and sense things as D. must have seen, heard, felt and sensed them; and if you are going to use style suggestively, in this case to evoke a mood, you have got to use it first to connect your reader with your acting agent.

What I am really talking about here is the relative success of a style - of diction, particularly - that is

sense-based. It is a point that Greene makes often, and one that he began to develop early in his criticism. In a 1934 review Greene says: "The poeticizing of experience comes from a failure to use the senses; it is the acceptance of sight and sound and smell at second hand . . . a physical failure of the senses to recall their reactions."¹¹ Much later, in his review of Janet Adam Smith's Henry James and Robert Louis Stevenson: A Record of Friendship and Criticism, he picks up on this idea again and quotes from James's letter to Stevenson about Catriona:

'The only thing I miss in the book,' James writes . . . 'is the note of visibility - it subjects my visual sense, my seeing imagination, to an almost painful underfeeding. The hearing imagination, as it were, is nourished like an alderman, and the loud audibility seems a slight the more on the baffled lust of the eyes . . .'

(Essays, p. 77)

James was probably the source for Greene's ideas about sensuous style in the first place. His essay on Guy de Maupassant¹² (in which he devoted a good deal of attention to Maupassant's ability to hold "the boldest communication" with his senses) is one which Greene undoubtedly had read. But the interesting thing about this essay is that James makes a strong argument for empiricism over poeticism; or, more exactly, he argues that poeticism is valueless without a convincing picture. He says:

¹¹"Fiction," Spectator, 5539 (August 1934), 264.

¹²See The Art of Fiction and Other Essays.

It is easy to exclaim that if [Maupassant] judges life only from the point of view of the senses, many are the noble and exquisite things that he must leave out. What he leaves out has no claim to get itself considered till after we have done justice to what he takes in. (pp. 77-78)

This is close to the point I made about the passage from The Name of Action. Indeed, the whole book gives the impression that what Greene started with was a handful of romantic notions about love, commitment, treachery, and revolution, and no real knowledge about a plausible setting and plot. As a result, the "noble and exquisite things" James talks about have very little to hang onto.

As for The Confidential Agent, we can see that in the passage I quoted Greene exercised his senses rather well, although we can hardly say that it is exquisite, or even suggestive of much beyond an atmosphere of hectic fear. But if we look at a few scenes in which his intent was not solely to convey physical excitement, we will see better how values or ideas can be woven into sense-based imagery. The Comedians is an interesting example because it is told in the first person and the style is, in the widest sense possible, a comment: on the narrator himself. Brown is decidedly adept at figurative expression and this very fact continually betrays his self-image of a spiritually barren capitalist. But, ignoring for the moment the sort of double-barrelled import of style in first-person narration, let us look at a few instances in which Greene uses sensuous imagery for a specific purpose. Here is his (Brown's) description of

Mr. Smith in the hotel pool, a description which quite effectively jogs our visual sense into action:

. . . there in the pool, avoiding the gardener's rake, swam Mr. Smith, wearing a pair of dark grey nylon bathing-pants which billowed out behind him in the water, giving him the huge hind-quarters of some prehistoric beast. He swam slowly up and down using the breast-stroke and grunting rhythmically. When he saw me he stood up in the water like a myth. His breasts were covered with long strands of white hair. (pp. 124-125)

When we come to this passage, we know already certain facts about Mr. Smith: that he is American, that he is a former presidential candidate (his platform being, absurdly, vegetarianism), and that he is on a self-induced mission to spread the good word of his "philosophy" in Haiti. All quite laughable; and yet in the description quoted, the man is oddly endearing. Besides being associated with a monstrous but placid animal from the past, out of touch with the times, he has traces of fatherly dignity. Here is a man, we might say, who is naive and innocent but frank and unswerving in his harmless convictions. Indeed, however ineffectual the story as a whole shows Mr. Smith's manner and beliefs to be, his character more and more takes on a certain integrity as the brutal, conniving, and inhuman atmosphere of Papa Doc's Haiti takes on, more and more, the quality of palpable evil.

Here is another passage, this time a description of someone who ought to be Mr. Smith's confrère but who is, in fact, his opposite - the new Secretary for Social

Welfare:

He was a small fat man who wore, for some reason, a fraternity-pin, and his teeth were very big and white and separate, like tombstones designed for a much larger cemetery. A curious smell crossed his desk as though one grave had stayed open. (p. 187)

Here Greene appeals to our visual and our olfactory senses. "Small" and "fat" give the impression of a man given to bodily indulgence. The fraternity-pin seems to be his badge of respectability, a symbol of his membership in a club: but the sort of club, we note, not meant for grown-ups. The teeth, standing apart like tombstones, and the "curious smell": a rather effective image which suggests that here is someone whose very breath betrays the putrid state of political Haiti.

There are two more examples I want to give, and these are interesting because each picks up on an image introduced in the passages I have just quoted. In the first, Brown is describing his approach to the Voodoo ceremony in the mountains outside Port-au-Prince. Here the essence of the scene is its sound: ". . . when we left the car on the road behind Kenscoff we could hear the drums beating very gently like a labouring pulse. It was as though the hot night lay there out of breath" (p. 219). What strikes one about this is its reference to the heavy rhythmical quality of primitive ritual. It takes us back to the image of Mr. Smith as some huge prehistoric beast, not innocent, perhaps, in the same

sense as Voodoo worshippers, but vital and life-giving all the same. As Brown goes on to describe the ceremony, he speaks several times of what impressed him particularly: the sight of Philipot, the young revolutionary who is gathering a band of guerrillas to fight against Papa Doc, actually partaking of the sacrificial rites. It is clear that however progressive Philipot feels himself to be politically, he is still bonded to this savage, pure manifestation of faith that is, after all, the religion of his people. In the person of Philipot, then, and in the whole atmosphere of this dark, throbbing, savagely religious scene, we get a version of innocence and purity that is quite distinctly Greene's.

In the final passage I want to look at, Greene gives us another version of his image of teeth as a symbol of decay. Here he alludes to dentistry, something with which it is difficult not to associate a sense of pain. In this passage Brown is regretting his inability to feel pain - or to respond to any other strong stimulus - so the sensuous appeal inverts as it were the meaning:

. . . my lack of curiosity was a hollow where a hollow should not have been. I had not plugged the hollow with a substitute, as a dentist puts in a temporary filling. No priest had come to represent a father to me, and no region of the earth had taken the place of home. I was a citizen of Monaco, that was all. (p. 273)

Greene is partial to this sort of tooth imagery. One thinks, for example, of the dentist, Mr. Tench, in The Power and the Glory, forcing himself to get on with filling a man's tooth while in the yard below the

horrifying spectacle of the whisky priest's execution is taking place. The buzzing noises of the drill and the repeated moans of the patient have the effect of jangling our nerves. The whole scene is a kind of grating, physical counterpart to the spiritual significance of what is happening outside. With Brown, too, Greene juxtaposes bodily sensation and spiritual condition. Although one mustn't stretch Brown's image beyond what it reasonably will take, one can see Brown's state as a variation on the Catholic idea of suffering for spiritual benefit.

Greene is not always so successful in his figurative use of style, I think, as he is in the examples I have given. In many instances, he relies on a single, short simile to convey quite as many sensations and nuances of association as he ekes out, leisurely, in longish descriptions. Of course, it is in the nature of similes to do just that: to compress units of meaning into a single, strong image. But Greene's similes are rather unusual in that they press into service so much. They are like mathematical formulae: if this _____, then thus _____, and so _____. Richard Hoggart, in his essay "The Force of Caricature", says that Greene's similes give the impression of having been written "by rote".¹³ The examples he gives are a fair representation of the sort of thing I mean:

¹³See Hynes, p. 86.

Evil ran like malaria in his veins.
The memory was like a hand, pulling away
the past, exposing him.
Heat stood in the room like an enemy.
She carried her responsibilities carefully
like crockery across the hot yard.
The old life peeled away like a label.
He could feel his prayers weigh him down
like undigested food.
Pride wavered in his voice, like a plant
with shallow roots. (p. 86)

These are from The Power and the Glory but, as Mr. Hoggart says, it is characteristic of Greene's similes in general that they "are almost always short and sharply juxtapose the concrete, actual or temporal with the abstract, subjective or eternal" (p. 86).¹⁴ This is obvious enough: "evil" is coupled with "malaria", "memory" with "hand", "heat" with "enemy", and so on. But if we look closer, we can see, besides the concrete and the abstract, a third level of appeal in the coupling of a noun (usually abstract) with an active verb. "Ran", "pulling away", "peeled", "weigh . . . down", and "wavered": each is designed to give a physical concreteness to something that is, literally speaking, without sensuous properties - "evil", "prayers", "pride" and so on. The impression we get is that Greene is determined to coerce his three requisites for stylistic truth into servitude: simple diction, sensed-based imagery, and poetic idea are all jammed together, made to work as a team. Now this sort of thing is effective in that it

¹⁴ Interestingly, in his working diary for A Burnt-Out Case, published as In Search of a Character (London, 1961), Greene complains about Conrad's "inflated" language and says: "how often he compares something concrete to something abstract. Is this a trick that I have caught?" (p. 51).

accomplishes several things at once and in that it forces our minds to attend. But one can see how easily it can become monotonous by repetition, caricaturish even (as Mr. Hoggart puts it) to the point of distracting us from what it is Greene wishes to say.

Quite possibly we can link Greene's intentions here with his admiration for the style of the so-called metaphysical poets - or, at least, with the peculiarities of their style as described by T. S. Eliot in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets". Certainly there is evidence that Greene found Eliot's discussion in this essay compelling, as we will see. But even without direct evidence we might guess that Greene was impressed with poetry in which, as Eliot says, "a heterogeneity of material [is] compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind" (Selected Essays, p. 283).¹⁵ Eliot was defending the metaphysical poets against Johnson's complaint that in their poetry "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" (p. 283); and his defence rests on his belief that they were "intellectual . . . constantly amalgamating disparate experience" (p. 287). In Chapman, for example, "there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling . . ." (p. 286). Similarly Donne:

¹⁵It is worth recalling Greene's description of Henry James as "the metaphysical poet working in the medium of prose fiction" (see my discussion on p. 215).

unlike "reflective" poets such as Tennyson and Browning, poets who "do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose", a "thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility" (p. 287). This sort of approach, he says finally, is one we ought to value, especially in a civilization such as ours which "comprehends great variety and complexity". The poet, according to Eliot, "must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" (p. 289).

Now it seems to me that Eliot's description, "to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into . . . meaning" fits what Greene tries to do rather well. And as for direct borrowing from Eliot, Greene is quite ready to admit his influence - at any rate, so far as critical principles go. In his 1939 review of Robert Sherwood's film Idiot's Delight, Greene speaks of the "cellophaned intellectuality" of Mr. Sherwood's films (Pleasure-Dome, p. 214). "They are all supposed to make one think," he says, "these windy abstractions, the literary quotations, the little scraps of popular philosophy" (p. 214). He goes on: "Mr. Eliot once remarked that the metaphysical poets experienced thought as directly as the scent of a rose, but Mr. Sherwood and his kind seem to experience a rose as dimly and

indirectly as a thought" (p. 215).¹⁶ In other words , what he finds lacking in Sherwood is any attempt to integrate sense impression and idea; whatever concessions to intellectual show there are end up being "windy abstractions" because they are not connected to (or amalgamated with, as Eliot would say) any particularized perception.

Greene's similes and metaphors are not any better for having such distinguished practical models as the metaphysical poets or so authoritative a critical model as Eliot. But by seeing a possible connection we can at least see what Greene is aiming at: as we can if we look at another possible, though quite different, influence - Walter de la Mare. Greene's assimilation of de la Mare is perhaps more predictable, since we know how sympathetic he found de la Mare's themes and how largely de la Mare figured in Greene's early stages as a writer. Listen, first, to Greene's admiring description of de la Mare's style in his essay "Walter de la Mare's Short Stories". He speaks of de la Mare's ability to

. . . play consciously with clichés (hemmed like James's between inverted commas), turning them under-side as it were to the reader, and showing what other meanings lie there hidden: he will suddenly enrich a colloquial conversation with a literary phrase out of the

¹⁶ Greene uses this review, incidentally, to take another stab at Charles Morgan when he speaks of the film as evoking a "Sparkenbroke world in which literature, passed through the filter of a naive mind, is a substitute for character" (pp. 214-215).

common tongue, or enrich on the contrary a conscious literary description with a turn of country phrase - 'destiny was spudding at his tap root'. (Essays, pp. 147-148)

Doesn't this metaphor strike us as being similar to the sort of thing Greene does himself? The abstract "destiny" linked to the concrete object "tap root" by the active verb "spudding": it does bear a resemblance to an image such as "Evil ran like malaria through his veins". De la Mare resorts to this sort of compact hybrid imagery only occasionally: as in "Defeat stared from his eyes" (from Henry Brocken¹⁷) or in "Unhasteningly, like water dripping from a fateful urn, the thump-recorded moments ebbed away . . ." (from The Wind Blows Over¹⁸). But his poetry and prose both are spiced liberally with the bold mixture of abstract and concrete Greene finds so appealing. "It was as if the silence had been stricken with leprosy, so instantaneous was the unnatural glare": this, also from The Wind Blows Over,¹⁹ has the basic ingredients of a Greene image even though Greene might have phrased it differently.

If we go back to Greene's fledgling stage, when he looked on de la Mare as a muse of sorts, we can see him quite consciously working for the startling effect, playing with the colloquial and the literary somewhat in the manner of de la Mare. In Babbling April he tended to longish conceit, like this from "Death and Cosmetics":

¹⁷London, 1904, p. 85.

¹⁸London, 1936, p. 278 (see "The Trumpet").

¹⁹See "Physic", p. 511.

For Death must pause a trifle at the paint,
And after at the powder she must linger,
Curious to brush away this purposed feint,
With slim and decorous, but imperial finger. (p. 18)

but on occasion he experimented with the sort of compressed images he was to use regularly later. In "Sensations", for example, we get:

How timorously, like an old fashioned collector
of wild flowers, do we gather our sensations
and press them in the damp blotting paper of
our mind. (p. 1)

This is really too coarse and too strained to work, but he improves on it in another poem, "Sonnet", in which the figurative appeal is at least not so far-fetched. Here, the compression goes a step further to effect the kind of taut image that has become almost a trademark of his style:

But age is like a wreck within a bay. (p. 24)

This is elaborated ("The sails are down: they do not feel the wind") but it need not be. The core of the simile can stand on its own.

What we notice particularly about these images is that the picture conjured up by the colloquial phrase is very often a crude one. "Blotting paper" has the same unpleasant effect as many of Greene's later images - as, say, prayers "like undigested food". In de la Mare, too, the concrete reference point is often harsh, ugly: silence "stricken with leprosy", or, much later in the poem "The Traveller",

Their minds had brewed a poison in the blood;
The sap of their own nature had decayed.²⁰

²⁰London, 1946, p. 16.

In de la Mare, the whiffs of disagreeable essences are no more than whiffs. The easy, lyrical grace of his over-all style, or as Eliot put it,

. . . those deceptive cadences
Wherewith the common measure is refined²¹

tend to have a general subduing effect. In Greene, we feel, the unpleasant whiffs more often take on the properties of a strong odour, meant to linger and pervade the texture of the surrounding narrative. Still, both de la Mare and Greene consciously set out to startle, to add a touch of sensationalism to descriptions that might otherwise seem prosaic. In fact, one could call an image such as "Heat stood in the room like an enemy", or "like water dripping from a fateful urn, the thump-recorded moments ebbed away" melodrama in miniature. Both are attempts to work up emotional force suddenly and pithily; and although the picture or sensation they convey might be transitory, the extravagant tone they set up is not.

If Greene and de la Mare were not preoccupied with themes that lend themselves to melodramatic treatment, the touches of sensationalism in their style might pass as idiosyncrasies only, interesting but not intriguing. But they are inclined to melodrama: de la Mare in an atmospheric sense, with his calculated frissons, touches of gloom, and hints of weird, unearthly presences, and Greene more directly in the mechanics of plot construction - violent action, suspense, and

²¹See "To Walter de la Mare," in Tribute to Walter de la Mare on his Seventy-fifth Birthday (London, 1948), p. 107.

mystery. Given this common attraction to thrilling subject matter, it seems likely that their peculiar imagery is meant to serve a larger purpose. It is melodrama tamped down to its most compact form but capable of detonating a healthy jolt to back up the front-line assault. In fact, Greene pays tribute to de la Mare's ability to make the finer devices of style work for the over-all effect. In his review of Ding Dong Bell he says that if critics seek vagueness, "let them seek it of Wells or Conrad, for Mr. de la Mare's prose is packed with imagery. It . . . goes back to the Elizabethans, to Webster . . .".²² Clearly Greene places a good deal of responsibility with figurative language to support general theme and to drive home poetic bias. And this explains, perhaps better than anything else can, the highly concentrated quality of his imagery.

If we can only assume that Greene's style took on certain peculiar features in the interest of melodrama, or let us say for the sake of intensifying emotional effect, we can say quite assuredly that certain features peculiar to his fictional designs as a whole are calculated to serve this end. Plot, setting, characterization - and the structural manipulation of these variables - are the most obvious tools of melodrama; and in Greene's case there is no question that their potential to excite is capitalized on. As

²²"Ding Dong Bell," Oxford Outlook (June 1924), 244.

we look at Greene's approach to plot and structure, and the role he reserves for melodrama in the grand design, we will find our assumptions about his intentions as a stylist confirmed. We will discover, in short, that his aim to make verisimilitude, poetic idea, and emotional force work together is a consistent one.

CHAPTER VIII

PLOT AND STRUCTURE

I have already talked about Greene's ambivalent attitude toward the value of entertainment in fiction, and about how this ambivalence lessened gradually as he found more and more in his art that entertainment and serious "truth" could be joined successfully. He had reservations about entertainment because, naturally enough, he equated entertainment with melodrama; and so far as he could see, melodrama was the basic ingredient of so much of the inferior art upon which he had to make critical judgements. Still, he was attracted to melodrama by nature, addicted, almost, as to a drug. It was part of his personal equipment as an artist and, unable to avoid succumbing to the "poison", as he calls it (Introduction to A Gun for Sale, vi), he set about trying to justify it, trying to determine if such a thing as "good" melodrama were possible.

Part of the answer he found thanks to the general social and literary climate of the thirties. Art that was popular, not élitist, was the order of the day, and

Greene reacted by sorting out what "popular" meant and what it ought to mean. In a caustic review of a Bing Crosby film, for example, he said:

. . . the common idea of popular entertainment [involves] a mild self-pity, something soothing, something gently amusing. . . . The public which rattles down from the North to Wembley with curious hats and favours, tipsy in charabancs, doesn't, apparently, ask to be soothed: it asks to be excited. It was for these that the Elizabethan stage provided action which could arouse as communal a response as bear-baiting. For a popular response is not the sum of private excitements, but mass feeling, mass excitement, the Wembley roar . . . (Pleasure-Dome, p. 94)

He goes on to say that it is not wrong to encourage people to "be taken out of themselves" so long as you avoid Bing Crosby "sentiment" (p. 94).¹ What you must aim at is the release of instinctive emotions, or emotions which strike a common chord.

Melodrama, then, so far as Greene could see, does have a function. It captivates one's readers, satisfies their thirst for excitement and suspense, and shows them a side of life that is, after all, quite real, however indelicate and sensational. But he had still to find a way to make melodrama work for art, not against it. As a reviewer he had read enough pot-boilers and seen enough Hollywood celluloid to know

¹In his essay on sentimentality in poetry, "'Woodbine Willie' Lives!", Roy Fuller suspects the thirties of having "incubated" a sentimentality that was to surface by the mid-forties (Owls and Artificers, London, 1971). Greene, in fact, came close to endorsing patriotic sentimentality in the war years (see my discussion in Chapter V, pp. 187-188).

that it was a dangerous tool that required careful handling. To complete his answer to the question "How can melodrama be used to good effect?" he turned back to his childhood. It was here that he had had his first taste of adventure and romance in art, and for Greene the first taste is the purest. In "The Lost Childhood" he says: "Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives . . . in childhood all books are books of divination, telling us about the future. . . . What do we ever get nowadays from reading to equal the excitement and the revelation in those first fourteen years?" (Essays, p. 13). His favourite, The Viper of Milan, is shamelessly melodramatic: in the climactic scene, as Greene describes it, "della Seala is dead, Ferrara, Verona, Novara, Mantua have all fallen, the messengers pour in with news of fresh victories, the whole world outside is cracking up, and Visconti sits and jokes in the winelight" (p. 18). And yet in that hectic confluence of improbable events and evil deeds, there is a purpose. To watch the horrible Visconti sit and joke, full of himself and his triumphs, is to feel, as Greene says, "the sense of doom that lies over success - the feeling that the pendulum is about to swing" (p. 18).² Now we may not share Greene's taste for melodrama so thickly and luxuriously applied as it is in The Viper; but it is true that without it this last scene

²Greene's own version of the "Viper" Visconti, Aunt Augusta's lover in Travels With My Aunt, is far less villainous, though still melodramatic.

would have no point. The tone throughout has prepared one for this final picture of Visconti, surfeited with power, gorged with evil. One feels his state is now so ripe that it will soon begin to rot; his very complacency will lead to his eventual ruin. Moreover, the melodramatic tone is not of a sentimental or escapist nature. It is unrelenting in conveying a sense of suffering, horror and evil; and these, to Greene, are as much a part of life as the stuff of melodrama.

We might sum up Greene's position so far by saying: melodrama is legitimate in so far as it shows us certain truths about life. Its function is to excite, but its purpose is to illuminate and to comment. If we turn from Miss Bowen to another of Greene's favourites, Henry James, we can see this idea working independently of the adolescent bias so obvious in "The Lost Childhood". In "The Lesson of the Master", as we know, Greene defends James against critics who view his work as being polished civilized, superficial - removed from "'real life'" (The Lost Childhood and Other Essays, p. 49). In fact, Greene says, James had a knowingness about corruption that is only faintly concealed in his eloquent prose and sophisticated characterizations. James knew, he says, that "life is violent and art has to reflect that violence" (p. 49). But what saves his novels from the clutches of popular romance is his ability to interpret that violence: to show its source and explain its context. Here is the heart of his argument; and I should point out that when Greene uses the term "melodrama" in this instance, he

means melodrama in its worst sense, as an end in itself:

The novel by its nature is dramatic, but it need not be melodramatic, and James's problem was to admit violence without becoming violent. He mustn't let violence lend the tone (that is melodrama): violence must draw its tone from all the rest of life; it must be subdued, and it must not, above all, be sudden and inexplicable. (p. 49)

It sounds straightforward, perhaps; a matter of carefully planning and executing a certain sequence of events. But there is more than simple craftsmanship in James's stories of moral decay, just as there is more than melodrama alone can achieve in Miss Bowen's "sense of doom". What Greene sees as the key to successful melodrama is not mechanics but temperament: a proclivity to strong emotion combined with an ability to assess the implications of that emotion.³ Recall Greene's description of James's private universe: a mind tormented by a sense of self-treachery. It is only because James was himself driven by a ruling passion that he was able to portray driven souls so convincingly, not as the uni-dimensional figures one gets in popular romance, but as people whose emotions are complex, subtly concealed, and, above all, part of an intricate web of ongoing circumstances and events. Consider the delicate quality of The Portrait of a Lady, a novel in which the plot, as Greene says, is blatantly melodramatic:

³Speaking, in an interview, of the importance of melodrama as a "working tool", Greene said: "I am not deliberately melodramatic; don't get too annoyed if I say I write in the way that I do because I am what I am". (See Shuttleworth and Raven in Hynes, pp. 165-166)

. . . it is as if James, looking round for the events which were to bring his young woman, Isabel Archer, into play, had taken the first to hand: a fortune-hunter, the fortune-hunter's unscrupulous mistress, and a young American heiress caught in the meshes of a loveless marriage. . . . We can almost see the young James laying down some popular three-decker of the period in his Roman or Venetian lodgings and wondering, 'What could I do with even that story?' (Essays, p. 55)

What he did with that story, according to Greene, was to show to what end melodrama, in real life, moves: not to a felicitous, neat conclusion but to an anti-climactic and temporary state of suspension. "There is no possibility of a happy ending," Greene says, for James saw life with a "bitter precision", not "with the despairing larger-than-life gesture of a romantic novelist" (p. 58). He shows us what melodramatic ingredients life does hold - innocent people and evil, fortunate events and calamitous; but he shows us too that life has a maddening way of dissipating these portentous configurations and leaving us to make some sense of them in the context of more ordinary reality.

A good example of what Greene would call the proper use of melodrama is his own thriller, The Ministry of Fear. This novel, perhaps better than any other of his, combines the ingredients I have talked about so far that give his view of melodrama its peculiar flavour: the appeal to popular, instinctive emotions, the deference to childhood as the original melodramatic state, and the respect for realistic melodrama à la James - realistic, that is, by virtue of its personal source and its uncompromising conclusions. Greene wrote The Ministry of Fear

during his period of wartime service in Freetown: a time when the view that the collective emotions of England at war were a positive popular force was crystallizing in his mind. He was now an active contributor to the war effort, part of what he called "a people's war;"⁴ and his novel was to depict an ordinary man caught up in the horror of what was then thought to be a very real danger - fifth columnist subversion. But he was also in Africa, the land which, by way of King Solomon's Mines, had caused to stir in him the first boyish longings for adventure, mystery, and romance. Greene pays tribute to this childhood legacy by introducing each chapter of the book with an epigram from Charlotte M. Yonge's The Little Duke. The use of the epigrams is only a minor melodramatic device, but each adds a little prick of excitement ("You will find every door guarded" - p. 72; "A business that could scarcely have been pleasant" - p. 173) and serves as a reminder of Greene's lost childhood.

As for melodrama of the kind Greene admires in James, it is the key to the novel's integrity. The plot is improbable enough: a man (Arthur Rowe), with a past personal tragedy as yet unresolved, becomes involved, by an absurd coincidence, in the intrigues of a group of fifth columnists. He is pursued, captured, and held by the group, and falls in love with someone who may or may not be an enemy agent. Rowe escapes, sees the criminals brought to justice, and ends up with the woman he loves who is not, as it turns out, one of the conspirators.

⁴See my discussion in Chapter V, p. 187.

It is all highly diverting; but it is convincing, too. For one thing, the sense of terror which pervades the book is not, as Orwell said of Midnight, worked up arbitrarily, but made to co-exist with realistic happenings - in this case the palpable atmosphere of London during the blitz. The intrusion of a stranger (Rowe's first contact with the ministry of fear) into the simple domesticity of his flat, while the bombs explode regularly outside, is only one example:

The stranger's voice said, 'Now you and I are intelligent men. We can talk freely . . . about things.' Rowe had no idea what he meant. Somewhere two miles above their heads an enemy bomber came up from the estuary. 'Where are you? Where are you?' its uneven engine-beat pronounced over and over again. Mrs. Purvis had left them; there was a scrambling on the stairs as she brought her bedding down, a slam of the front door; she was making for her favourite shelter down the street. 'There's no need for people like you and me to get angry,' the stranger said, 'about things.' (pp. 19-20)

Here, a sense of the safe and commonplace, symbolized by Rowe's landlady Mrs. Purvis, is set up in contrast to the frightening "Where are you?" chant of the bomber engine and the even more frightening - because inexplicable - presence of the sinister stranger.

For another thing, Greene uses all the mechanical devices which make for excitement and suspense - mystery, pursuit, capture, escape - for a specific purpose: to mirror the emotional turmoil of Rowe's inner self. Rowe's preoccupations are all the more convincing because they echo Greene's own. Rowe is as much a betrayer (of his own, dead wife) as he is betrayed; he discovers his forgotten real self, emerges from his amnesiac state by

probing secrets which, like the images of Greene's own psyche, are extremely fearful;⁵ and he comes to the conclusion, in the end, that commitments must be tentative, that the whole man is made up of both the happy man and the unhappy. Greene closes the novel with: "It seemed to him that after all one could exaggerate the value of happiness . . ." (p. 260); and if he seems to be emulating James's "bitter precision", he is also stating a truth he had discovered already for himself.

So far we know that good melodrama, in Greene's eyes, proceeds from a temperamental source, and a particular one at that. But how is it actually achieved? What sort of technical decisions does it involve, and what tricks of execution does it depend on? Plot, we know, is only a first step: "the machinery," as Greene calls it (Essays, p. 55). But what is it that someone like James does technically to flesh out his plots, to make them convincing and suggestive? To Greene, and indeed to James, it is largely a matter of constructing an elaborate yet subtle design, softening as it were the bold outlines of life's crude course and weaving them into a pattern. Let us go back for a moment to The Portrait of a Lady, and listen to James's description of his structural intentions in the novel:

⁵Significantly, the key step in Rowe's process of self-discovery occurs when he opens the green baize door which separates a secret wing of the "hospital" where he is imprisoned from the other wards. I discuss this more fully in my concluding chapter. Helpful on Greene's use of the green baize door as a symbol of his childhood experience of crossing a frontier (originally, the frontier between home and school) - with all its attendant fear and fascination - is Ian Gregor's "The Greene Baize Door" in Blackfriars, XXXVI (September 1955).

Such is the aspect that to-day "The Portrait" wears for me: a structure reared with an "architectural" competence, as Turgenieff would have said, that makes it, to the author's own sense, the most proportioned of his productions after "The Ambassadors" . . . On one thing I was determined; that, though I should clearly have to pile brick upon brick for the creation of an interest, I would leave no pretext for saying that anything is out of line, scale or perspective. I would build large - in fine embossed vaults and painted arches, as who should say, and yet never let it appear that the chequered pavement, the ground under the reader's feet, fails to stretch at every point to the base of the walls. (Art of the Novel, p. 52)

This is vague, but it does give us some idea of the function of structure. Plot is the workman, piling "brick upon brick", and design and architect, carving out "line", "scale", and "perspective" - the expressive elements of his aesthetic whole. Greene, too, uses an architectural metaphor to describe The Portrait, though he specifies architecture to bring the image more sharply to the eye:

. . . it is as a great, leisurely built cathedral that one thinks of it, with immense smooth pillars, side-chapels and aisles, and a dark crypt where Ralph Touchett lies in marble like a crusader with his feet crossed . . . those huge pillars are required to bear the weight of Time . . . the succession of side-chapels are all designed to cast their particular light upon the high altar: no vista is without its ambiguous purpose. (p. 54)

This too is vague so far as pinpointing actual technique is concerned. But it is helpful in a general sense: with its image of Ralph, dead yet immortal in his stony vigilance; the pillars, silent reminders of the immensity of time; and the high altar, the guardian of destiny.

All seem poised, watchful, as Isabel Archer follows the course James has set for her to follow. The impression we get from both descriptions is that the novel's over-all effect has to do with its proportions: its particular relation of bricks, each one to each of the others, so that all reverberate together to impart their secrets.

Not all of Greene's - or James's - descriptions of structural finesse are quite so allusive. James's Notebooks and Prefaces show how painstakingly he worked out details of intention and effect, and to these records of scrupulous craftsmanship Greene is very much indebted. Perhaps the mainstay of James's theory of structure is his idea of continuity or internal cohesiveness. He was attracted to the dramatic form, for example, because, as he says, in the play "We are shut up wholly to cross-relations, relations all within the action itself; no part of which is related to anything but some other part - save of course by the relation of the total to life" (Art of the Novel, p. 114). Similarly Greene: "any serious novelist," he says, "must have an unremitting consciousness of subject, which will prevent him enlarging his novel by any incidents, characters, or dialogue not vitally necessary to his theme".⁷ Of course, it is rather more difficult in the novel to achieve the sort of organic unity that seems to come almost naturally to the play. In James's view, the novelist has to make a real effort to corral his material in order to prevent its becoming "the perfect paradise of the loose end" (Art, p. 114). "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere," he says,

⁷"Fiction," Spectator, 5519 (April 1934), 551.

"and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so" (Art, p. 5). Greene no doubt has this in mind when he complains of the characteristic looseness of English fiction, the apparent willingness of so many novelists "to be irrelevant, to be picaresque, to be panoramic . . .". "I cannot help preferring," he says, speaking of The Strange River, "that firm line which Mr. Julian Green draws round his subject".⁸

Happily, James and Greene were able to convert this hypothetical firm line from idea to practical tool in their fiction. Neither, certainly, had much success with the much stricter constraints of the dramatic form. Greene, reviewing The Complete Plays of Henry James in 1950, commented: "Unwillingly, we have to condemn the Master for a fault we had previously never suspected the possibility of his possessing - incompetence" (Essays, p. 68). Greene's own ventures into the theatre have been rather more successful.⁹ None, at least, was the "catastrophic failure" (Greene's words) that Guy Domville was. All the same, none of his five plays is very good; the exigencies of the form seem to squash his ideas, to harden them into slightly ridiculous sounding intellectual

⁸"Fiction," Spectator, 5459 (February 1933), 196.

⁹In all, he has written five plays: The Living Room (1953), The Potting Shed (1957), The Complaisant Lover (1959), Carving A Statue (1964), and The Return of A. J. Raffles (1975).

abstractions. Here, for example, is a passage from The Potting Shed:

Sara: You believe in God and life eternal. But I don't want to be that important. I wasn't kissing God when I was kissing you. I was only saying, 'I have remembered to order the steaks. And I know you don't like water-cress. And I'll be here tonight, and next night, and the night after' . . . I don't want eternity. I hate big things - Everest and the Empire State Building.

James: Everest exists.¹⁰

This sort of dialogue is pretty volatile; it needs careful, "tasteful" handling, as Peter Glenville remarks in his Introduction to The Living Room.¹¹ "Theatricality or falseness of any kind will seem out of place and will inevitably cause laughter," Glenville says, though as a director he was clearly excited, not daunted, by the challenge. But how much more at ease both James and Greene - in their very different fashions - appear with the novel: a more personal medium and more porous, capable of absorbing and holding poetic juices. Neither James nor Greene switched his allegiance for long, though neither dismissed altogether the dramatic form as a model for the principle of unity and internal logic. Both simply recognized that they would do better to transplant this principle in their native terrain where it could grow a little more lush. Perhaps, too, both realized how perilously close their plots, stripped of their architectural trappings, came to pure melodrama.

¹⁰London, 1958, pp. 71-72.

¹¹London, 1953, ix.

There is a good example of this curious mixed desire for drawing the "firm line" and allowing a certain amount of freedom to dilate in Greene's Preface to The Third Man.¹² The Third Man was written, Greene says, not "to be read but only to be seen" (p. 6). In other words, it is analogous to a play in the sense that it employs a minimum of devices (basically, scene and dialogue) to carry a whole complex of meanings. And yet for Greene to achieve this economical end successfully it was necessary for him first to write the script in novel form, to work out the intricacies of his story in the manner to which he was accustomed. He says:

To me it is almost impossible to write a film play without first writing a story. Even a film depends on more than plot, on a certain measure of characterization, on mood and atmosphere; and these seem to me almost impossible to capture for the first time in the dull shorthand of a script. One can reproduce an effect caught in another medium, but one cannot make the first act of creation in script form. One must have the sense of more material than one needs to draw on. (p. 6)¹³

The Third Man, of course, was not meant to be anything much more than a good thriller; but that Greene should have felt the need to expand, in even so obvious an exercise in plot-making as this, shows where his natural inclinations lie.

¹²Volume 16, The Collected Edition (London, 1976).

¹³Quite apart from formal considerations, Greene admits to a preference for the novel on the grounds that it is a "one-man business . . . in which I bear the full responsibility for failure": a characteristic Greene touch. (See Gene D. Phillips, "Graham Greene: On the Screen" in Hynes, p. 170.

"One must have the sense of more material than one needs to draw on": this is a sentiment that undoubtedly affects Greene's opinion of the short story form, too, and probably gives us a clue as to why many of his short stories are not very good. The problem Greene had, especially with his early stories, was not one of form (as it was with the play or film script) but one of length. The short story, he says in a 1937 review, has no "time to take our imaginations by anything but rape";¹⁴ and certainly stories such as "The End of the Party", "Brother," "Proof Positive," and "A Little Place off the Edgware Road"¹⁵ live up to that unpleasant image. The fault, I think, lies not in the fact that they deal, typically, with odd and grotesque subjects but in the fact that they are simply too short to give these subjects anything but shock value. Fictional accounts of horror, ugliness, and pointless acts of violence repel to no purpose if they are presented in abbreviated form: a little like newspaper reports of tragedies or disasters. Ugliness or violence, as Greene himself said in "The Lesson of the Master", must be enlarged upon or explained; otherwise they will appeal to little more than our base instinct for voyeuristic horror.

Consider "A Little Place off the Edgware Road", a story Greene wrote in 1939. Like "Proof Positive", it

¹⁴"Irish Short Stories," Spectator, 5710 (December 1937), 1014.

¹⁵These stories appeared originally in Nineteen Stories (1947) and later in Twenty-One Stories (1954).

plays with the idea that corpses do not decay: that the body continues to live after death in its own ghastly fashion. The plot is as follows: a shabby, desolate man, Craven, the victim of a recurring nightmare about "living" corpses, takes shelter from the rain in a dingy, run-down theatre off the Edgware Road. A suicide scene in the film being shown begins to revive his sense of his horrible dream image and his sense that perhaps he is going mad. Quite abruptly his train of thought is interrupted by the arrival of a man who brushes past him to reach the adjacent seat. The man begins to mutter about the death scene in the film. "There would be more blood than you can imagine," he murmurs with "a little bubble in his speech" and a spray of "damp breath" (p. 416). Craven and the man begin to converse and as the man becomes more voluble, he lays his hand - "damp and sticky" (p. 417) - on Craven's hand and pronounces the words "Bayswater Tragedy". The man then leaves as suddenly as he had arrived and it dawns on Craven that this must be the Bayswater murderer: he had seen a poster announcing the crime outside the theatre. Craven rushes out, phones the police and delivers his message, only to be told by the police, "Oh no, we have the murderer . . . It's the body that's disappeared" (p. 419). Trying to convince himself that it is all a dream, Craven sees his face in the mirror above the telephone - dotted with tiny drops of blood. Then he really does go mad. The story, as a whole, conveys little more than does this crude synopsis. It is merely

a brief, grotesque anecdote with no point to it; and we are left wondering why Greene should have bothered with it at all - unless he intended only to tease.

Not all of Greene's stories are so meagre as this one. Some are very good indeed and these tend to be (though they are not always) relatively long. "The Innocent" and "Across the Bridge" stand out in Nineteen Stories because in them Greene avoids worked-up, extraordinary subjects. And "May We Borrow Your Husband?", from the collection of stories with the same name, is simply a good, light, and entertaining exercise in sexual comedy. But the story that is perhaps his best, "Under the Garden," deserves special mention because it is, like many of his unsuccessful ones, fantastical and chilling, but it also has substance.¹⁶ Like "A Little Place off the Edgware Road", the story turns on a confusion between imagined events and real ones, but it manages to draw the reader into the confusion and to invite him to share with the main character the sense of disorientation that life's mysteries can provoke.

Let me recount the plot first. The central figure, Wilditch, is an ordinary middle-aged business man, given to thinking in terms of hard facts and not indulging in flights of fancy. The story begins as Wilditch discovers that he has a terminal disease. He decides to return to the home of his childhood to rid himself of any remaining illusions: to be "bankrupt when death came" (Collected

¹⁶Greene singles out "Under the Garden" as one of his own favourites (see Introduction to Collected Stories, viii).

Stories, p. 172). As Wilditch sets out on this last journey, childhood memories begin to come alive again in his brain: the poetic imagination with which he viewed life as a young boy; the determination with which his so-called progressive mother squelched his fanciful inclinations; and, most importantly, the exceptionally vivid dream he had had as a boy of finding a storehouse of treasure under the garden. When Wilditch reaches the family home and settles in for the night, he discovers among the family memorabilia a story, written by him as a boy, recounting the story of the "dream" treasure-hunt. Inexplicably, this story is a blatant falsification of the experience as Wilditch remembers it. He determines to set the record straight, to reconstruct the story as it really happened. Then follows his detailed account of his dream - or actual adventure - under the garden.

In his reconstruction, Wilditch tells how one night, as a boy, he hid from his brother and mother in the garden and explored the terrain which he planned to use as the setting for an adventure story.¹⁷ He came upon a hole in the ground, under the enormous uplifted roots of an oak tree, and discovered it to be the entrance to an underground cave. Summoning his courage, he crawled through and found himself in a long, dark

¹⁷The scene is reminiscent of Greene's own adventures on Berkhamsted common - which is used again, of course, in The Human Factor.

tunnel. He pressed on till he came to a large cavern where he found: an old, dishevelled man and his witch-like companion, obviously long-time occupants of this subterranean room, and clearly suspicious of this unexpected intruder. Then follows Wilditch's account of the days he spent in the company of this odd couple, a time passed primarily in conversation with the rude but curiously wise man. The boy was very soon made aware of the fact that he was their prisoner, but so fascinated was he with the horrible crudeness of their existence, and so intrigued was he with the prophet-like man - with his lack of civil graces and his raw truthfulness - that the boy knew not whether he ought to be intent on escape or content to remain in this timeless underground world. He did escape, eventually, crawling in terror up through the hole with the witch screaming wildly behind him. But he escaped with one tangible piece of evidence - a "golden po".

Here Wilditch ends his reconstruction. The night has passed and he determines to go down to the garden and to retrace the steps of his boyhood adventure to the enormous old oak tree. He does so and finds the stump of an old oak, its roots almost obscured by overgrown grass. He kicks the earth around it a little and suddenly discovers - an old tin chamber-pot, flecked with yellow paint. He sits, clutching the pot, in a daze for some time. Then he revives and begins to feel "Curiosity . . . growing inside him like the cancer" (p. 237). He had not, after all, succeeded in purging

all his illusions in preparation for death. He recognizes only one thing: "Poor mother," he says, "she had reason to fear" (p. 237).

This superficial summary hardly does justice to the richness of the story, but it gives us enough material to draw a few conclusions. The first thing we notice is that Greene has padded an incredible event with plausible circumstance and realistic detail. In the case of the supernatural, or extraordinary phenomena, the quantity of padding is especially important. In this story, Greene takes the time to build up our willingness to suspend disbelief so that the incredible comes not so much as a revelation but as an intensification of something we have already begun to expect. We want to be partner to the mystification, to consent to it; and we can do that only if it operates on us over time. One of the devices Greene uses to work his deception is a mixed narrative. The first twenty-five pages of the story, for example, are told in the third person. This sets a tone of detachment, and gives the effect of accurate observation. It also serves to establish Wilditch as an ordinary man, doing things that are quite capable of being described objectively. The next thirty-odd pages, beginning with Wilditch's recording of the dream-story and ending with his cessation of writing as the adventure in the tunnel ends, is told, of course, by Wilditch himself. We are led into his consciousness at the point at which our impression of him as a normal, sane person has begun to gel. The remaining six pages revert to third-person narration, but this time

with a turn of the screw, for what this section leads up to is a description of Wilditch's discovery of the chamber-pot, "the golden po", - all rendered by our invisible, detached, and objective reporter. The device is not original, of course. In fact, mixed narrative is a convention used in many mysteries (Collins's The Moonstone, for example) or fantastical tales (James's Turn of the Screw) to bolster credibility. But that Greene should use it at all, and in a short story, suggests that he realized the difficulties he faced in making so strange an event plausible.

The other thing Greene has done in "Under the Garden" that he did not do in "Edgware Road" is play up psychological possibilities to explain (or at least to give the hint of an explanation for) the incredible experience. The achievement of psychological suggestiveness, I think, depends as much on the nature of the subject as on its treatment. I do not mean the nature of the subject in absolute terms but as it corresponds to the writer's own disposition. The trouble with "Edgware Road" is not that the mystery devolves on a corpse; James quite successfully made The Turn of the Screw depend for effect on ghosts. The trouble is that ghosts are not so compelling a force in Greene's psychological make-up as childhood and dreams are. When he has Wilditch say to himself that "a dream too was an experience, the images of a dream had their own integrity" (p. 185), we know that Greene's personal convictions about childhood and the unconscious (not to mention the unconscious and the act of artistic creation)

are making themselves known. The same might be said of James and ghosts, or presences of a vaguely sinister nature. But the point is, psychological credibility depends in part on a temperamental sympathy with one's subject.

Two things about Wilditch's story in "Under the Garden" stand out: it is an event of his childhood and it took, perhaps only ostensibly, the form of a dream. In other words, Wilditch's return to the scene of a boyhood incident is really a return to a primal state of mind: a state of mind where anything might happen and where quite ordinary sensations and perceptions take on the force of symbols. And because this adventure has all the appearance of a dream, it has even more power to proclaim itself as valid. What lies under the garden might exist only in Wilditch's imagination; but its grotesque and fearful images, its crazy logic, and its uncompromising truths are every bit as real, in a psychological sense, as the tangible, measurable quantities in the objective world. All this is so close to Greene's own outlook that he need hardly work at making it vivid to his reader. "I dreamed that I crossed the lake, I dreamed . . . that is the only certain fact and I must cling to it, the fact that I dreamed" (pp. 187-188), Wilditch says at the outset of his reconstruction. But as his story unfolds, he eases gradually into a tone of quiet, calm certainty that it was not a dream. He moves in ever-decreasing circles around the astounding possibility that the adventure

actually did take place: and we watch, and we consent to the logic of his acquiescence.

Twenty-odd years before Greene wrote "Under the Garden" he complained: "The trouble about short stories is that one is continually beginning again . . . one misses . . . the drive, the accumulative effect, of a novel."¹⁸ In "Under the Garden" he proves that it is possible to achieve an accumulative effect, at least on a small scale. But the statement brings up another point we ought to consider in view of his other, less successful ventures into the short story form. In the Introduction to the Collected Edition of his stories, Greene makes a distinction between novelists, like himself, who happen to write short stories and short story writers, like V. S. Pritchett and Maupassant, who happen to write novels. This distinction, he says, is "a distinction between two different ways of life" (ix). He goes on: "With a novel . . . the author is not the same man at the end of the book as he was at the beginning. It is not only that his characters have developed - he has developed with them . . ." (ix). A novelist is by nature someone who wants to be "encrusted with characters," to "live with another character for years on end, picking up his jealousies, his meanness, his dishonest tricks of thought, his betrayals" (ix).

Now, the point this raises so far as structure, or predetermined design, is concerned is this: that

¹⁸"Short Stories," Spectator, 5552 (November 1934), 28.

the novelist feels most comfortable with a form that allows a certain amount of unconscious development of characters, ideas, and scenes as the writing is taking place. In the case of the short story, Greene says, "One knew too much about the story before one began writing" (vii). During the writing of a novel, on the other hand,

. . . at any moment the unexpected might happen - a minor character would suddenly take control and dictate his words and actions. Somewhere near the beginning, for no reason I knew, I would insert an incident which seemed entirely irrelevant, and sixty thousand words later, with a sense of excitement, I would realize why it was there - the narrative had been working all that time outside my conscious control. (vii)

As he goes on to say in the Introduction, he did come to realize that the short story form allows some flexibility: "the surprises might not be so far reaching as in a novel, but they were there all the same" (viii). But he had to keep pressing himself to capitalize on this degree of freedom, to trust, as he puts it, "the divagations of the mind" (vii).

What we notice particularly about these remarks is the repetition of words and phrases that have a melodramatic connotation: "One knew too much," "the unexpected might happen," "a sense of excitement," "surprises". That Greene should refer to the creative process in such terms is not surprising: the fact that many of his stories and novels were inspired by dreams indicates the faith he has in the unconscious, not to mention the fondness he has for its peculiarities of logic and imagery.¹⁹ But if we consider a few examples of Greene's

¹⁹See my discussion in Chapter I, p. 45.

"surprises" we will see that they do seem to emerge spontaneously from the recesses of his mind and take shape of their own free will as it were. Though Greene does not mention it, the dream-experience in "Under the Garden" has this quality. Quite apart from the obvious parallels one can draw between Wilditch and Greene (the liberal upbringing, the fascination with the "truth" of dreams), there is a good deal of familiar Greene material in the rambling monologue of the prophet-like old man, Javitt. Some twenty-five pages are built around this man's unabashed observations: "Things grow differently underground" (p. 209); "Beauty doesn't come from beauty. All that beauty can produce is prettiness" (p. 211); "Be disloyal; it's your duty to the human race" (p. 215); "Maria and I are both rogues . . . It's the hardest thing in the world for a rogue to survive" (p. 213). The truths keep tumbling out, in no particular order; and the scene brings to mind someone engaged in an exercise in free association, giving voice to thoughts as they occur to him.

But there are other examples of Greene's surprises that are perhaps more truly representative of what he means by unconscious creation. He in fact singles out certain characters who fall into this category: the "poor, hopeless Mr. Prewitt" in Brighton Rock,²⁰ and Minty, the rag-tag reporter in England Made Me. It is appropriate that Prewitt should have evolved as so vivid a character in Greene's mind: the essence, really, of

²⁰See Introduction to Brighton Rock, xiii.

Greene's image of Brighton, as he testifies in his Introduction to the novel. It is Prewitt ("watching with sad envy 'the little typists go by carrying their little cases'" - xiii) who becomes responsible for awakening in Pinkie the first stirrings of empathy for another human being. "A man was coming alive before his eyes" (Brighton Rock, p. 262), so Greene writes of Pinkie's encounter with Prewitt; and it is one of the few signs we get that Pinkie is not spiritually bankrupt.

Minty is more obvious even than Prewitt as a character who "took over" and spiced the mechanical process of composition with a little excitement. The interesting thing about Minty is that, unlike Prewitt, he had no place whatsoever in Greene's original scheme for the novel. This is how Greene describes him:

He was entirely unexpected when he emerged from the pre-conscious - this remittance man who woke up one morning in his Stockholm lodgings watched by a spider under a tooth glass . . . I had no intention of introducing into the story a sly, pathetic Anglo-Catholic, a humble follower, perhaps, of Sir John Betjeman, who would steal all the scenes in which he played a part and have the last word, robbing even Kate of her curtain at Anthony's funeral. Oh yes, I resented Minty, and yet I couldn't keep him down.²¹

No matter how much Greene resented Minty, it is characters like him who give Greene's novels a peculiarity, rather in the way an idiosyncratic gesture - a tilting of the head, or a tugging at an ear lobe - gives a person an intriguing individuality. One could go on picking out examples of unexpectedly "live" characters:

²¹Introduction to England Made Me, x.

Tench, the dentist, in The Power and the Glory, with his chronic indigestion, his array of hopelessly inadequate and unsanitary professional instruments, and his lonely nostalgia for England; or Daintry, in The Human Factor, who lunches alone in his tiny flat on sardines and left-over bread and cheese. It is no accident that these characters are typically seedy: weather-beaten loners, existing on the fringe of respectable society, yet possessors of some individual spark of integrity. Perhaps Greene resents his Mintys partly because they touch him so closely. Each is a little betrayal of a private obsession - truthful, perhaps, but treacherous nonetheless. He does justify his resentment on the grounds that "live" characters interfere with the symmetry of one's design:

. . . one can't have too many characters who are really created. They overload the book. The character who comes out from one's unconscious is a fairly heavy load on a book. If you have two of those in a book you have to have gradations of minor characters, and it's very easy to overload a book with created characters. It's like an overloaded ship - it wobbles in hard weather.²²

But it is probably truer to say that they grate because they are parasitic, like "lampreys,"²³ as Greene says, encrusting the novelist with unpleasant extensions of his secret self.

This idea that the writer is a victim of his own creations is not, of course, original. One thinks of

²²Bryden interview, 544.

²³Introduction to Collected Stories, ix.

Flaubert identifying so closely with his Anna Bovary that the process of composing her story becomes positively painful. Indeed, Greene mentions Flaubert in the Introduction to his short stories and points out how, in his letters, "you can see him becoming Madame Bovary, developing in himself her destructive passion" (x). In a slightly different way, closer to Greene's idea that one must trust "the divagations of the mind," one thinks of Coleridge's experience (albeit drug-induced) of having mentally composed "Kubla Khan" in a state of semi-consciousness. But whatever form this subliminal invention takes, that it is an important part of the creative process to Greene is quite clear. So important is it, in fact, that he uses it to orchestrate one of his better novels, The End of the Affair. In the novel, the idea of unconscious, or spontaneous, development of scene and character is worked up deliberately: that is, as a controlling structural device. But so closely does Greene make it parallel the real thing that the novel becomes a metaphor for the creative process itself.

Maurice Bendrix, the narrator and main character of The End of the Affair, is a professional writer. He is, moreover, a writer who is extremely well-versed in points of technique and very proud of the self-discipline so finely displayed in his fictional offspring. This is how he describes the regimen to which he has committed himself in the interest of his profession:

Over twenty years I have probably averaged five hundred words a day for five days a week. I can produce a novel in a year, and that allows time for revision and the correction of the typescript. I have always been very methodical and when my quota of work is done, I break off even in the middle of a scene. Every now and then during the morning's work I count what I have done and mark off the hundreds on my manuscript. (pp. 31-32)

Now, he has come to write his own story, the story of the only love affair he has ever had that had the power to upset this routine. And this is how he begins:

A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead. I say 'one chooses' with the inaccurate pride of a professional writer who - when he has been seriously noted at all - has been praised for his technical ability, but do I in fact of my own will choose that black wet January night on the Common, in 1946, the sight of Henry Miles slanting across the wide river of rain, or did these images choose me? It is convenient, it is correct according to the rules of my craft, to begin just there, but if I had believed then in a God, I could also have believed in a hand plucking at my elbow, a suggestion, 'Speak to him: he hasn't seen you yet.' (p. 1)

By his own admission, then, at least one of the structural decisions he would normally make with painstaking deliberateness has been made for him already. But as Bendrix's account of the affair progresses, it becomes clear that much more than his opening scene is outside his control. He starts with a wet January night in 1946, the beginning of his ostensible story, but proceeds to stray from this time period to include scenes from two other time periods: 1939-1944, the time of the affair, and 1944-1946, the time immediately following

the affair. More than this, Bendrix claims at the outset that "this is a record of hate far more than of love" (p. 1), but as his story begins to spill over into the time of the affair, memories of his lover, Sarah, start to interfere with his intended bias. Indeed, so early as the opening sequence, as Bendrix sits with Henry Miles, he begins to recall the reason for their acquaintance and lets slip a comment, as if by accident, about his unscrupulous methods:

I had . . . begun in 1939 to write a story with a senior civil servant as the main character . . . and the first night I took Sarah out to dinner I had the cold-blooded intention of picking the brain of a civil servant's wife. . . . she was so pleased that anybody should take Henry seriously . . . an . . . assistant secretary [in] the Ministry of Home Security. . . . I used to laugh at that later in those moments when you hate your companion and look for any weapon . . . (pp. 4-5)

What Greene has done, then, is to set the stage for what turns out to be a full scale betrayal. Bendrix is neither the master of his design nor the master of his emotions; and the sequence of narrated events which follows the opening scene is interrupted increasingly by Bendrix's admissions of his true feelings. In Book I, for example, one of the seven chapters consists of a scene from the time of the affair, and Bendrix allows us to see how its images will not let themselves be excluded from the account: "Why, at the moment when Mr. Parkis returned across the Common, he didn't even know that Sarah and I had once been lovers. And when I write that word my brain against my will travels

irresistibly back to the point where pain began" (p. 41). In Book II, four of the eight chapters are devoted to the love affair; and by Book III, it has encroached on Bendrix's original design so thoroughly that the Book consists entirely of Sarah Miles's diary account of the same experience. In Books IV and V, the account of the affair is over and Bendrix can devote himself to the hatred which motivated him to write initially of that period just preceding Sarah's death when he hired a private detective to spy on her; and the period just following her death when his jealousy of Henry, Smythe, and Sarah's inexplicable lover God has full vent. But this period, approaching the time of Bendrix's act of narration as it does, imposes its own clues as to Bendrix's state of mind; he is now living with Henry, a fact which by itself suggests the limits of his hatred. And his final statement, "I'm too tired and old to learn to love" (p. 211) not only misrepresents Bendrix's true feeling for Henry but also recalls his first statement (" . . . if I had believed then in a God") regarding the most profound manifestation of love.

There are things in The End of the Affair that Greene does not very much like, especially the use he made of apparently God-induced miracles to chip away at and finally undermine altogether Bendrix's atheism. So strong was his sense of guilt at "cheating"²⁴ both himself and the reader that he felt impelled to revise

²⁴See Introduction to The End of the Affair, ix.

the novel for the Collected Edition, to give the miracles some natural explanation. Nevertheless, he feels the book is "more simply and better written than its predecessors" (ix). This he attributes to its elaborate chronological structure (a device, incidentally, for which he is indebted to Ford Madox Ford²⁵). But there is no doubt that the novel's effect has something to do as well with its narrative stance. The End of the Affair is the first instance (with the exception of some of his stories and The Third Man) in which Greene uses a first-person narrator. Now this form of narration seems an obvious choice for the subject: to see the process of unconscious creation at work we must be within the mind so engaged. But it was a choice that was to have consequences for something other than technical effect. It was to have consequences for the religious preoccupations that had directed all Greene's novels since Brighton Rock.²⁶ Greene's use of point of view is a subject that deserves some attention for its own sake and one that I should like to turn to now. But as we look at this aspect of his technique in detail, we will be drawn back to The End of the Affair to see just how it figures as a kind of methodological and emotional turning point in his career.

²⁵Greene says in the Introduction: "I had learnt something from my continual re-readings of that remarkable novel

²⁶The Good Soldier by Ford Madox Ford . . ." (ix).
I except the "entertainments" The Confidential Agent and The Ministry of Fear.

CHAPTER IX
POINT OF VIEW

Of all the tools of technique to which Greene devotes a good deal of critical attention, point of view, or narrative voice, seems the most problematic. It is the only technical subject on which his opinion changes dramatically during his most active critical period (that is, from the early thirties to the late forties). We know that very early on Greene had discovered his essential position on style so far as objective "truthfulness" and subjective colouring were concerned. The same is true for the mechanics of plot and the intricacies of structure: on both he had pretty clear ideas that never really wavered as he evolved as an artist. But as for point of view, there is very little evidence to show that before the forties Greene saw in it much potential for conveying a "poetic". He felt strongly enough about it to call it "the primary problem of [the novelist's] art;"¹ but he tended to think of point of view as primarily a structural device about which one made certain clear-cut, mechanical decisions

¹"Myers and Myers," Spectator, 5573 (April 1935), 664.

prior to writing. It is true that with respect to James at least - in "The Lesson of the Master" - he made a connection between method and the transmission of values. But James was special. In the case of writers who lacked the obsessional quality Greene found in James, or writers whose obsessions did not pluck a chord in Greene, he was far less able and willing to explore the persona concealed behind the narrative mask.

This is not so curious as it might seem. The fact is, Greene had not yet, in the thirties, found his own voice, his own point of view; nor had he yet worked out a method (a different one, at any rate, from that of his first three novels) in which to couch his private rhetoric. The embryonic themes were there: the child as father to the man, the symbolic power of the unconscious, the seductive mystique of faith, and the unavoidable pressure of politics. But none was yet ripe, and none certainly was ready to be assimilated into some fuller, more rounded life view. It is helpful to follow the stages by which Greene moved toward what I earlier called his "worldly poetic" from this new angle - his treatment of point of view - for the evolution of this aspect of his method, perhaps more than any other, mirrors the sorts of obstacles he faced, and eventually overcame, to arrive at a mature and confident attitude.

Let us begin by calling to mind, for a moment, Greene's respectful remarks of James: on how his "rules" were liberating because he never mistook them for his ends: on how James delighted in his "'exquisite treacheries'"

against the dogma of point of view for the sake of - as James himself put it - "the moral involved."² Now listen to a few of Greene's comments on point of view from other reviews written at about the same time as "The Lesson of the Master". In a 1933 review he states that a novel ought to be "carefully self-contained, free from irrelevances and from the author's intrusion."³

Two weeks later he elaborates:

. . . if an author begins to show a personal attachment to one of his characters, he introduces into the reader's mind emotions ruinous to his receptivity. The reader begins to quarrel with the author; he begins to argue. What is it, after all, but a form of self-love to feel emotionally moved by characters created by oneself?⁴

And in 1934, we get the point even more emphatically: "the reader and the author have a quite different reality from [the] characters and must be kept rigidly out of the book if the characters are to make a proper impression."⁵ The most he is willing to concede to the author is the right to establish a "unifying atmosphere, a dominant mood,"⁶ though it is difficult to ascertain from what exactly Greene sees this mood proceeding. He harps on the crime of "incomplete parturition" which comes, he says, from "a misuse of the author's personality;"⁷ and praises any novelist who "has covered up his tracks" so thoroughly that one cannot even guess at

²Art of the Novel, p. 326

³"Fiction," Spectator, 5497 (November 1933), 638.

⁴"Fiction," Spectator, 5499 (November 1933), 730.

⁵"Fiction," Spectator, 5529 (June 1934), 938.

⁶"Fiction," Spectator, 5541 (September 1934), 336.

⁷"Fiction," Spectator, 5543 (September 1934), 412.

the sources for his material.⁸ Odd that these sentiments should just precede "The Lesson of the Master"; even odder that they should just precede too his foray into James's sources in "Henry James: The Private Universe".

To some extent, Greene's narrow-mindedness in these early reviews is connected, paradoxically, with the very fact that he held James in such esteem. James was an object of adulation for many novelists and critics at the time, and his inadvertent status as the "Master" pushed his disciples to harden his working principles into points of doctrine. Foremost among the critical devotees of James's method was Percy Lubbock, whose somewhat hagiographic book The Craft of Fiction definitely influenced Greene.⁹ Lubbock had stated dogmatically: "The whole intricate question of method I take to be governed by the question of point of view" (p. 251), and pronounced, even more boldly, that with James's particular use of point of view "the art of dramatizing the picture of somebody's experience . . . touches its limit. There is indeed no further for it to go" (p. 171). That Greene, as an apprentice craftsman, should be drawn to so tempting a formula for success as Lubbock offered is not surprising. As a kind of practitioner's manual,

⁸"Fiction," Spectator, 5531 (June 1934), 1010.

⁹The Craft of Fiction (London, 1921). In his interview with Shuttleworth and Raven Greene said: "Of the many many books on the art of the novel, only [Lubbock's] has interested me at all" (Hynes, p. 165); and in A Sort of Life he says that his "long studies" in the book taught him "the importance of 'the point of view'" (p. 198).

The Craft of Fiction seemed to answer a need that Greene undoubtedly saw himself as having.

At the same time as Greene was stressing the merits of narrative objectivity, he was working hard to achieve the kind of neutral presentation of character and scene his early novels (The Man Within, The Name of Action, and Rumour At Nightfall) had lacked. In Stamboul Train (1932) and It's A Battlefield (1934) in particular, he took pains to diminish the "presence" of the narrating medium and to record events, thoughts, and feelings from the point of view of his central characters. "Sacrifice, Mr. Surrogate thought, as he stared from the window of his bare and tasteful room into the wide blue pool of the Bloomsbury square" (p. 29); or "Jules Briton dried his hands on the towel which hung behind the counter and warmed them close to the great copper urn" (p. 33): these examples from It's A Battlefield do little to conjure up an image of the narrator when compared with this from The Man Within: "The blackberry twigs plucked at him and tried to hold him with small endearments, twisted small thorns into his clothes with a restraint like a caress, as though they were the fingers of a harlot in a crowded bar" (p. 2). They remind us a little of the view from Isherwood's camera eye in Goodbye to Berlin: "the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair":¹⁰ a simple, bare record of facts, cool, detached. Certainly the method

¹⁰See my discussion in Chapter V, p. 183.

of Stamboul Train and It's A Battlefield is an advance over the self-conscious, almost cloying intimacy of the early novels. But it makes for a kind of sterility, an absence of feeling or warm emotion that Greene came later to view as essential to the poetic.

After Stamboul Train and It's A Battlefield came England Made Me - something of an anomaly for Greene for it introduces into a conventional narrative from multiple points of view sections of stream-of-consciousness prose. Here, perhaps, Greene was trying to recapture a little of the subjective intensity that The Man Within had achieved and that Stamboul Train and It's A Battlefield had lacked. Ostensibly, however, the passages of interior monologue were meant to convey, as Greene says, the "ambiguity in the minds of Kate and Anthony"¹¹ with regard to their near-incestuous relationship. "They were continually on the edge of self-discovery," he goes on to say; "but some self-protective instinct warded off, with false or incomplete memories and irrelevancies, the moment of discovery" (xi).

Greene admits to having, still, a "soft spot" in his heart for the novel, though he admits, too, that it is a novel that has never appealed to the public. It is difficult to determine what it is about the book that gives rise to Greene's affection. Perhaps the answer lies simply in the fact that for him it was experimental: something to be tried at least once - like screen-writing, later, or writing for the theatre. Certainly in his

¹¹Introduction to England Made Me, xi.

reviews he is consistently hard on stream-of-consciousness prose, describing it (so early as 1933) as "a little outmoded"¹² and in 1938 remarking:

. . . the method . . . must have seemed in 1915 a revivifying change from the tyranny of the 'plot'. But time has taken its revenge: after twenty years of subjectivity we are turning back with relief to the old dictatorship, to the detached and objective treatment . . .¹³

As for England Made Me, there is nothing wrong in absolute terms with his subjectivity: it is simply that its frequent shifts from external to internal points of view, compounded by shifts from one character's to another's point of view, produce an uneven - not to mention confusing - effect.

After England Made Me came A Gun for Sale and Brighton Rock: again, rather calculated exercises in the use of controlled points of view and narrator detachment. In Brighton Rock, for example, the narrative proceeds variously from the perspectives of Pinkie, Ida Arnold, Rose, and briefly Mr. Prewitt. Of course, we are meant to engage sympathetically with Pinkie (deliberately distanced though he is) and not with Ida; but what moral sympathy Greene aims to invest in Pinkie gets lost in the confusion of his religious message. We end up being tempted to share the values of Ida, or being moved by the pathetic existence of Prewitt, or being tempted to pity the innocent Rose, - or being drawn to

¹²"Fiction," Spectator, 5471 (May 1933), 654.

¹³Essays, pp. 151-152. See also my discussion in Chapter III, p. 130. In the humorous "literary soirée" scene of The Third Man, Greene has fun with "stream-of-consciousness" as one of the catch phrases of literary pedants. (I discuss this in my concluding chapter.)

nobody at all. The various points of view are more strongly and more warmly presented, perhaps, than in It's A Battlefield; but what they gain in passion they lose in certainty of focus.

With The Confidential Agent in 1939, there is a change in Greene's method: a new attempt, perhaps, at achieving the kind of poetic warmth that England Made Me had only partly realized. For the first time since his first three novels, Greene chose to work with a single point of view: that of D., the agent from some anonymous country who is dropped into the conspiratorial atmosphere of pre-war England. There are two things worth noting about The Confidential Agent: it is a spy thriller of sorts and it centres on a political idea that was to figure largely in Greene's later development. We remember D. saying

You've got to choose some line of action and live by it. Otherwise nothing matters at all. . . . My people commit atrocities like the others. . . . But I still prefer the people they lead - even if they lead them all wrong.¹⁴

He has chosen to commit himself politically, but for personal reasons; it is as if the spy scenario - ready-made for variations on the themes of betrayal and allegiance - provoked Greene to speak with some confidence, to take one firm line as opposed to several, indefinite ones. He was beginning to see that there might be some answer to the questions he had raised in It's A

¹⁴See Chapter I, p. 82.

Battlefield, and he was therefore able to choose his moral centre with some authority. Interestingly enough, with D., too, Greene gives us the first of his intelligent points of view. D. is a scholar, an expert on medieval French literature and has the distinction of having discovered the "Berne MS." of the Song of Roland. His credentials are, perhaps, laid on a bit too thickly; but it seems clear that Greene was intent on developing a character who could reasonably be expected to live by some carefully thought-out principles. Unlike the characters of It's A Battlefield - the Assistant Commissioner of Police with his unquestioning loyalty to bureaucratic justice, or Mr. Surrogate, with his vague political ideals, or Conrad Drover, with nothing but his own desire for personal revenge - D. has worked out an ideology that satisfies the need for both political pragmatism and personal integrity.

The Power and the Glory appeared one year after The Confidential Agent, and here Greene reverts to the use of multiple points of view. There is not, in this novel, the uncertainty of focus regarding the religious theme that there was in Brighton Rock. Indeed, Greene's moral ideas are worked out quite clearly: that is, we sympathize with the values the priest represents in so far as we can. The extent of our acquiescence depends on our personal beliefs, not on the success with which the priest's position is presented. Still, The Power and the Glory is a "thesis" novel, as Greene says, and

it quite naturally has that curious air of detachment so noticeable in the earlier novels. A good example of this is the execution scene near the end. It is presented from the point of view of the dentist, Mr. Tench, and the physical horror of it is conveyed vicariously, against the background of the grating buzz of the dentist's drill and the unnerving moans of his patient. The martyrdom of the priest is an abstraction only, unspecified, remote.

After The Power and the Glory came The Ministry of Fear, a most interesting link in Greene's progression toward his "point of view". Here, as in The Confidential Agent, there is a single narrative centre, Arthur Rowe. He is by no means intellectual, or even especially discerning about his inner condition and his place in the external world. But that is the point of the novel. Rowe is brought, by stages, and as a consequence of arbitrary events beyond his control, from a state of suspended apathy to a state of enlightened self-awareness. And as we follow his awakening, through memories of childhood scenes, through a clinical process of emotional discovery similar to Greene's own therapy, and through an increasingly palpable series of "real-life" events, we feel that Greene is reproducing metaphorically the pursuit and discovery of his own adult identity. The backdrop is political and the catalyst is the love of a woman: two features The Ministry of Fear has in common with The Confidential Agent. But there is in The Ministry of Fear a personal warmth that even The Confidential Agent

lacked - self-assured though that novel is. With D. Greene showed a man living according to a truth he himself had only just realized, but with Rowe Greene shows what one must live through in order to arrive at that truth.

We must slow our pace now as we come to the immediate post-war period, for it is here, I think, that Greene's poetical treatment of point of view reaches its critical stage. Let us say for summary that by the time Greene wrote The Ministry of Fear he had learned to use point of view for poetic purposes so far as his emotional and political themes were concerned, or at least so far as these themes in a rudimentary form were concerned. But as for his attitude toward religion, it hovered still in a world of abstractions, a collection of ideas - remnants, really, of his early days as an "intellectual convert". He needed to find out what these ideas meant to him in a strictly personal way. Only by doing that could he write something other than a thesis novel like The Power and the Glory, or a novel fraught with contradictions like Brighton Rock.

The first obvious sign that Greene was on the point of voicing his religious beliefs candidly comes, paradoxically, in his 1945 essay on François Mauriac. I say paradoxically because, as we have already noted, the essay is a tribute to the unswerving nature of Mauriac's faith. Perhaps in a back-handed way the example of

Mauriac forced Greene to realize how tenuous were his own convictions or, as he was to say later, how little capable was he of emulating so orthodox a believer as Mauriac. But there is something more definable Greene learned from Mauriac, and this has to do with Mauriac's particular use of point of view. Listen to what Greene has to say about La Pharisienne, a first-person novel, narrated by the faintly disagreeable and self-righteous Louis Pian. Greene is speaking of the dangers of the technically "pure" novel à la Flaubert and goes on to place Mauriac outside this tradition:

The exclusion of the author can go too far. Even the author, poor devil, has a right to exist, and M. Mauriac reaffirms that right. It is true that the Flaubertian form is not so completely abandoned in this novel as in Le Baiser au lépreux; the 'I' of the story plays a part in the action; any commentary there is can be attributed by purists to this fictional 'I', but the pretence is thin - 'I' is dominated by I .
(Essays, p. 117)

How dramatic a reversal this is of his opinion in the thirties: "the reader and the author have a quite different reality from [the] characters and must be kept rigidly out of the book if the characters are to make a proper impression"! He goes on to quote two passages from La Pharisienne and then comments:

In such passages one is aware, as in Shakespeare's plays, of a sudden tensing, a hush seems to fall upon the spirit - this is something more important than the king, Lear, or the general Othello, something which is unconfined and unconditioned by plot. 'I' has ceased to speak, I is speaking.
(p. 118)

Now there is no doubt that part of the appeal of Mauriac's 'I' for Greene lay in its religious message. At the end of the essay Greene suggests that one hears in Mauriac's 'I' the "very accents of Pascal" (p. 120). But it was not very long after this passionate tribute to Mauriac that Greene began to doubt the sincerity of his enthusiasm; and this he did as a consequence of listening to his own "I". In 1948 two things appeared that show this quite clearly. In the first, Why Do I Write?, Greene gives a very honest appraisal of his position as an artist with respect to institutional attitudes generally and to the Catholic Church specifically. Disloyalty, we remember him saying, is the artist's privilege and duty; and he comes down quite hard on the writer for whose loyalty to Catholic doctrine he had only three years before felt such respect. He says: "If my conscience were as acute as M. Mauriac's showed itself to be in his essay "God and Mammon", I could not write a line" (p. 31). "Literature has nothing to do with edification," he goes on; "I am not arguing that literature is amoral, but that it presents a personal moral, and the personal morality of an individual is seldom identical with the morality of the group to which he belongs" (p. 32).

The Heart of the Matter, the second piece to come out in 1948, turns on this very point. Here, for the first time, Greene treats the religious theme from a single point of view - that of Scobie; and although Scobie is not offered as the perfect model of disloyalty, or

thoroughly exonerated for his waywardness, he is still the first character with whom Greene seems to share some intimacy so far as his religious qualms are concerned. The Heart of the Matter is not a wholly successful venture, for it was Greene's first attempt to develop artistically an idea that seemed deceptively simple in the format of Why Do I Write? But the flaws in the book, the cracks in the seams as it were, show that with Scobie Greene was ready to shake up some of the orthodox notions that had seemed so pat, so solid, in The Power and the Glory.

Let us look at Scobie a little more closely to see how he is something of a breakthrough in terms of Greene's "I" and how he is too, being the first of the rebels, something of a victim. In an interview with Philip Stratford, Greene said of Scobie that he is a character "that one had loved too much",¹⁵ and this, I think, is a key to both the strength and the weakness of the novel. It is a strength because it shows that Greene was ready to place the full weight of responsibility for carrying his own spiritual convictions on the shoulders of his main character. We see everything through Scobie's eyes. We are encouraged to share, for example, his tired, resigned attitude to his wife, his pity for the ship's captain whose secret he cannot betray for the sake of duty, his dislike for the faintly mysterious Wilson, his inability to resist the overtures of the opportunistic Yusef, and his compassion for the child-like Helen.

¹⁵Faith and Fiction, p. 237.

Greene builds up the case for Scobie so much that when we come to face the fact of Scobie's "sin", his inability to put regard for his own soul before that of others, we must side with Scobie. "One should look after one's own soul at whatever cost to another" (p. 213), Scobie thinks; but, as he says to God, "I don't trust you. I've never trusted you. . . . I can't shift my responsibility to you. . . . I can't make one of them suffer so as to save myself" (p. 305). Scobie's sense of pity, of course, is tantamount to inordinate pride, but we cannot condemn it because Greene cannot. Not only is Scobie the only character in the novel in whose consciousness we are invited to share, but he is the only character in the novel to show any real compassion. His sense of pity marks him far more as a fellow traveller of Greene than as a strayed member of the Catholic flock.

There is one passage in particular in the novel that shows how forcefully Greene drives a wedge between Scobie and his God - and how conspicuously he plants his moral signposts. It occurs when Scobie is forced to take the sacraments in a state of sin. He has confessed his adultery, but has felt no contrition, for he cannot reconcile his own definition of sin with that of the Church. As Scobie kneels at the altar rail, the scene unfolds, from his point of view, thus:

Father Rank came down the steps from the altar bearing God. The saliva had dried in Scobie's mouth; it was as though his veins had dried. He couldn't look up; he saw only the priest's skirt like the skirt of the medieval war-horse bearing down upon him; the flapping of feet;

the charge of God. If only the archers would let fly from ambush: and for a moment he dreamed that the priest's steps had indeed faltered: perhaps after all something may yet happen before he reaches me: some incredible interposition. . . . But with open mouth (the time had come) he made one last attempt at prayer, 'O God, I offer up my damnation to you. Take it. Use it for them,' and was aware of the pale papery taste of his eternal sentence on the tongue. (p. 264)

The "medieval war-horse bearing down," the "charge of God": these remind us a little of Greene's description in The Lawless Roads of the vivid images of Catholicism that had appealed to him as a young boy. But how cruel those images are now: there is no trace of the "Mother of God" or of "the appalling mysteries of love moving through a ravaged world."¹⁶ It makes one realize how strong was the initial appeal of Catholicism in an imaginative, or literary sense,¹⁷ for when God's representative appears in fact, the effect is altogether fearful. It is Scobie against the enemy - trapped and with no hope of escape.

If Greene's love for Scobie gives the novel a sincerity that was lacking in his previous religious novels, it provides the novel too with a problem. However strong our impression of Scobie as a justified rebel - and victim - may be, he is still idealized as a man whose actions and thoughts are conditioned wholly by the Catholic faith. However sympathetically Greene feels toward Scobie, he still attempts to show that the dictates of the creed with which Scobie wrestles are

¹⁶See my discussion in Chapter I, p. 65.

¹⁷As does, perhaps, the use of the word "papery" to describe the sacramental wafer: the association here being to Greene's (Scobie's) bookishly romantic - and medieval - conception of God.

not to be denied. In this sense, I think, we see at work some traces of Greene as an intellectual convert, as one who admires those for whom the faith is natural and absolute. Scobie, though not a born Catholic, is one of long-standing (sixteen years), and though his wife worries that he converted only in order to marry her, he seems to believe implicitly in God and in the doctrines of the Church. In the following passage, a dialogue between Scobie and his lover, Helen, Scobie's unquestioning loyalty is made very clear - and right:

He said, 'Louise wants me to go to Mass with her, to Communion. I'm supposed to be on the way to Confession now.'

'Oh, is that all?' she asked with immense relief, and irritation at her ignorance moved like hatred unfairly in his brain.

'All?' he said. 'All?' Then justice reclaimed him. He said gently, 'If I don't go to Communion, you see, she'll know there's something wrong - seriously wrong.'

'But can't you simply go?'

He said, 'To me that means - well, damnation. To take my God in mortal sin.'

'You don't really believe in Hell?'

'That was what Fellowes asked me.'

'But I simply don't understand. If you believe in Hell, why are you with me now?'

How often, he thought, lack of faith helps one to see more clearly than faith. (p. 245)

Now, we might be reluctant to attribute much perspicacity to Helen - in this instance or in any other in the novel. She is too young and too simple to have any real understanding of human nature. But she does make a point that one simply cannot ignore: the two halves of Scobie don't fit together. George Orwell said irreverently of Scobie:

If he really felt that adultery was mortal sin, he would stop committing it; if he persisted in it, his sense of sin would

weaken. If he believed in Hell, he would not risk going there merely to spare the feelings of a couple of neurotic women.¹⁸

Poor Scobie is up against two non-Catholics here who are not in a very good position to comment on the psychological possibilities of such a predicament as Scobie's; but the point is, neither is Greene. He himself does not believe fully in "sin" or "Hell",¹⁹ and the force of his personal values, transmitted through Scobie, makes Scobie's doctrinal tenacity quite incredible. Scobie cannot be a good Catholic and a psychologically "true" character (by Greene's definition) at the same time. Greene would like to make him so, but it is an admission of defeat that in the end there is no choice for Scobie but suicide. As Scobie says upon deciding to take his own life, "You see it's an impasse, God, an impasse" (p. 306). Greene, at the end, speaks of the unfathomable depth of God's mercy, but it won't work: there is no way out of a dilemma.²⁰

The title of Greene's next novel, The End of the Affair, is pregnant with innuendoes about Scobie and his impossible situation. With his new hero, Maurice

¹⁸"The Sanctified Sinner" in Hynes, p. 108.

¹⁹In his interview with Christopher Burstall Greene says: "I don't believe in this phrase 'mortal sin', so often used by old-fashioned priests" (673) and then, later, of his school-days: "Thirteen weeks of term was eternity, and one in a sense believed in Hell then, but I lost that belief in Hell with Catholicism" (674). See also my discussion of Greene's view of Mauriac's "sinners" in Chapter IV, p.

²⁰In a very general sense, Scobie is a sophisticated counterpart to Andrews in The Man Within. Both face an impossible choice - the one religious, the other personal - and both, romantically and despairingly, see no way for it but to die.

Bendrix, Greene gives over straining after a man who is really only an ideal, who can never survive because his conflicting allegiances are too absolute to do anything but rend him in two. Maurice Bendrix signals the end of Greene's affair with Scobie's Church, too: the end of his uneasy relationship with "the Scarlet Woman". From now on Greene's intercourse with her was to be more amicable, and more subdued: a compromise in which he chose to emphasise their common interests rather than their points of contention. In an interview Greene granted in 1953 - two years after The End of the Affair was published - he implied that he had got rid of his religious "fixations," and said that the group of novels which dealt with religious themes was now complete.²¹ Looking at The End of the Affair, one can see how it acted as a sort of purge. Not a purge, certainly, of Greene's spirituality; for in the novel Greene brings Bendrix to a state of reluctant belief, a state, we feel, which is preparatory to the sort of calm, benign acceptance of a spiritual force that Greene himself had reached. But there is a purge of the inward conflicts Greene's Catholicism had provoked. Through Bendrix he vents these conflicts very boldly - explains them and to some extent justifies them.

Maurice Bendrix is, as I have said, the first of Greene's characters in a "religious" novel to tell his own story. He is also the last - his successors (Fowler in The Quiet American, Brown in The Comedians, and Pulling

²¹Shuttleworth and Raven in Hynes, pp. 161, 159.

in Travels With My Aunt) moving onto rather different ground. In his Introduction to the novel Greene explains his choice of the first-person form this way:

The slow discovery by a novelist of his individual method is exciting, but a moment comes in middle-age when he feels he no longer controls his method; he has become its prisoner. . . . I had tried to escape from my prison by writing for the films, but The Third Man only beckoned me into another and more luxurious prison. Before I returned to what I consider my proper job I read Great Expectations. I had never before found Dickens a very sympathetic writer, but now I was captivated by the apparent ease with which he used the first person. Here seemed to be an escape from the pattern, a method I had not tried. (vii)

We cannot doubt the appeal of the technical challenge; but if we recall Greene's remarks on La Pharisienne, on the force of Mauriac's "I" behind the narrator's "I", we may assume that Bendrix is the product of poetic motives as well.

For one thing, Bendrix is an atheist, a man who might say: "Prove to me the existence of God - impossible though that is - and I will believe". If he is to accept the proposition, it must be put to him in the form of a mathematical probability. "How twisted we humans are," Bendrix says, "and yet they say a God made us; but I find it hard to conceive of any God who is not as simple as a perfect equation, as clear as air" (p. 6). Echoes of Pascal, surely, and of Greene's own attitude in his pre-conversion days.

Bendrix has, too, the mentality of an outsider, of one who hates the society of believers because he does

not belong to it. He wrangles with Father Crompton, the priest who takes over the arrangements for Sarah's funeral, because he represents the complacent initiate who holds a mysterious trump card that the atheist never gets to see. Father Crompton seems to have a secret about Sarah that Bendrix is not privileged enough to be party to; he seems to have "an intimate knowledge of somebody he had known only for a few hours or days" (p. 197). Bendrix says: "Go back to your own people, father, back to your bloody little box and your beads" (p. 198). Father Crompton reminds one a little of the thoroughly unsympathetic priest to whom Greene's later Maurice - in The Human Factor - turns in vain for comfort. And what a far cry these two priests are from the world of Brighton, from the priest whose appeal to the privileged position of Catholics vis à vis good and evil is supposed to give Pinkie's fate some special significance.

Bendrix fears this secret society as much as he hates it. He resists and resists the possibility that Sarah came to believe in a God, and that she had some special pact with Him that she forced herself to honour. Suddenly it is revealed to Bendrix by Sarah's mother that Sarah had in fact been baptised a Catholic though she herself never knew it; and Bendrix feels a sudden jab of fear,

. . . like a man who has committed the all-but-perfect crime and watches the first unexpected crack in the wall of his deception. How deep does the crack go? Can it be plugged in time? (p. 177)

The wall metaphor is interesting here for it reminds one of Greene's metaphorical use of the Berlin wall (which one faces with equal dread and fascination) as the last frontier of atheism so to speak in "Letter to a West German Friend".²² (It reminds one also of Greene's primary frontier symbol, the green baize door which separated his family from Berkhamsted school.) In a sense, the crack in Bendrix's wall of deception makes possible the erection of the wall of blind faith. The crack cannot be plugged; he must take the spiritual leap, accept the last dogma, for the wall is indisputably there. The sort of wall he is up against is not the same as Scobie's, of course. Scobie's is the Church. He wants to love his God but doctrine bars him from fulfilment. Bendrix's wall is himself; he wants to hate God but his self-hatred, his knowledge of his own fallibility, gets in the way. "O God," he says at the end, "I'm too tired and old to learn to love, leave me alone for ever" (p. 211). It is the same kind of passive acknowledgement of a superior force that characterizes Greene's description of his faith in A Sort of Life: "I cannot be bothered to remember [the arguments for belief] . . . I accept. With the approach of death I care less and less about religious truth. One hasn't long to wait for revelation or darkness" (p. 165).

There is much more in Bendrix that seems to spring from a true source in Greene: his disposition as a

²²See my discussion in Chapter V, p. 196.

novelist, so particular about the mechanics of his craft yet concerned to let "the stream of the unconscious . . . flow undisturbed" (p. 16) to facilitate creation; or his covert fascination with secrecy and intrigue - a characteristic which not only induces him to hire a detective to spy on Sarah but also, more importantly, shows how vulnerable he is to be to the mystique of Sarah's faith. But the point is, Bendrix is a natural man (as Frank Kermode put it²³): selfish, conniving, suspicious, but telling his own story with no pretence of self-justification. He is not unlike Wilditch in "Under the Garden" who undertakes to set the record of his particular "conversion" straight. Bendrix wants to prove his immunity to spiritual infection, Wilditch his immunity to illusion. But both get sucked into the mystique in the very act of reproducing its apparent absurdity. Even more important, both, with the force of their "I", beguile the reader into the seduction, into seeing the process of conversion as a psychological possibility. Certainly Greene's choice of first-person narration in both cases was calculated to bolster the illusion of psychological realism; but, as he said of Louis Piau's "I", "the pretence is thin". The fictional "I" only superficially disguises the real "I"; indeed, it is conditioned by it.

In The End of the Affair, then, Greene roused himself to confront and master much more than the challenge

²³See "Mr. Greene's Eggs and Crosses" in Hynes, p. 136.

of a new method. He says in his Introduction to the novel that he was "grateful" to it for having given him practice in the first-person form, for he was able to use it with ease in his next novel, The Quiet American - a "novel which imperatively demanded it" (xi). But he must have felt grateful to The End of the Affair too for having pushed him to examine the true nature of his faith and to overcome to some extent the obstacles which barred Scobie from anything but despair. Having reached a resolution (however tentative) of the religious question that had been a bugbear for so long, Greene seemed able to progress in his work with a new confidence. The question of faith he never abandoned, but he treated it, more and more, as only a part of the larger question of commitment.

I look on The Quiet American as a watershed between the religious theme that had exercised Greene's creative powers for so long and the more widely-based political theme that has directed his energies ever since. It is an interesting thing about the novel that it is the first of his to divorce the political theme from the thriller genre. I do not mean to suggest by this that there is a difference between The Quiet American and, say, The Confidential Agent or The Ministry of Fear along the lines of Greene's entertainment-novel distinction, but to suggest that there is a difference in tone, or angle of vision, between it and the thirties novels. The question of commitment has lost some of its melodramatic flavour with Fowler: the characteristic pursuit-capture-escape situation is abandoned and the atmospheric

props - claustrophobic fear, vague hints of danger - are used sparingly. There is very little sense, in other words, that external events work on Fowler's inner state with the terrifying urgency that so marked Arthur Rowe's crisis: a sign, I think, that Greene is much more his own master, more able to accommodate the hectic exigencies of life. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Farris have spoken truly of Greene's "terror of life;"²⁴ but with Fowler some of that terror is curbed simply because he has the resources to see it for what it is.

One other interesting point about the novel is this: in terms of setting, it is entirely new ground for Greene. He went to Malaya in 1951, as he says in his Preface to The Quiet American, to write an article on the guerrilla war there for Life magazine; he happened to stop in Hanoi - where another war was on - and found himself very quickly falling under the "spell" of Indochina. He managed to transfer his journalistic activities to Hanoi, where he settled in (between return trips to England) to prolong his love affair with the country and to dispatch periodically pieces of characteristic Greene-flavoured journalism.²⁵ This background information is important, I think, for the light it throws on Greene's very personal stake in this altogether novel environment and for the light it throws on his new perspective as a commissioned political observer.

²⁴The Art of Graham Greene, p. 15.

²⁵He "covered" Indochina for Paris-Match (1952), The Sunday Times (1953-1955), and Le Figaro (1954-1955).

Fowler is very much the product of this new voice; his role as a reporter exemplifies Greene's new direction.

These facts - the subdued plot, the fresh foreign scene, and the journalistic flavour - perhaps explain why Greene referred to The Quiet American as a novel which "imperatively demanded" the first-person form. Certainly there is an element of technical propriety in allowing Fowler to tell his own story, for his narrative provides an important ironic comment on his conduct. But before we consider the quality of his presentation, let us sort out what Greene's poetic motives might have been. First, as to the absence of melodrama, the use of Fowler as narrator makes good sense. He, by temperament and by experience, is incapable of being wooed by sensationalism, though it is obvious that the sort of existence he leads, as an on-the-spot reporter in a war-torn country, offers plenty of it. He is also engaged in a battle of sorts for the woman he loves with the innocent, idealistic American, Pyle. Here is a situation ripe with emotional potential. But Fowler's love for Phuong is dispassionate, almost offhand, and his attitude toward Pyle is one of rather resigned cynicism.

There is only one longish scene in the book that has some of the old thriller touches. It occurs when Fowler and Pyle are returning to Saigon from a Caodist festival in Tanyin. Fowler's car runs out of petrol and they are forced to take shelter in a watch-tower guarded by two terrified young Vietnamese soldiers.

Fowler is pragmatic about the danger of their situation, about their chances of passing the night without being attacked by the Vietminh. When the danger materializes - in the form of voices from the dark on the road below demanding they come out - Fowler says to Pyle matter-of-factly, "We're for it" (p. 113). He informs Pyle as to how they will try to make their escape. He begins to lower himself down the watch-tower ladder and imagines there is someone - "something" - coming up:

I don't know why I thought of it as something, that silent stealthy approach. Only a man could climb a ladder, and yet I couldn't think of it as a man like myself - it was as though an animal were moving in to kill, very quietly and certainly with the remorselessness of another kind of creation. The ladder shook and shook and I imagined I saw its eyes glaring upwards. Suddenly I could bear it no longer and I jumped, and there was nothing there at all but the spongy ground, which took my ankle and twisted it as a hand might have done. I could hear Pyle coming down the ladder; I realized I had been a frightened fool who could not recognize his own trembling, and I had believed I was tough and unimaginative, all that a truthful observer and reporter should be. (p. 116)

The whole scene is extremely powerful, taut with suspense and fear; and yet there is a difference between it and the chilling scenes in The Confidential Agent and The Ministry of Fear. The situation is imaginable as one that might actually have happened in Indochina at the time. It is not contrived in the sense that D.'s predicament is, or Rowe's entanglement with fifth columnists is. The danger is tangible, not insinuated, and the enemy identifiable, not elusive and mysterious.

It is as if the use of a real war situation and the use of a reporter's point of view helped Greene to externalize the terrors of life that for Rowe, especially, were so closely bound up with self-induced terror. With Rowe, physical acts are preceded by painful, confused inward scrutiny. With Fowler, there is no question: one acts - and survives, or dies. With the exception of his brief lapse into fearful imaginings as he lowers himself down the ladder, Fowler has his eye fixed clearly on the situation and his place in it. As he observes himself, with a kind of detached irony, we observe too. There are no concealed surprises, no anticipated thrills: no drama beyond what the actions themselves produce.

Greene's other motive for using Fowler's "I" is perhaps more obvious and more important, for it has to do with the question of commitment. Fowler, remember, professes to be a reporter only: "not involved," as he says, unlike his "fellow journalists who called themselves correspondents" (p. 22). The tone of his narrative - superficially at least - upholds this image. But his detachment goes only so far. He cannot avoid making certain observations that betray his principles. And it is the counterpoint between objective reporting and restrained, unadorned - one might say "grown-up" - comment that so delicately throws into relief Greene's own attitude.

There is a good example of this in the scene in which Fowler, having contrived to get himself dropped

into a hot spot near Nam Dinh, surveys a recently devastated farm in the company of a French officer:

Twenty yards beyond the farm buildings, in a narrow ditch, we came on what we sought: a woman and a small boy. They were very clearly dead: a small neat clot of blood on the woman's forehead, and the child might have been sleeping. He was about six years old and he lay like an embryo in the womb with his little bony knees drawn up. 'Malchance,' the lieutenant said. He bent down and turned the child over. He was wearing a holy medal round his neck, and I said to myself, 'The juju doesn't work.' There was a gnawed piece of loaf under his body. I thought, 'I hate war.' (p. 53)

This scene is an exact reproduction of a scene Greene himself witnessed. It is, as he says in his Introduction to the novel, only one of the many instances of "direct reporting" in the book and the effect it had on him is important.²⁶ "I still retain the sharp image of the dead child couched in the ditch beside his dead mother," he says. "The very neatness of their bullet wounds made their death more disturbing than the indiscriminate massacre in the canals around" (xix). How crucial this is to Greene's worldly poetic, to his conviction that it is the individual tragedies that give global politics its peculiar horror. With the eye of a self-determined moralist he homes in on the single case that seems to speak for the suffering of all. "'I hate war,'" Fowler says: a simple, direct statement that needs no accoutrement and permits no rejoinder.

It would be wrong, of course, to suggest that Fowler is a mere mouthpiece for Greene, or to suggest that

²⁶It is worth noting that of all his Introductions, this is the only one in which Greene talks almost exclusively of the real-life experiences that generated the story, and in which artistic questions play a very minor role.

he is heroic in any sense and exonerated for his conduct. He is responsible for Pyle's death (by default at least) although Pyle's mission in Indochina on behalf of his government is dangerous enough in itself. Fowler, too, refuses to take a stand. Unlike D. in The Confidential Agent, he is unwilling - till the end - to commit himself to any person, any spiritual belief, or any political idea. He is loyal only to his opium pipe and the Baudelairian reverie it induces:

Aimer à loisir,
Aimer et mourir
Au pays qui te ressemble. (p. 5)

Once embarked on this aimless journey, he no longer needs even Phuong: "her presence or absence mattered very little" (p. 5). Nevertheless, as his story unfolds, as he recounts such incidents as his visit to the farm and his night in the watch-tower, the unavoidable truth catches him up. He quotes Pascal at Vigot, the Sûreté officer: "'Both he who chooses heads and he who chooses tails are equally at fault. . . . The true course is not to wager at all'" (p. 152). Vigot shoots back: "'Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. . . . You're engagé . . . Fowler . . . like the rest of us" (p. 152). He can, and does, hang onto the one clear observation he had nourished into a form of belief: that the rhetoric of war can never justify the fact of individual suffering. But he had to see the whole picture, come out from behind his secure reporter's mask, and learn to share the burden of guilt that war - and life -

thrust upon everyone.

Before I leave The Quiet American altogether, there is one final point I should like to make about the quality of its narrative. Fowler's approach and tone are remarkably different from Bendrix's and the difference confirms, I think, my point about Greene's settled confidence. Three things stand out about Bendrix's presentation: it is strident, it is muddled, and it occurs at a point in time well beyond the time of the events he describes. Fowler's narrative, on the other hand, is subdued and detached, chronologically straightforward, and apparently just succeeds the occurrence of the events. Now it seems to me that Bendrix's aggressiveness, and his tendency to contradiction, mirror rather well the sort of turmoil Greene must have experienced in coming to terms with the peculiarities of his faith. The fact that Bendrix's account is retrospective, too, seems to suggest that clear-headedness was possible only after a considerable lapse of time. By contrast, the impression we get of Fowler is one of self-assurance, and although he too has much to learn, his enlightenment as it were occurs simultaneous to the events that provoke it. He comments as he describes, and this proximity of self-examination and objective reporting suggests that he possesses synthesizing powers that Bendrix presumably will acquire only after he closes his story. There is something childlike about Bendrix, something that reminds one of Greene's black and white world of childhood where

good and evil are discrete and absolute. And there is something very adult about Fowler who lives in a gray world where frontiers, if they exist at all, exist as very fine lines between expediency and conscientiousness. No decision is simple, just as no territory is sacred. The best one can hope for is that the calm wisdom experience brings will help one to live peaceably, day by day, in this borderland world.

The novels that follow The Quiet American continue in this vein by and large, some more successfully than others. It would be possible to argue, I suppose, that when Greene rid himself of his religious "fixation" and consolidated his personal views in the political arena, the passion that propelled his creative energies was purged. A Burnt-Out Case certainly seemed to portend this. It tried to rekindle the religious flame. It tried also to light a new torch: a testimony to the crippling effects of artistic success. But it didn't work. Querry truly was a burnt-out case and it is somehow apt that he is a character for whom Greene had to search. In the first entry of his "Congo Journal" (published in the volume titled, significantly, In Search of a Character) he tells us: "The novel is an unknown man and I have to find him: a situation that I cannot yet even vaguely imagine: a background as strange to me as it was to him at his first entrance" (p. 13). How unfulfilled the promise of Querry was is recorded in Greene's Introduction to the Journal: "it seemed to me when I wrote the last words [of the novel]

that I had reached an age when another full-length novel was probably beyond my powers" (p. 8).

The lapse, of course, was temporary. The image of the dried-up artist was one Greene simply couldn't bring off, for his material was still rich with possibilities and his creative powers still sharp. Following A Burnt-Out Case came the stories collected under the title A Sense of Reality and the novels The Comedians, The Honorary Consul, and The Human Factor.²⁷ And although these later works perhaps lack the vitality that contradiction seemed to confer on his "religious" novels, they provoke the kind of excitement one feels at seeing any artist consummate his skills as a craftsman and comprehend his inspirational sources - his obsessions - as a man.

²⁷ Not to mention two plays - Carving a Statue and The Return of A. J. Raffles, the volume of short stories titled May We Borrow Your Husband, Travels With My Aunt, Lord Rochester's Monkey (finally published after some forty years), Collected Essays, and A Sort of Life.

CONCLUSION

I have used as my guiding themes throughout this study the preoccupations Greene himself might call his ruling fantasies: the psychological legacy of childhood, spiritual faith, and political commitment. But there is another motif that rules the man and his work that perhaps overrides all others: that of writing itself - the power of the written word and the character of the man who commits himself to the exercise of that power. In my Introduction I spoke of Greene's affair with words, with the creative process, and I should like now to round out my picture of Greene and his "poetic" by following up this idea in some detail.

There are three features of Greene's writing that bring home to us the peculiar relationship that exists between Greene and his craft. The first is his characteristic use of literary (or pseudo-literary) characters in his novels; the second is his distinctive use of literary allusion, or reference to literature as if it were a key to some kind of truth; and the third has to do with his frequent observations (both within and without his fiction) on the personal nature of the act of creation itself. As we look at each of these elements in his work,

we will conjure up an image of the professional writer as Greene sees him: of Greene looking at Greene, so to speak.

Greene's array of "literary" characters is large and varied. It ranges from the pathetic, "seedy" journalist (like Savory in Stamboul Train) to the serious artist or literary academician (like Maurice Bendrix in The End of the Affair and D. in The Confidential Agent respectively). Almost all his novels contain one of these character types, and very often they are treated with a certain amount of light-hearted fun. In the background stands Greene, roguish conjurer of his own vocational type. Yet it is interesting that very often, too, it is these characters (even when they play minor roles) who come alive for us. It is as if, from behind the mask of slightly self-mocking puppeteer, Greene is sending out little kernels of truth about the profession - about its vagaries and its pitfalls, its potentialities and its actualities.

Let us consider, for example, Savory in Stamboul Train, a character whom J. B. Priestley took to be a representation of himself (and who, consequently, spurred Priestley on to threaten a libel suit against Greene¹). Greene disclaims any intentional analogy to Priestley, though Savory does bear a resemblance to another popular novelist about whom Greene has had much to say: Arnold

¹The suit was avoided when Greene reluctantly agreed to delete certain suggestive lines (see A Sort of Life, p. 213).

Bennett. Savory, like Bennett, had humble beginnings but visions of a grand finale:

. . . the words which he, Q. C. Savory, the former shop assistant, wrote had a result that the hardest work on an office stool could not attain . . . he thought not of current accounts, royalties, and shares, nor of readers who wept at his pathos or laughed at his Cockney humour, but the long stairs to London drawing-rooms, the opening of double doors, the announcement of his name, faces of women who turned towards him with interest and respect. (pp. 122-123)

He is a perfect candidate for corruption by success, an example of one who (as Greene quotes Henry James on Flaubert) "hovered for ever at the public door, in the outer court, the splendour of which very properly beguiled him."²

Greene treats Savory with no venom: indeed, he is almost pitiable in the ease with which he is seduced by the image of success. (He is also pitiable as a victim of the voracious journalist type, but more of that later). Certain successful, "serious" literary aficionados, on the other hand, Greene does treat with some maliciousness, for they, rather like Greene's pious Catholics, prey on the ignorant to nourish their smug superiority. One of the most striking scenarios in which Greene's attitude in this respect is brought out occurs in The Third Man. The occasion is a literary "soirée" in honour of the distinguished novelist Benjamin Dexter, a writer who, in the words of the narrator, "has been ranked as a stylist with Henry James . . ." (p. 30).

²See my discussion in Chapter III, p. 121.

The narrator goes on:

. . . but he has a wider feminine streak than his master - indeed his enemies have sometimes described his subtle, complex, wavering style as old-maidish . . . (p. 30)

To the dismay of the organizer of the soirée, one Mr. Crabbin of the Vienna "Institute", Benjamin Dexter's performance at this discussion is not at all what one would expect from a serious practitioner of the art. This is so because "Mr. Dexter" is, in fact, Rollo Martins, a boozy writer of "cheap novelettes" (p. 21) who, by chance, finds himself present at the soirée and taken for Dexter. The whole discussion evolves, then, as a comical defrocking of literary pedants, with Mr. Crabbin frantically attempting to ask the "right" questions of and evoke the "right" responses from his guest:

'Mr. Dexter, could you tell us what author has chiefly influenced you?' . . .
'Zane Grey - I don't know any other [Grey]' . . .
'That is a little joke of Mr. Dexter's. He meant the poet Gray - a gentle, mild, subtle genius - one can see the affinity.' . . .
'You might say something about the stream of consciousness.'
'Stream of what?' (pp. 68-70)

- and so on. Despite the acute discomfiture of Mr. Crabbin, Martins, according to the narrator, "was making an enormous impression. Only a great writer could have taken so arrogant, so original a line" (p. 20). Greene, here, is having fun ("A number of names were simultaneously flung at Martins - little sharp pointed names like Stein, round pebbles like Woolf" - p. 70); but his point is to expose the literary establishment in all its pomposity and misguided erudition. Martins, replying to

the question "where would you put James Joyce, Mr. Dexter?" says "What do you mean put? I don't want to put anybody anywhere" (p. 69); and it is on Martins's side that Greene, I think, would put himself.

Neither Savory nor Dexter-Martins is especially important so far as furthering the theme of the work in which he appears is concerned. But they are representative of those literary figures in other novels to whose vocation Greene attaches a good deal of significance. D. in The Confidential Agent, for example, is a serious academician: the discoverer of the "Berne MS." of the Song of Roland. The interesting thing about D.'s attitude toward his work, however, is that it never allows him to place scholarship for its own sake (à la Crabbin) above human affairs in importance. In a discussion D. has with "L.", his fellow-countryman who has turned traitor, L. complains that the war in their country had resulted in the destruction of his manuscript collection. "These horrible things are bound to happen in war - to the things one loves," L. says; "My collection and your wife" (p. 29). D., with horror, recognizes that L. "hadn't the faintest conception of what it meant to love another human being. . . . he had no idea that the Berne MS. meant nothing at all beside the woman one loved" (p. 29).

Another interesting thing about D.'s literary work is that the Berne MS., for which he feels a proud affection, contradicts the accepted version of the Roland story as one of great heroic sacrifice. D.'s version has

Oliver - rather slighted in the "Oxford MS." - kill Roland for his foolhardy neglect of the lives of his men. Roland, according to D., is "the big boasting courageous fool who was more concerned with his own glory than with the victory of his faith" (p. 70). And how well this version suits D.'s own (and Greene's) position: that it is far better to place oneself on the side of oppressed people than on the side of some ideology, or some vain concept of patriotism and personal heroism. Greene, then, uses D.'s position as a scholar to enhance our perception of him as an intelligent and trustworthy central consciousness; but he uses his integrity as a scholar - his clear-sightedness about the relation of art and life - to enhance our perception of him as a sympathetic man.

Maurice Bendrix, in The End of the Affair, and Querry, in A Burnt-Out Case, add two more dimensions to Greene's composite image of the literary figure. Maurice, unlike D., begins as one for whom craftsmanship, or the pure application of his skill, is the prime aim. He intends - so he tells us - to allow nothing to interfere with his objective to write a record of hate. And yet affairs of the heart (of that "great soft organ with its unreliable goodness and easy melancholy and baseless optimism" as Greene once affectionately described it³) take over and love creeps into his design unavoidably. As for Querry, he has gone beyond both professional success and love; but he, too, despite his calculated hardness,

³See The Pleasure-Dome, p. 204.

finds in the end some reason for living.

Interestingly enough, it is Query's fable - the "bedtime" story he invents in order to help the child-like Marie Rycker go to sleep - that seems to rekindle in him some sense of attachment to the world he has so stubbornly renounced. Although Query is not a literary figure in the sense in which I have been using the term, Greene makes Query's description of his tremendously successful professional career as a sculptor (disguised as the fable) parallel Greene's own so closely, that we take it to be a comment on Greene's career. At the end of his tale, Query thinks:

It was . . . a sad story, so that it was hard to understand this sense of freedom and release, like that of a prisoner who at last 'comes clean', admitting everything to his inquisitor. Was this the reward perhaps which came sometimes to a writer?
(pp. 182-183)

In a curious way, Query seems to have had to re-establish a bond between his burnt-out self and his art in order to carry on with living. He had, like D. and Maurice, to learn from his art what is important and what is not, as well as the reverse: to learn from life what is important in art and what is not.

If Query, in his almost self-pitying renunciation of his vocation and distinguished reputation, rings a little false, it is, I think, because Greene does not quite accept Query (the burnt-out artist) emotionally. Far closer to Greene's temperamental sympathy are his "journalist" characters, that odd collection of seedy, drunken, world-weary news-hounds who yet possess some

spark of vitality or idiosyncratic passion. In The Ministry of Fear, when Arthur Rowe is trying to pierce through his amnesiac blind to discover his former self, Anna says to him: "People don't always become what they want to be" (p. 133), and he replies:

'Of course not; a boy always wants to be a hero. A great explorer. A great writer . . . But there's usually a thin disappointing connection. The boy who wants to be rich goes into a bank. The explorer becomes - oh, well, some underpaid colonial officer marking minutes in the heat. The writer joins the staff of a penny paper . . .'

(p. 133)

And it is these failed artists, the ones who never quite made it, who seem to appeal to Greene. In a sense they are border inhabitants, caught between their instinctive roots on the one hand and visions of glory on the other. More often than not, their limbo state is one in which mere survival is all; and the only thing that helps them get by, day-to-day, is some peculiar pet perversion or obsession.

Minty is perhaps the prime example - a character, we remember Greene saying, who "emerged from the pre-conscious."⁴ How pathetic he is, with his spider trapped under the tooth-glass, his stone-cold cups of coffee, his salvaged cigarette butts and his scurf. Greene does have fun with him, as when he comes upon a Lutheran church and, feeling a pull,

. . . looked this way and that . . . bent his head and dived for the open door, with the caution and the dry-mouthed excitement of a secret debauchee. (England Made Me, p. 109)

⁴See my discussion in Chapter VIII, p.

But there is something to be admired in Minty: his almost child-like morality (he abhors drink, pornography, and religious hypocrisy) and his steadfast will to survive. As Anthony thinks, "If Minty were to be envied at all, it was that he had chosen his dump and stayed there" (p. 222). He is an exile, not only from England but also within the society of fellow-expatriates around him: a law unto himself, living on the edge and surviving on sheer instinct.

There are many other journalist figures in Greene's novels, some - like Mabel Warren in Stamboul Train and Parkinson in A Burnt-Out Case - far more ruthless and parasitic than Minty, and some - like Condor in It's A Battlefield and Hale in Brighton Rock - gentler and less fit for long-term survival. All are failures by the standards of convention, but all seem to glow with life in Greene's hands because, as failures, they are still their own masters, still, of necessity, living close to the natural, instinctive core of their being.

While Greene's Minty-figures are the most frequent of his journalist types, his "serious" journalists are quite as important to his poetic. I am thinking primarily of Fowler, in The Quiet American, who cannot be placed among Greene's seedy, failed writers but who embodies Greene's interest in the question of commitment. It is interesting that the idea of journalistic integrity crops up in so early a novel as Rumour At Nightfall and then is dropped pretty well until Greene confronts it squarely

in The Quiet American. This is an example, perhaps, of an obsession (like those with betrayal and revenge) that Greene was conscious of from very early on but was not able to articulate fully till maturity had consolidated his outlook. At any rate, in Rumour At Nightfall we get a rudimentary form of Fowler in the persons of Chase and Crane. Chase, a journalist, says "My position is in a No-Man's-Land. I want news, that's all" (p. 74). Crane - his alter-ego so to speak - takes the opposite view: that "One must always take sides" (p. 177). Unfortunately, the issue is never developed, or integrated into the plot to make it a convincing theme, and the respective pronouncements of Chase and Crane end up being rather hollow abstractions. Nevertheless, we can see Fowler's position as descending from that of Chase ("The true course is not to wager at all," Fowler says) and that of Crane (Vigot responds to Fowler: "Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional". - Quiet American, p. 152).

The use Greene makes of literary allusion in his novels is very much bound up with this idea of commitment, or at least with the process by which one can come to an understanding of human nature - which is the proper prelude to commitment. For many of Greene's characters, books provide a key to the truth about human affairs, and numerous are the passages in his novels that call to mind Greene's own tribute, in "The Lost Childhood", to the power of books, especially in childhood. Listen, for example, to Henry Pulling, the narrator of Travels With My Aunt:

One's life is more formed, I sometimes think, by books than by human beings: it is out of books one learns about love and pain at second hand. Even if we have the happy chance to fall in love, it is because we have been conditioned by what we have read, and if I had never known love at all, perhaps it was because my father's library had not contained the right books. (pp. 244-245)

How close this is to the sentiments expressed in "The Lost Childhood", particularly to Greene's statement that it was through his reading of The Viper of Milan that he discovered that "human nature is not black and white but black and grey" (Essays, p. 18). At that point, he says, "the future for better or worse really struck" (p. 17): a reference not only to his future vocation as a writer but also to his future philosophical attitude toward his fellow men. It is interesting, too, that in Travels With My Aunt Greene pays tribute to Majorie Bowen's "Viper", Visconti, by recreating him as Aunt Augusta's lover. He has, in Greene's hands, a little of the rakish, medieval air of Miss Bowen's villain, but far more of the integrity and the passion appropriate for a character to whose predecessor Greene owes so much in terms of imaginative outlook.

Greene's reference to the books of childhood in The Ministry of Fear has a slightly different twist. It occurs, significantly, in the chapter titled "A Load of Books" and it comes closer to the meaning suggested by the title of his essay, "The Lost Childhood". Here the allusion is to something lost - childish innocence and simplicity: the stage that in Greene's own experience was marked by his reading of King Solomon's Mines. It is the stage that

precedes a knowledge of the greyness of human nature and rejoices instead in a black-and-white world of pure good and pure evil. In the course of his description of Arthur Rowe's childhood, Greene writes:

In childhood we live under the brightness of immortality - heaven is as near and actual as the seaside. Behind the complicated details of the world stand the simplicities: God is good, the grown-up man or woman knows the answer to every question, there is such a thing as truth, and justice is as measured and faultless as a clock. Our heroes are simple: they are brave, they tell the truth, they are good swordsmen and they are never in the long run really defeated. That is why no later books satisfy us like those which were read to us in childhood - for those promised a world of great simplicity of which we knew the rules, but later books are complicated and contradictory with experience; they are formed out of our own disappointing memories. (p. 97)

But however strong the sense of loss, Greene goes on to show through Rowe the Wordsworthian compensation of experience gained. The "Load of Books" referred to in the chapter title turns out to be a suitcase containing a fifth columnist bomb which sets in motion Rowe's unknowing adventure with danger and with evil. As a result of the explosion of the bomb, Rowe becomes divorced from his adult identity through amnesia, and is placed in a state of imprisonment, dependent on the care and whims of the so-called Dr. Forester. He is as helpless and vulnerable as a naive child, and it is only by discovering the evil that exists around him that he is able to come alive again, to become "adult" and to view life realistically.

Rowe's awakening occurs, again significantly, with the aid of a book: Tolstoy's What I Believe. It is the

property of Rowe's captor, Dr. Forester, and it is the inefficiently erased pencil marks in the margin beside certain passages that lead Rowe to question Forester's honesty. Rowe reads:

"Remembering all the evil I have done, suffered and seen, resulting from the enmity of nations, it is clear to me that the cause of it all lay in the gross fraud called patriotism and love of one's country . . ."
(p. 149)

and this is cause for him to doubt the integrity of "a man who dared not hold his opinions openly" (p. 153), of a man who found it necessary to conceal from others what was for him, apparently, a guiding principle. It is only later, when Forester is exposed and Rowe is beginning to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, that Rowe is able to recognize the flaw in Forester's philosophy. He had, Rowe thinks, "intellectual pride . . . [an] abstract love of humanity. . . . [but] one can't love humanity. One can only love people" (p. 214).

But at the time of his initial discovery of Forester's book, Rowe is provoked sufficiently to explore the forbidden area of the "hospital" in order to probe the doctor's other secrets. He passes through the green baize door separating the "Sick Bay" from the other wards and finds himself in a wing in which Forester kept hidden those who were destined to die because they knew too much. It is no accident, of course, that Greene uses the green baize door as a symbol of Rowe's passing from innocence to knowledge. For Greene himself the green baize door which separated his family home from Berkhamsted school marked the frontier between love and security, and hatred

and fear. And no matter how painful the crossing of the border may have been, for Rowe and for Greene, it is certain that it is a crossing that must be made - a sort of rite of passage - in order for one to become (as Rowe finally does) a whole man.

With Maurice Castle in The Human Factor, a book serves not so much as a key to some hidden truth but as a confirmation of a truth already discovered. Here again the author in question is Tolstoy, only now it is not his collection of philosophical observations that is important but his imaginative account of something far closer to Castle's own preoccupation, War and Peace. Castle uses the novel as a practical tool, as a code-book, but the double entendre is obvious. It is a code for his own sentiments and beliefs. There is a nice piece of irony in the scene in which Castle visits his unsuspecting code-book supplier to acquire his two copies of the novel. Mr. Halliday, the owner of a respectable bookshop stocking Penguins and World's Classics, speaks in passing of his son's more successful business in a pornographic bookshop across the street. He says:

Most of his books are on loan, you understand.
They buy a book one day and change it the next.
His books are not for keeps - like a good set
of Sir Walter Scott used to be. (p. 52)

The irony is that Castle's purchases, ostensibly, stem from motives that must be kept quite as clandestine as the pornography addict's; and even though Castle chooses his code-books with a view to their philosophical suitability, he feels a natural affinity with the furtive buyers in "the other establishment". If Mr. Halliday

only knew, one thinks, to what purpose his World's Classics are put by this respectable customer, Mr. Castle, double agent.

This sense of the illicit nature of his communion with War and Peace is brought out again when Castle, settling down for the train ride from Berkhamsted to London, opens the novel and begins to read. "It was a breach of security, even a small act of defiance, to read this book publicly for pleasure" (p. 144), he thinks. But then we are made aware of the real importance of the novel to this man who has committed himself to Communism, who has crossed the frontier, for reasons that satisfy him alone. He reads from Tolstoy:

"One step beyond that boundary line, which resembles the line dividing the living from the dead, lies uncertainty, suffering and death. And what is there? Who is there? - there beyond that field, that tree . . . that roof lit up by the sun? No one knows, but one wants to know. You fear and yet long to cross that line . . ." (p. 144)

How reminiscent this is of Greene's own description of the "invisible frontier" between half-realized desire and full commitment in "Letter to a West German Friend".⁵ The West German border, like Castle's east-west border (and Rowe's green baize door), stands for an ideological frontier one must cross in order to achieve knowledge and integrity in both a personal and a larger social sense. And it is fitting that Castle's last coded message to his control, Boris, just prior to his escape from England,

⁵The Portable Graham Greene, p. 599.

should be based on these lines from War and Peace:
"You say: I am not free. But I have lifted my hand
and let it fall" (p. 187). "It was as if," the narra-
tive continues, "in choosing that passage, [Castle] were
transmitting a signal of defiance to both the services"
(p. 187). It is the same sort of defiance of institu-
tionalized belief that Wormold, in Our Man in Havana,
had expressed ("If I love or if I hate, let me love or
hate as an individual"⁶) and that D. in The Confidential
Agent had selected as a principle to live by ("You
choose your side once for all . . . I've chosen certain
people who've had the lean portion for some centuries
now" - Agent, p. 68). As for Castle, the coded lines
signal the end of what happiness he had known, but they
do indicate that he goes to his exile secure in the
knowledge that his commitment is a true one for him.

Not all of Greene's literary allusions are so
central to the meaning of the works in which they appear,
nor are they all offered in so serious a vein. At times
he has great fun with authors whom he deems deserving
of raillery - such as Charles Lamb. In an early review,
Greene accused Lamb of a "cunning pathos," "an antique
literary manner";⁷ and in Our Man in Havana he takes the
opportunity to capitalize on his long-standing irritation.
Wormold's code-book happens to be Tales from Shakespeare,
though for a very prosaic reason: as Wormold says, "It

⁶See my discussion in Chapter I, p. 79.

⁷"Lamb's Testimonials," Spectator, 5518 (March 1934), 512.

was the only book I could find in duplicate except Uncle Tom's Cabin'" (p. 42). From that point on, Greene plays mercilessly with Lamb in Wormold's hands ("Gloomily he took down Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare - how he had always detested Elia and the essay on Roast Pork. . . . 'Dionysia, the wicked wife of Cleon,' he read, 'met with an end proportionable to her deserts.' He began to decode from 'deserts'" - p. 55).

He has tremendous fun, too, with allusions in A Burnt-Out Case, though with a rather more serious aim. Parkinson, the unethical, parasitic journalist, has a penchant for dramatic-sounding quotations, though he usually quotes - and always attributes his quotations - wrongly ("'To think I am farther off from heaven, etc., etc. Quote. Edgar Allan Poe'" - p. 127). Greene's point is to prepare us for Parkinson's feature article on Querry - a gross, unwitting parody of Heart of Darkness, and for Parkinson's betrayal of Querry and Marie to Marie's husband, Rycker. It is as if Greene is suggesting that distortions of the truths that literature offers reflect distortions of personal integrity and that travesties of genuine art are somehow synonymous with travesties of human decency.

I have mentioned only a few of the literary characters and allusions that appear in Greene's works, but the fact is that his habitual play with the artefacts and types of his profession is a distinctive feature of his style. Perhaps one might say about this peculiarity that it, like his preoccupation with personal themes and

his taste for melodrama as a technical aid, comes close to achieving the quality of an obsession. There is something curiously intimate about his fondling of author's names, titles of books, and pertinent quotations, as well as his frequent recreations of writer types, that speaks of a special fascination with all the permutations of the creative act.

In a rather long 1947 review, Greene refers to the novelist as being the "victim of a passion" and equates the writing of a novel with a "love affair".⁸ Of course, like any obsession, writing has its anguishes as well as its glories. The novelist's job is a despairing one because the novelist knows that each book will end as a love affair ends. Even at the outset of the creative act, of the affair, Greene says, "It already contains the hatred and the dryness of heart that will succeed it" (p. 292). And yet it is a magnet (rather like belief or commitment⁹) and a stimulant (rather like Russian roulette or opium) to which he is drawn inevitably. Perhaps it is this very duality in the nature of writing that attracts Greene: it proposes a continuous life on the border between love and hate, reality and fantasy, and it asks of the writer only that he stake out his position on the basis of what, to him, is true. It may well be an escape; as Greene says,

⁸"Books in General," New Statesman and Nation, XXXIV (October 1947), 292.

⁹In "Letter to a West German Friend" Greene says: "Belief, like it or not, is a magnet" (Portable, p. 600).

Writing 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.¹⁰

But it may well be, too, that it is only those who feel the need to escape, those who are sensitive to the terrors of life, who can see life clearly.

Looking back, then, at the dominant feature of Greene's life and career - his quest for a cure for the obsessions that have ruled him - we realize that if he has found a cure at all it is not one that is specific to any one obsession. It is not, in other words, in psycho-analysis that he found a cure for his childhood-based melancholy, or in Roman Catholicism that he found an antidote to his metaphysical lethargy, or in political journalism that he found a cure for his debilitating boredom. Rather, it is in the act of writing itself, of recreating these personal terrors in a variety of situations and from a variety of viewpoints, that he has found whatever solace exists for one who, after all, has taken life rather hard and who bluntly labels himself "manic-depressive".¹¹ I am reminded of Greene's remark about Henry James's ability to "construct convincing masks for his own personality,"¹² and perhaps it is the control over subjectivity that good art demands that has helped Greene, too, to deal with "'the black and merciless things'"¹³ that reside within.

* * * *

¹⁰See Greene's Introduction to Collected Stories, xii.

¹¹See Burstall interview, p. 673.

¹²See my discussion in Chapter III, p. 136.

¹³See "Henry James: The Private Universe" in Essays, p. 37.

In this study, I have aimed at sifting through the neglected body of Greene's non-fictional writing in order to examine his fiction by the terms Greene himself set. However, I should like to think that I have achieved something else as well, and that is to have given a sense of the passion he feels for his art and a sense of the power he attaches to the creative act. One of the most touching of Greene's own expressions of his commitment comes, oddly enough, in the otherwise light-hearted Travels With My Aunt.¹⁴ At one point in the novel Henry Pulling pays tribute to the story-telling abilities of his Aunt - a woman who, significantly, lived life on the dangerous edge of things and who let slip from her creative bank not one scrap of experience. People she had known and recreated for her nephew lived, Pulling says, "in my imagination as though she had actually created them. . . . She was one of the life-givers" (p. 191). It is an interesting twist to suggest that people come alive only by being made into characters to feed the imagination. But it is consistent with what we have come to know about how Greene views his own "real" life (as a "sort of life") and how he views his life as an artist (his "only reality" and his "only responsibility"¹⁵).

¹⁴Perhaps this provides a clue as to why Greene chose not to label the book an "entertainment".

¹⁵See Introduction to The Heart of the Matter, xii.

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ERRATA

- p. 7 Ane should read And
- p. 21 had " " hat
- p. 29 omit "and"
- p. 32 references should read reference
- p. 63 give should read gives
- p. 67 than " " that
- p. 92 omit "an"
- p. 120 aborad should read abroad
dismissed " " dispensed
- p. 164 add quotation mark "slightest . . .
- p. 196 Statemen should read Statesman
- p. 231 add quotation mark . . . future"
- p. 235 Nof should read Now
- p. 254 add parenthesis . . . 188.)
- p. 302 footnote 19 add p. 168
- p. 309 Preface should read Introduction
settled in (between should read
settled (in between
- p. 311 stealty should read stealthy
- p. 325 footnote 4 add p. 278
- p. 335 alredy should read already
- p. 25 adamance should read adamancy
- p. 45 harly should read hardly
- p. 70 hurdle should read overcome
- p. 71 wordly should read worldly
1928 should read 1929
- p. 89 Quennel should read Quennell
- p. 94 idiosyncracy should read idiosyncrasy
- p. 108 lenience should read leniency
- p. 111 Chiapis should read Chiapas
- p. 133 hates should read dislikes
- p. 190 pitfalls should read shortcomings
- p. 255 Seala should read Scala
- p. 262 vague should read difficult
- p. 263 corrall should read corral
- p. 297 the second piece to come should read
which also came