

INTRODUCTION

With a family background deeply rooted in pre-World War II Roman Catholicism, I have always been fascinated by the novels that Henry Graham Greene wrote under the name of Graham Greene. I even suspect that my own way of thinking with regard to the religion I share with Greene was strongly influenced by his attitude towards it. I suppose that, even at the time I first was introduced to Greene's work, I unwittingly belonged to a generation that no longer indiscriminately accepted what was being told by the Church. Greene was our forerunner. In his books he pointed out different ways of looking at faith, and he tried to make clear to his readership that religious rules should not only be embraced intellectually but also, and in particular, with one's heart. In this context, then, I recall a phrase from Wolfgang Iser's, that:

in general, literary texts constitute a reaction to contemporary situations, bringing attention to problems that are conditioned though not resolved by contemporary norms (3).

The nature of the present analysis inevitably entails a confrontation with many of the views held by other critics with regard to Graham Greene's attitude towards Roman Catholicism. Critical characterizations of the writer vary from "a leading Catholic writer" (Pryce-Jones 47) to a "Catholic fellow-traveller" (Allain 88), and everything in between. We must realize that Greene was a convert: he originally posed as an atheist. What moved him to accept the Roman Catholic faith was his infatuation with Vivien Dayrell-Browning, who was to become his wife. She was an ardent Catholic, and Norman Sherry, Greene's official biographer with unlimited access to the author's most intimate papers, underlines this when he writes about her and Greene's courting days. Initially, Vivien's basic objection to marrying the writer-to-be would seem to have been a matter of her religious beliefs and his unsatisfactory attitude towards those beliefs (Sherry 1: 188). Graham Greene himself more or less confirms this in one of his conversations with Marie-Françoise Allain. He says that in Nottingham, where he worked after becoming engaged to Vivien, he slipped a note into a collection box in the cathedral, asking for instruction because his fiancée was Catholic (Allain 153). His conversion itself, in 1926, again according to Greene himself:

was not in the least an emotional affair. It was purely intellectual. It was the arguments of Fr Trollope at Nottingham which persuaded me that God's existence was a probability (Allain 154).

Still, Greene claims that he "eventually came to accept the existence of God not as an absolute truth but as a provisional one" (Allain 154). I believe we should take Greene's statements in the matter seriously, for in doubting his sincerity we would rob ourselves of a plausible starting point for his lifelong search for something that, at least to him, might represent an acceptable kind of god. For this is in fact the leitmotiv that runs as a thread through all of Graham Greene's fictional novels. That line was hardly to be discerned as long as not all of his novels had been written yet. It is therefore not to be wondered at that most of the early criticism tends to show a doubtful judgment of Greene's actual motivations to use religion as a vehicle to get to his final aim. He himself might not even have been consciously aware of that aim, although some of his novels do betray a deliberate attempt to come to a solution. If, hypothetically speaking, he had ever succeeded in finding a satisfactory explanation for the existence of God, it might have put an end to his career as a committed writer, for it would have deprived him of the ardour that is the driving force behind his writing.

When we take a look at the wide range of critical opinions extant concerning Graham Greene's Roman Catholicism, we see that these opinions gradually tend to alter as the number of novels by the author increases. At first there is a general tendency to focus on what is sometimes called Greene's "Catholic novels" (Marković 277), namely Brighton Rock (1938), The Power and the Glory (1940) and The Heart of the Matter (1948). Marie-Beatrice Mesnet, for instance, made a probing analysis of the trilogy. She senses the real driving force behind Greene's writings: "All things considered, God is the leading actor in Greene's tragedies, the 'third man' we are looking for unwittingly."¹ But she also expresses her conviction that the writer still has a long way to go when she writes: "Greene has not yet reached peace and unity in his works"²

Philip Stratford, in 1964, paid attention to even earlier works of Greene. He was the first to recognize that Rumour at Nightfall [1931] "could be called his [Greene's] first Catholic novel" (105), and that: "It contains Greene's first attempt to find a religious basis for his emerging novelist's point of view . . ." (105). Stratford then goes on to claim that, in Brighton Rock, "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God" (218) may be called: "the *Catholic* [emphasis added] theme of the novel" (218). In his introduction to

The Portable Graham Greene (1973) Stratford holds on to his view and writes that: "In the early fifties he [Greene] forsook *Catholic* [emphasis added] themes" (vii).

These critics are particularly fascinated by Greene's then rather unusual religious approach to human dilemmas and his unreligious solutions to dogmatic problems. This is quite understandable, for at the time there was no further indication as yet that Graham Greene had something else on his mind than the discussion of a variety of problems in a specifically Roman Catholic context.

Other critics have considered a wider range of Greene's works. For instance, in 1962, Ian Gregor and Brian Nicholas, in a book comparing Graham Greene with D[avid] H[erbert] Lawrence, write of Greene that his "travels are really pilgrimages and their object to discover God" (Gregor 268). Vida E. Marković, in 1963, significantly names her study "Graham Greene in Search of God" (271-82). When commenting on A Burnt-Out Case she states that Greene "resorted to God" as he felt "too lonely and too weak to proceed in his search [for a lost childhood] all alone" (281):

But no sooner had he discovered Him, than he came into conflict with Him and finally found in Him the culprit, responsible for all the evil, all the suffering in the world (281-82).

The full significance of the idea of "evil" was to surface forcefully later.

David Pryce-Jones, in his Graham Greene (1963), quotes the critic C[live] S[taples] Lewis, who "feels he can call The Power and the Glory "a divine comedy"; the priest's character having "much of the comical unpredictability of the traditional *pícaro*". (57) It is noteworthy that Greene himself, in his introduction to the Collected Edition-issue of The Heart of the Matter comments on its main character that: "Perhaps Scobie should have been a subject for cruel comedy rather than for tragedy . . ." (The Portable Graham Greene, 101). Maybe this might also hold good for the whisky priest in The Power and the Glory, but I think that it is essential in a case like this to consider how a true vocation might work in the mind of a genuine believer: that in recognizing the underlying motives of the priest one would come to know exactly what his ultimate decision was going to be and that it was the loyalty to his vocation that kept him from running away from an inevitable death. His being on the run, seen on the surface, may give the (false)

impression of his being a *pícaro*, but “comical” is a term I would prefer to reserve for certain forms of criticism. Pryce-Jones himself, by the way, made a statement that he almost certainly will have come to rue later. He claimed that: “It is not too much to hazard that [for Greene] religion as a source of inspiration for further novels has run dry” (114). Time has told that Pryce-Jones made a mistake here.

Though, in retrospect, then, many critical statements on Greene cover only part of the truth, some of the critics do sense that there is more than a thinly veiled Catholicism behind the human dramas Greene presents to his readership. In 1959, S[imon] J[an] Popma touches upon ‘the heart’ of the matter. He writes in his commentary:

We may not take it upon us to pass judgement. Only God knows what goes on in the human heart. That motif is recurrent in Greene.³

He comes close to what I myself see as the truth with regard to Greene when he calls “the human heart . . . the place of combat . . . between God and devil”.⁴

There was a growing awareness, then, among those professional followers of the progress and development of Graham Greene’s career, that there was more to his writing than met the eye. Still, most critics seem to have continued to focus too exclusively on the Roman Catholicism in which the writer wrapped his universal problem.

At the same time an ever increasing number of critics also realized that Greene’s works offered a fresh approach to the time-honoured theme of the struggle between good and evil. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Farris led the way here. In their excellent book The Art of Graham Greene (1951) they observe, while discussing England Made Me, that “where there is faith, in Greene, there is the profounder sense of evil and the more hopeless degeneration” (110). While discussing Journey Without Maps, they state that:

even his earliest dreams suggested some power prowling outside which had somehow to get in. Soon there came the intrusion into actual life, as well as into dreams, of the sense of evil (121).

They also claim that “As the Catholic element emerges in the novels, symbols of evil begin to be associated with the ‘mysteries of divine love’” (123). Trying to gauge where this paradoxical coupling came from, they find that, in order to make the character of Scobie in The Heart of the Matter acceptable to the reader, there had to be “a knife-edge balance, and it is this necessity that produces the apparent paradox on the nature of goodness” (167).

Frank Kermode ventures even closer to the truth when he remarks that “Sin is the shadow thrown by the strong light of God; Mr. Greene is of the devil’s party and comes near to knowing it” (183).

In The Portable Graham Greene, editor Stratford compares Greene to Mauriac and writes that, when a door opens in a novel by Mauriac, “one is aware of forces of Good and Evil that slide along the walls and press their fingers against the window-pane ready to crowd in” (585). Stratford took this image from an address given by Graham Greene in Brussels in January 1948, but Greene had already used it earlier in Brighton Rock (Penguin ed. 1961. 242), written as far back as 1938, and also in The Heart of the Matter (Heinemann/Ned. ed. 1961. 258), which was published about the time he delivered his Brussels speech. It is a striking example of the remarkable way in which Greene’s memory was capable of hanging on to a certain image for later (re)application. (He did the same with the ‘leper’-image, which first appears in Lord Rochester’s Monkey [written in 1931/2, but published in 1974. 214], then reappears in England Made Me [1935. The Shipwrecked. 1956. Bantam ed. 1968. 8], and in The End of the Affair [1951. Penguin ed. 1962. 118], and which was worked out to the full in A Burnt-Out Case [1960. Penguin ed. 1964], the setting of which is a leper colony.) The Good-and-Evil image, then, was already there at a very early stage. I will discuss the matter further in my chapter on the leitmotiv.

In 1977, J.P. Kulshrestha, in Graham Greene: The Novelist, explicitly traces the theme of Good and Evil. Already in his preface he claims that Greene has an urge “to seek out the impulses of good and evil in man” (x). Commenting on Brighton Rock he writes that “Good and evil meet on the battlefield, not to fight but to fraternize” (66), and about The Power and the Glory he remarks that “Greene brings Good and Evil together in the priest” (92). Speaking in general about Greene’s work, he comments that “For Greene, man is not good or bad but good and bad”, and he also mentions the “‘boundary situations’ where the diabolic and the divine are joined in a dramatic conflict” (225). Finally, he claims that “He [Greene] is obsessed

with good and evil as human problems, not as Catholic problems” (228). With this statement, Kulshrestha comes close to my own observations.

Roger Sharrock, in discussing “Greene’s Catholic novels” (56), draws our attention to something the author said with regard to his conversion. Sharrock writes that:

In the course of his [Greene’s] instruction he argued to defend his atheism and finally became convinced on intellectual grounds of ‘the probable existence of something we call God’ (181).

He then discusses Doctor Fischer of Geneva and claims that:

There is a development from the theology of León [the renegade priest in The Honorary Consul]. The night side and the day side of God are now being operated by human beings in their acts of will (267).

I think Sharrock is wrong here. Contrary to Sharrock’s statement, Greene in Doctor Fischer of Geneva (1980. Penguin ed. 1981. 61-2) returns to familiar notions. More specifically, Greene is here saddling human beings with paradoxical qualities one is able to trace back to their Creator if one takes His dual quality for granted.

Grahame Smith likewise traces the Good-and-Evil theme. On p. 18 of The Achievement of Graham Greene (1986) he states that:

Writing from a religious centre, Greene’s concern with questions of good and evil differs radically from the tradition of moral and social criticism associated with, for example, F.R. Leavis.

Towards the end of his study Smith finds the perfect phrasing for Graham Greene’s unceasing search of the kind of God he was after:

[T]he unbridgeable gap between man’s fallen nature and Christ’s perfect goodness is, for him, a source of continual pain (216).

The nineteenth-century Oxford Movement, with its strong inclination to Rome--Charlotte Brontë scouringly referred to its adherents as “tools of the Propaganda” (1849. Penguin ed. 1981. 39-40n3)--appealed to Greene. This,

among other things, can be measured by his extensively quoting John Henry Newman in the epigraph to The Lawless Roads (1939. Penguin ed. 1982. n. page). The author himself, quoted in Allain's The Other Man, said about the Oxford Movement's most influential adherent that the writings of Cardinal Newman (a convert like himself) influenced him a great deal "*after* my [Greene's] conversion" (160) [emphasis added]. And if anything influenced him in particular, it would probably have been Newman's fifth University Sermon, called "On Justice as a Principle of Divine Governance" (Faber 260) as it deals with natural pity and natural indignation.

Some critics also link Graham Greene to Jansenism. According to Gene D. Phillips, S.J.:

Jansenism is a doctrine, born in the seventeenth century and almost immediately declared heretical, that minimizes the role played by man's free will in affecting his actions, and exaggerates that played by divine grace, which God arbitrarily grants or withholds, in determining human behavior. Practically speaking, the term refers to the Jansenists' pessimistic, austere view of life, which is pre-occupied with the miseries of human existence, and is more conscious of evil than of good in the world (101).

Sharrock seems rather convinced of Greene's adherence to this doctrine. First he mentions "the heresy of Jansenism" on p. 23 of Saints, Sinners and Comedians, and then continues, while commenting on Brighton Rock, that:

The Jansenist horror of the body present not only in Pinkie's consciousness but throughout the imagery of the narrative is offset by the daring and contradictory suggestion of redemption through the mystery of the flesh (91).

Yet, in a footnote on the same page, Sharrock claims that "The idea of redemption through sexual love would be antipathetic to Jansenism". He sounds less convinced when he remarks about the whisky priest in The Power and the Glory that he "is not a holy sinner but a sinful saint" (121), and then continues by saying:

For this reason the Jansenist streak in Greene is necessarily less pronounced in this book than in the earlier ones (121).

In Graham Greene: A Revaluation: New Essays, edited in 1990 by Jeffrey Meyers, Alan Warren Friedman, in an essay called ““The Dangerous Edge: Beginning with Death”, states that:

As several critics have noted, the specific appeal lay in the Jansenist strain of Catholicism, with its doctrine of moral predeterminism, denial of free will, belittlement of human nature and action—and, no doubt, the fact of its having been condemned as heretical (133).

Yet, while Friedman claims on p. 143 that “Sex as both physically and morally repellent accords perfectly with Greene’s Jansenism”, the same Friedman also, when Greene defends Pinkie (Brighton Rock) by saying that “his [Pinkie’s] actions were not committed in defiance of God but arose out of the conditions to which he had been born” (Allain 148-49), comments that this “sounds more like a social worker, or an Ida, than a Jansenist” (144). Graham Greene himself was fully aware of his being called a Jansenist. On 12 April 1975 there appeared in the Tablet a letter from him to the editor, which I quote here:

-I ought not to complain of being called a Jansenist by the amiable Mr Burgess . . . since it has been doubted whether even Jansenius himself was a Jansenist. Mr [Anthony] Burgess, cradle Catholic though he is, or perhaps because he is, seems rather wobbly in his theology or he would realize that my novels which cast doubt on the doctrine of damnation are tinged with the very opposite of Jansenism, with what he might well consider to be the damnable doctrine of hope. Saint-Simon who was no Jansenist wrote well on the loose use of the term: ‘I think that the terms Jansenist and Jansenism are like pitch, used as a convenient method of blackening people’s characters, and that out of a thousand so dubbed, less than two merit the name (Graham Greene: Yours etc.: Letters to the Press. 1989. 173-74).

When asked by Phillips to give his thoughts on this question of Jansenism in his work, Greene answered:

People who think they are getting at Jansenism in my novels usually do not know what Jansenism really means. They probably mean Manichaeism, because in the Catholic novels I seem to believe in supernatural evil (101).

Phillips explains that:

The Manichaeian heresy is an ancient belief in the duality of Nature based on the eternal conflict of Matter which is evil and Spirit which is good, a conflict in which the evil principle often has the upper hand (101).

Greene, by the way, used the term “Manichaeian” in his novel The Comedians, where he has the first person narrator say “You believe that evil is necessary? Then you’re a Manichean like myself” (1966. Penguin ed. 1967. 82).

When asked about this by Phillips, Greene answered that he “had forgotten that passage but that he had meant it playfully” (102).

No matter from what angle one may look at Graham Greene as far as his religion is concerned, anticipating the outcome of my analysis of The Honorary Consul I think it is wise to mark the statement the author made in response to a question put to him by Allain:

I don’t see why people insist on labelling me a Catholic writer. I’m simply a Catholic who happens to write (23).

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Notes

1 ““Alles wel beschouwd is God de hoofdakteur in Greene’s tragedies, de “derde man” die wij onbewust zoeken”” (Mesnet, Marie-Beatrice. De Trilogie van Graham Greene. Trans. Simone Simons. Bilthoven: ’t Groeit-H. Nelissen, 1954. 80.

2 “Greene heeft in zijn werken de vrede en de eenheid nog niet bereikt . . .” (118).

3 “Wij mogen ons geen oordeel aanmatigen. Alleen God weet, wat er omgaat in het menselijk hart. Dat motief keert bij Greene telkens terug”

(Reformatische Stemmen. Ds. Popma, S.J. Graham Greene en het Rooms-Katholicisme. 's-Gravenhage: Willem de Zwijgerstichting, 1959. 15).

4 “[H]et mensenhart . . . de kampplaats . . . tussen God en duivel”
(9).