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## THE SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF:

### GREENE'S *BURNT-OUT CASE*

IF IN THE PAST, the *Times Literary Supplement* said recently,<sup>1</sup> the Western writer could construct upon a basic framework of accepted values, "today in a society of ideological flux he can assume hardly anything about his readers' ideals except perhaps a vague liberal humanism." Consequently it is fairly easy for the writer to attack snobbery, prejudice, the bomb, and so on, but "to support, to praise, is out of the question; it smacks of propaganda, fanaticism; and the least suspicion that the writer is emotionally involved in positive ideals can arouse the irony and smirks of the cynic." The contemporary reader tends to think that the fewer the restraints upon the writer the better it is for him; once a writer has been given a label as the possessor of a type of belief, he is open to suspicion. But there is a danger of our oversimplifying the nature of his commitment and taking too narrow a view of the aspects of the human scene with which he deals. There is always the possibility that, while we are deploring the fact that a writer is strait-jacketed by his beliefs, he is a subtle and shifty fellow who in secret is enjoying himself hugely over our attempts to impose upon him strait jackets of our own devising.

In his article "Kierkegaard's Stages and 'A Burnt-Out Case' ", in the *Review of English Literature* for January, 1962, James Noxon makes an interesting comparison between Kierkegaard and Graham Greene. Even though Kierkegaard felt that the aesthetic stage of existence was inferior to the ethical and the religious, Mr. Noxon says, he made an attempt to instruct his contemporaries in what it meant to be a Christian by indirect means. A direct attack on their way of life would only alienate them; one had to engage in literary dialectics, and reveal to the reader the main types or categories of human existence so that he could discover for himself where he belonged. But Kierkegaard found that the detachment essential to the creative artist was the antithesis of the passionate commitment essential for the

religious person; there was an inherent contradiction in attempting to serve religion through art, and eventually he abandoned his "indirect communications." "Perhaps he finally realized", Mr. Noxon writes, "the implication of his own principle of the stages, that one cannot use art or philosophy to advance the cause of religion. Their interests, as he had shown, are in conflict; they present an either/or, and one must choose."

On this basis, Noxon goes a step farther than John Atkins in his study of Greene published in 1957. Atkins observes stresses and flaws in Greene's writing which he takes as signs of spiritual malaise. The criticism of Catholic doctrine implied in his most sympathetic characters, such as Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, is so devastating that Greene's co-religionists begin to wonder about his orthodoxy. When he solves problems in terms of Catholic doctrine, as in *The Living Room*, he does so with sophistical arguments: the Church conquers the artist in him. When he succeeds as artist, he fails as apologist, and *vice versa*. "Greene is making a desperate attempt to persuade himself", Atkins writes. "He knows how cruel, how merciless and intellectually dishonest it all is, but he dare not let go." Mr. Noxon, however, is less interested in the state of Greene's soul than in Greene's novels, especially *A Burnt-Out Case*, as examples of Kierkegaard's either/or. The writer must choose between doctrinal acceptability and artistic soundness.

Since both of these opinions are in danger of becoming stereotypes, the first about Greene himself and the second about writers in general, they require some examination. First, does Greene's writing show the self-division that Atkins describes?

Many readers of Atkins' book must have been struck by the naïveté with which he discusses the religious topics that are brought up in Greene's novels and plays. His approach is that of a controversialist who blandly dismisses his opponent's arguments as irrational (pp. 113-4 in the Calderbook edition) or as ingenious attempts to prove that the worse is really superior to the better (p. 130). He thinks that Catholics regard sex as sinful (p. 94), that there is a group in the Catholic Church which regards all political activity as the work of Satan (p. 115), and that Greene's whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory* does not deserve heaven "when the unbaptized children go the way of all sinners" (p. 209). Hampered by such hoary canards, and lacking sufficient imagination to enter into the fictional problem as Greene presents it, Atkins is no fit judge either of the art or of the doctrine to be found in a Greene novel. The best illustration of this fact is his discussion of *The Power and the Glory*, where he wrongly thinks that Greene is posing a choice between rule by the politicians and rule by the priests, misses the point of Greene's

selection of an apparently inferior specimen of a priest for his hero, and pontifically asserts that a novel which concentrates on religious relations must lack human interest. Atkins has every right to disagree with Greene's religious outlook or his presentation of it in his novel; but the critic discussing the novel ought to try to see what its theme actually is, and a critic who says that the whisky priest carries on only out of habit is missing the whole point.

Atkins is equally untrustworthy in his assessment of the Catholic response to Greene's books. "Catholics were worried by *The Heart of the Matter*", he writes. "Waugh said it was a 'mad blasphemy' " (p. 193). Waugh said nothing of the sort; in his review in *Commonweal*, he described Scobie's idea of willing his own damnation for the love of God as "either a very loose poetical expression or a mad blasphemy", and, though he disagreed with Greene's apparent theological interpretation, he recommended the book as a masterpiece which posed a very subtle problem in plain human terms. Similarly Father Illtud Evans, O.P., reviewing the book in *Blackfriars*, called it a very great novel: "Its meaning will be debated, and not least by those who share its author's faith. But it is unlikely that in our time we shall see another novel of such power and pity and integrity." Father Harold C. Gardiner, S.J., discussed *The Heart of the Matter* in enthusiastic terms in his *Norms for the Novel*, and in fact employed it as a model of how the Christian ought to pose religious problems in fiction.

"More than the work of any other contemporary novelist", writes Mr. Atkins, "Greene's fiction is a running confession. Like all novelists he is compelled to rationalize and sublimate, but no-one else carries out these tasks with so little concealment of the psychological tangles they utilize." He is superbly confident that Greene's heart is an open book to him:

One undergoes considerable risk in writing about Greene personally. He likes to insist that he goes to particular trouble to exclude himself from his works. This may put some off the scent but if you have only the most rudimentary idea of the creative process you cannot be deceived.

Upon this assurance that he can analyse the author's mind through his books, Atkins' thesis that Greene's later works show his own declining faith, disillusionment, and divided allegiance to two masters really rests. It would have been more prudent for him to have followed the advice given by so many of Greene's fictional priests and been wary of attributing motives or imagining that you can fathom the mind of a human being—or to have heeded the warning given by Greene in an interview reported in the *New York Times* Book Review section for January 20, 1957:

"One chooses a point of view and tries to get inside it. I am not I. I happen to share some of I's views, but not all of them and not with that intensity. It's a fearfully irritating thing. I wish people would read Percy Lubbock's book, *The Craft of Fiction*, where he stresses the need for a point of view."

There are more psychological tangles, then, than Atkins suggests; since he wrote, Philip Stratford has begun to untangle some of them in the *Kenyon Review*, and in analysing some of the recurrent motifs in Greene has shown him to be a master at disguise, concealment, and laying false clues.

If Atkins is an unreliable guide to Greene, and if *The Heart of the Matter* is a dubious example of a novel which succeeds as fiction because it rejects Christian dogma, the thesis of Atkins and of Noxon rests on insecure grounds. But whether or not the thesis has a basis in fact, does *A Burnt-Out Case* itself illustrate Greene's spiritual malaise?

Noxon declares that an agnostic reading the novel might suppose that the author shared his own religious scepticism. The hero, Query, professes religious indifference. The admirable Dr. Colin is an atheist. The villain is a dutiful Catholic. The strictest of the priests is a completely unsympathetic figure. "Indeed", Noxon remarks, "the human value of Graham Greene's religious seems to be a function of their distance from Rome, increasing in direct proportion." In this novel, Noxon observes, the author's convictions appear to differ so radically from what he is known on other grounds to accept that the reader feels puzzled. "He waits for some faint but clear echo of the convert's voice, some subtle gesture by which the balance, so far weighted in favour of atheism, will be redressed." But no such sign is given, not even at the very end, where "the intellectual scrupulousness and moral integrity of the atheistic humanist scores its final point over the good intentions and mental vagueness of the man of faith." Examining a three-year-old boy, Dr. Colin detects the nodules symptomatic of the early stages of leprosy:

"I know that little fellow," the Superior said. "He always came to me for sweets."

"He's infected all right," Doctor Colin said. "Feel the patches here and here. But you needn't worry," he added in a tone of suppressed rage, "we shall be able to cure him in a year or two, and I can promise you there will be no mutilations."

"The doctor offers a cure for a loathsome disease", Mr. Noxon comments. "The priest offers sweets."

But the "tone of suppressed rage" makes us wonder. Has Colin really won the argument?

Perhaps something of Greene's meaning will emerge if we begin to consider *A Burnt-Out Case* in relation, not to Kierkegaard, but to some existentialists of our own time. The novel broaches such favorite existentialist themes as alienation, nothingness, and the absurd. The central character, Querry, will not, like Sartre, take Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" for his starting point; nor will he take Camus' "I revolt, therefore we are"; but he will use a variant of his own: "I feel discomfort, therefore I am alive." He has repudiated thought and he has repudiated solidarity with his fellow man; he has reduced himself to the barest of existential situations, in which he knows that he exists only because he is slightly aware of discomfort. Like Camus' stranger or exile, he has alienated himself from an irrational society; he has turned his back on the absurd world, which has treated him as a great Christian and a great architect when he was neither. He has left everything behind him and gone into the heart of the jungle, as far away from the world of gossip and politics as he can go.

If he has retired from his faith and his vocation, he has also retired from love. Camus near the end of *The Plague* sounds the affirmative note that people can always yearn for, and sometimes attain, human love. But Querry's love affairs have illustrated Sartre's view of love as always a using of another. Using women in this way, Querry has caused the death of a girl named Marie; but, unlike Camus' Meursault, he feels no remorse, no anguish. He has put aside the vanity of love and the vanity of art; he has put an end to hypocrisy; but nothingness is his condition, and there seems to be nothing to build on.

But when Greene has shown us a man in this condition, he does not place emphasis on his freedom, or his freedom to choose. It is not a question of his becoming what he wills himself to be, of his creating his own world around him. He can create nothing. Furthermore, his insensitivity to pain and suffering, his condition of spiritual numbness, is a counterpart of leprosy. As Camus has his plague, Greene has his physical disease of leprosy and its mental and spiritual equivalent—the condition of believing, wanting, and feeling nothing.

He dreamt of a girl whom he had once known and thought he loved. She came to him in tears because she had broken a vase which she valued, and she became angry with him because he didn't share her suffering. She struck him in the face, but he felt the blow no more than a dab of butter against his cheek. He said, "I am sorry, I am too far gone, I can't feel at all, I am a leper."

As the doctor at the leper hospital explains, mutilation is the alternative to pain; suffering is in some sort a protection against mutilation. The term "burnt-out case".

describing a person in whom the disease has burnt itself out but who, before he is cured, has lost everything that could be eaten away, is applied to Query on more than one occasion.

Greene's prefatory remarks make it clear that the Congo to which he takes his central character is a region of the mind, an area in which various types of belief, half-belief, and non-belief can be dramatized. One possible type of belief or attachment, scientific rationalism, is soon ruled out. Within its legitimate area, it has its triumphs; a cure has been found for leprosy. Beyond that, its hope of evolutionary progress is ridiculed as an outworn superstition. Significantly, the admirable Dr. Colin, though he battles courageously against leprosy, is shown as liking rather than loving his fellow-man, and saving his love for his apparatus:

"I've wanted it for so long," the doctor said, touching the metal shape tenderly as a man might stroke the female flank of one of Rodin's bronzes.

On his first morning in the leper colony, Query is reminded by the chanting from the chapel that the area of leprosy is the area of another disease, religion. As Mr. Noxon says, the farther the religious people in the book are from Rome, the more favourably Greene seems to present them. But if we examine their loves and their beliefs, we shall find that another means of discrimination is being used. Rycker, the "dutiful Catholic" who becomes the villain (by murdering Query), talks a great deal about love, though "Truth, which someone had once written made us free, irritated Rycker as much as one of his own hangnails." He is the type of Catholic who mouths pious phrases (about Christian marriage, for example) and follows the letter, not the spirit of the law. He is a Pharisee, and Greene goes after his type as relentlessly as Mauriac does.

As Noxon says, Father Thomas, the most rigorous and ascetic of the priests, is a very unattractive figure, too quick to make Query the hero of a pious tale and too quick to condemn him when Marie Rycker alleges that he is the father of the infant she has conceived. But Father Thomas is not a typical priest; he is described as very different from the others. He is married to the Church, and he feels that the Church responds to him only with the clichés of the confessional: his is a failing vocation.

Early in the book, Query is annoyed at the laughter of a group of priests at a seminary:

... their laughter irritated him, like a noisy child or a disc of jazz. He was vexed by the pleasure which they took in small things. Those who marry God, he thought, can become domesticated too—it's just as hum-drum a marriage as all the others. The word "Love" means a formal touch of the lips as in the ceremony of the Mass, and "*Ava Maria*" like "dearest" is a phrase to open a letter. This marriage like the world's

marriages was held together by habits and tastes shared in common between God and themselves—it was God's taste to be worshipped and their taste to worship, but only at stated hours like a suburban embrace on a Saturday night.

Near the end, he recalls this episode:

Afterwards at the Mission there was a great deal of raillery over the champagne. . . . Query remembered an occasion months ago: a night at a seminary on the river when the priests cheated over their cards. He had walked out into the bush unable to bear their laughter and their infantility. How was it that he could sit here now and smile with them? He even found himself resenting the strict face of Father Thomas who sat at the end of the table unamused.

It is obvious that the change which takes place in Query in the course of the book—his learning to suffer and learning to laugh—is associated with a change in his attitude to the priests and the religion for which they stand.

He begins with nothing, but, as his name suggests, he is a seeker after truth: "All I have left me is a certain regard for the truth." He is not in a world in which everything can be used for his fulfilment; on the contrary, he is lured on to the road of recovery by his servant, suspiciously named "Deo Gratias". Against all reason he goes looking for Deo Gratias, who is lost in the forest where, if anywhere, a god could exist; Query the egotist goes hunting for his mutilated servant, finds him, and covers him with his body to keep him warm. Later on he tells the Superior that he did no more than one animal might do for another; he refuses to consider his actions as evidence of belief or love, and still says that he is looking for nothing. When a journalist named Parkinson has got hold of the story and ludicrously exaggerated it, Query is led to deny still more strongly the notion that there was any good motive in his actions or that he is anything other than selfish. But he worries over truth and searches for peace even when he denies that he is doing so; it is difficult to believe that the theme is anything but the familiar Greene one of the hidden pursuit of man by the grace of God.

There is an oblique reference to St. Augustine's *Confessions* in the novel, and Query's discovery of peace and happiness as he searches for truth seems in keeping with St. Augustine's discussion of truth in Book X of this work:

Now joy in truth is happiness: for it is joy in You, God. . . .

There is but a dim light in men; let them walk, let them walk, lest darkness overtake them.

For where I found truth, there I found my God, who is truth Itself. . . .

. . . Thou didst send forth Thy beams and shine upon me and chase away my blindness.

. . . Thou didst touch me, and I have burned for Thy peace.<sup>1</sup>

Evelyn Waugh sees Query as an example of spiritual sloth, "the condition in which a man is fully aware of the proper means of his salvation and refuses to take them because the whole apparatus of salvation fills him with tedium and disgust."<sup>2</sup> Query's repeated assertions that he does not want to understand or believe would seem to support this view. But against it must be set the evidence of his conduct and his conscious and subconscious concerns. The change which occurs is in terms described by the doctor:

"Wouldn't you rather suffer than feel discomfort? Discomfort irritates our ego like a mosquito-bite. We become aware of ourselves, the more uncomfortable we are, but suffering is quite a different matter. Sometimes I think that the search for suffering and the remembrance of suffering are the only means we have to put ourselves in touch with the whole human condition. With suffering we become part of the Christian myth."

When the doctor goes on to say that suffering is not hard to find, Query is reminded that someone else said much the same thing to him months previously. It was the Superior, who said enigmatically, "Oh, well, you know, suffering is something which will always be provided when it is required." By the time of his last conversation with the doctor, Query has accepted suffering, and begun "to feel part of the human condition, on the side of the Christian myth. . . ." He describes himself as an atheist; the doctor wonders whether he qualifies as one:

"You're too troubled by your lack of faith, Query. You keep on fingering it like a sore you want to get rid of. I am content with the myth; you are not—you have to believe or disbelieve."

Query is on the way to discovering a pattern in existence when the absurd world intervenes. Though he dies before he has made any overt acceptance of belief, the Superior's final comment on him is worth noting:

"We all analyse motives too much. I said that once to Father Thomas. You remember what Pascal said, that a man who starts looking for God has already found Him. The same may be true of love—when we look for it, perhaps we've already found it."

Thus Greene gives a notably different version of experience from that of a writer such as Camus, who in *The Fall* also wrote a story about a man who discovered that most lives rest on lies, and that his own success was due to vanity and selfishness; a man who had a mania for self-accusation and a compulsion to confess his guilt to others (for all his assumed indifference, Query tells his story to half a dozen people); a man who worried about the suffering of the innocent and could not be easy in



conscience while suffering was taking place. But Camus described Christianity as "a doctrine of injustice . . . founded upon the sacrifice of the innocent and the acceptance of that sacrifice."<sup>3</sup> Greene, on the other hand, shows his hero coming closer and closer to the Augustinian notions of evil as essentially not-being and God as the finality of all loves. These are presented in the Superior's sermon to the lepers, which, to the doctor, as Noxon points out, seems to beg a lot of questions, but which presents ideas which the less superficial Querry cannot dismiss: Is it possible that a feeling of vacancy is a punishment from God for neglecting Him? If love is possible, what is its source? How is "belief" or "unbelief" possible? For Greene, suffering is explicable in terms suggested by the quotation from Newman which he prefaces to *The Lawless Roads*: the human race must be implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. Yet the attitude of his priests to suffering is a more complex one than Noxon shows. They join the doctors in trying to alleviate it, but still both they and Querry see the continuance of suffering as mocking scientific utopianism. Furthermore, they see that it can have a certain psychological utility. For *The End of the Affair* Greene used an epigraph taken from Léon Bloy: "Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence." *A Burnt-Out Case* is a dramatization of that process. It shows a numbed person discovering new capacities in himself. One of these is the capacity for faith. He can discover no scientific or purely natural reason why others should exist for him as anything more than objects; and when he has performed an action not done for love of himself, he wonders for whose love it can possibly have been done.

Therefore, if the novel does not end with the subtle convert's twist which Mr. Noxon expected, it does show modern man in search of his soul. At one point Querry says, "You are like so many critics. You want me to write your own story." This is evidently Greene's reply to his Catholic critics who want him to write completely edifying works and dislike his treatment of sexual themes. But the same reply might be made to Noxon, who, generalizing on the basis of one man's experience, declares that religion and art cannot go together:

Graham Greene, the novelist, is so out of harmony with Graham Greene, the Catholic apologist, because the aesthetic attitude really is incompatible with religious commitment, as Kierkegaard himself came to realize. The detachment and impartiality which are essential to making credible fiction are qualities alien to the religious propagandist. As a Roman Catholic, Greene must accept the interpretation of events and the evaluations of persons which are endorsed by his elected authorities. As a novelist, he must remain faithful to his own experience of the world and men. His

'attempt to give dramatic expression to various types of belief, half-belief and non-belief' requires neutrality as a condition for doing justice to the experience of those whose beliefs and values differ from his own.

The most obvious comment on this is that a Catholic writer like Greene would probably wonder what interpretations and evaluations Noxon is talking about; Noxon evidently thinks of Catholicism as a mental strait jacket, whereas it might be more correct to think of it as establishing an area of discourse within which argument can take place. The main point, however, is that Noxon, like some Catholic critics, is confusing the novelist and the propagandist. "The sole end of art is the work itself and its beauty", says Maritain,<sup>4</sup> and if Noxon were acquainted with serious discussions of art by Catholics he would realize how often this point is made; the novelist must indeed be faithful to his own experience, and he should not be a propagandist.

Yet there is a difference between religious propaganda and religious commitment. Mr. Noxon's demand for neutrality is a novel one; it demands that the artist be something other than human; and it minimizes the power of the creative imagination. The *a priori* assumption that the aesthetic attitude is incompatible with religious belief simply cannot stand up against the fact that writers from Aeschylus to Edith Sitwell have found that this is not so. What the writer requires is not neutrality, but an imaginative effort great enough to secure authenticity: Milton did not need to be an unbeliever to create Satan, nor did Dostoievsky have to be neutral on the subject of murder to create Raskolnikov. Nor, for that matter, did Tolstoy have to reject determinism before he could write *War and Peace*. If Mr. Noxon finds a conflict between religious commitment and aesthetic experience, there is no reason for his not finding a similar conflict in any artist who possesses any belief or standard whatsoever. He is not asking the artist to be objective, but to be nothing. He would have him numb and vacant, mutilated mentally and spiritually, a burnt-out case.

#### NOTES

1. "Common Ground," *TLS* (Sept. 14, 1962), 689.
2. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. F. J. Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948), pp. 186-9.
3. Article on "Sloth", *Sunday Times* (London), Jan. 7, 1962, p. 21.
4. Quoted in "Albert Camus", *Times Literary Supplement* (Jan. 8, 1960), p. 14.
5. *Art and Scholasticism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1943), p. 74.