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Graham Greene and Belief

1

Although Graham Green has been writing novels successfully for fifty years and has received his share of critical attention and more than his share of popular success, there seems to be no general consensus as to the value and importance of his work. A writer in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1971, when a new Collected Edition of Greene appeared together with his autobiography, *A Sort of Life*, expressed the view that, besides being a literary entertainer worthy to rank with Eric Ambler and Somerset Maugham, Greene was the principal English novelist now writing in the great tradition of the novel as a work of art—the tradition of James and Conrad and Ford. Greene was concerned to restore to the modern novel the religious sense, and with it the sense of the importance of the human act. 'Like Mauriac, he is concerned to restore that importance and thus to justify the novel in moral as well as in aesthetic terms'

It is difficult to accept this evaluation of Greene's importance. His early practice, to which the reviewer briefly refers, of dividing his work into novels proper and 'entertainments' already suggests some uncertainty of intent. How serious are the 'serious' novels? The entertainments are skilfully contrived stories of flight and pursuit, distinguished from their models, the yarns of John Buchan and Edgar Wallace, by their dispirited mood and shabby settings, and their down-at-heel, morally dubious heroes: qualities which made them acceptable to the disabused younger generation in the bleak thirties and forties. The novels proper differ from the sensational fictions by their more immediate expression of Greene's private concerns, particularly his religious feelings, featuring as they did specific Roman Catholic situations with a full complement of priests, sinners and confessionals and earnest talk about evil, damnation and the soul. It seems captious to doubt that this makes them fully serious. Yet the Catholicism of these novels turns out when probed to be of an oddly heterodox kind. This did

not prevent Greene from being generally accepted as one of a select band of 'Catholic' novelists, and little adverse comment was caused by his reception in 1952 of the (U.S.) Catholic Literary Award. It is unlikely that such an Award would be given him today, when the Catholic interest has all but disappeared from his work.

A discerning account of Greene's writings up to 1960, by Graham Martin, may be found in Volume Seven of the Pelican Guide to English Literature, *The Modern Age*. Noting the topicality and realism of Greene's fiction Martin shrewdly points out that these qualities fail to lead to any appraisal of the social climate of the time. 'As far as its social insight goes, each novel remains an isolated statement. There is no sense in which, collectively, "the world of Greene's novels" outlines the significant experience of an epoch.' The realism too is ambiguous. It is not clear whether the squalid and vacuous settings for Greene's seedy, damned or depressed characters are sympathetic projections of these characters' inner worlds, or whether characters and settings alike represent the novelist's own innate view of the world. 'In *Brighton Rock*', Martin points out, 'the first of Greene's Catholic novels, the corrupt lawyer, Mr. Drewitt, to whom Pinkie applies for advice about his marriage, fittingly quotes Mephistopheles. "Why, this is Hell," he says, "nor are we out of it", and the remark applies, of course, to the career of the damned Pinkie. But it also indicates a feature of the novel less explicit than its theology. The presentation of Brighton, full as it is of convincing period details, can be called "realistic", but "hell" is also a very fair description.' That Brighton=Hell is the view of Pinkie, but this view is endorsed by all but one of the characters, and is confirmed by the metaphorical language which establishes the mood of the book, this mood being underwritten by ' . . . the apparently unquestionable guarantee of "realism".' The equation (Brighton=Hell) is presented both as outward fact and as an inner projection of Pinkie's 'sterile guilt'.—'This balance works both ways, so that the personal guilt and the particular character define themselves in "real" social environments. Neither environment nor moral condition predominates; neither is the cause of the other; and as a result, both together, Pinkie and Brighton, combine in the novel to suggest an absolute human condition, of no particular social or historical identity. The modified "realism" helps both to make topical and to generalize Pinkie's total estrangement from the meaning of his life.'

These observations seem to me true of Greene's writing as a whole, each novel being an expertly put together fictional package the wrappings of which partly conceal an unacknowledged attempt to persuade

the reader into acceptance of a one-sided or aberrant view of the world as objectively real. D.H. Lawrence called this sort of novelist's design upon the reader 'putting the thumb in the pan' so that the imaginative balance of the novel as an authentically disinterested work of art is not permitted to establish itself. Again in Martin's words: 'Greene's art attempts to reconcile the narrow strength of a very specialized vision [of an "underworld"] . . . with an easily accessible novel structure whose purpose is to generalize the vision. At the level of "mood", the reconciliation succeeds, but beyond that it begins to involve serious evasions and ambiguities. And this is certainly one of the ways in which Greene is a minor novelist. A "major" treatment of his underworld would involve either a different quality in the supporting argument or a fuller commitment to the special vision—in either case, a very different kind of novel. On the other hand, the ambiguities evidently spring from the writer's belief that the condition he diagnoses *is* absolute, and demands an expression of itself which says so. So, at this point, the discussion can only go forward by questioning the belief, i.e. by going behind the currently accepted limits of criticism.'

The present investigation proposes without apology to go behind 'the currently accepted limits of criticism' and to scrutinize those religious beliefs of Greene's which play such a prominent part in some of his more pretentious novels, relating these beliefs to the psychopathology of Greene as revealed in his more confessional writings.

2

Greene's attempt in *Brighton Rock* (1938) to combine the plot of a thriller with the metaphysical theme of good and evil has some curious features, not least the way in which 'good' and 'evil' for Greene appear to be interchangeable concepts. The first oddity is Pinkie, his gangster hero, who, although but a stripling of sixteen, is presented as in every way an embodiment of evil, destructive will.—'There was poison in his veins, though he grinned and bore it . . . he jerked his narrow shoulders back at the memory that he'd killed his man . . . He trailed the clouds of his own glory after him: hell lay about him in his infancy. He was ready for more deaths.' A small-time Satan, Pinkie pronounces 'Evil, be thou my good'; but like Satan the evil that is in him depends upon good for its activity. Not only is he nothing without the 'goodness' of the teen-aged waitress, Rose, whom he pursues and marries (in order to shut her mouth as a possible witness against him), but equally he is unable to dispense with the Catholic schematism of salvation/ damnation which

he uses to inject infernal significance into his otherwise meaningless and futile deeds.

The undefined and in the end ambiguous 'goodness' of Rose is supported by the easy-going righteousness, or complacent normality, of the matronly Ida Arnold who, siding with law and order against criminality and abnormality, pledges herself to track down the unknown murderer—Pinkie—of the newspaper stunt-man, Hale. But when the 'good' and Catholic Rose identifies herself with the 'evil' and Catholic Pinkie, the Protestant moralism of Ida Arnold with her cut-and-dried notions of right and wrong is made to appear as a topsy-turvy form of evil. In the eyes of the adolescent pair she is forever deprived of infernal significance and will never be privileged like them to burn in hellfire.—' "Oh, she won't burn. She couldn't burn. She couldn't burn if she tried." She might have been discussing a Catherine wheel. "Molly Carthew burnt. She was lovely. She killed herself. Despair. That's mortal sin. It's unforgiveable . . . I'd rather burn with you than be like her." Her immature voice stumbled on the word. "She's ignorant." ' Thus the devil's disciple's disciple, the tender Rose.

But the *good* Rose's identification with the *evil* Pinkie cannot be mutual. Pinkie's response to her devotion is first to cut her a phonographic disc with the loving message, 'God damn you, you little bitch, why can't you go back home for ever and leave me be?', and second, to plan her elimination in a rigged suicide pact. When instead it is Pinkie who perishes, the tale ends with Rose in the confessional making a morally subversive appeal to a priest who, it seems, has just the distorted mentality needed to understand her.—'She said: "I wish I'd killed myself. I ought to 'ave killed myself . . . I'm not asking for absolution. I don't want absolution. I want to be like him—damned."' To which the priest's response is to muse aloud about a certain French Catholic, killed in the War, who 'had the same idea' as Rose.—'He was a good man, a holy man, and he lived in sin all through his life, because he couldn't bear the idea that any soul should suffer damnation.'—

. . . She listened with astonishment. He said: 'This man decided that if any soul was going to be damned, he would be damned too. He never took the sacraments, he never married his wife in church. I don't know, my child, but some people think he was—well, a saint. I think he died in what we are told is mortal sin.'

The priest concludes his rambling disquisition with the words: 'You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone—the . . . appalling . . .

strangeness of the mercy of God It was a case of greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his soul for his friend.'

This priestly interjection in no way develops from the course of the story and can only be taken as an intrusion of the authorial thumb into the pan. So far from representing values opposed to the 'diabolical' currents in the narrative, the priest is there to propagate the moral subversions favoured by Greene by giving them a fraudulent odour of sanctity. Because she prefers hell with Pinkie to heaven with Ida Arnold for company, the priest brackets her with Péguy (if it is he who is meant) as all but a secular saint. Yet in the narrative itself Rose identifies with negation merely because, of the meagre choice offered her, the profound because Catholic diabolism of Pinkie seems preferable to the shallow moralism of Ida Arnold. It is the priest, a ventriloquist's doll who speaks with the voice of Greene, who gratuitously converts her childish confusion into a saintly compassion for the 'damned' in 'hell'. The same legerdemain appears in the next novel, *The Power and the Glory* (1940), where the hero is a persecuted priest on the run from the police in communist Mexico, as godforsaken a place as the Brighton of Pinkie and Rose. The downbeat similes of the metaphorical prose reiterate the human plight.—'The world was in her heart already, like the small spot of decay in a fruit . . .'; 'He drank the brandy down like damnation . . .'; 'Evil ran like malaria in his veins . . .' Although the priest is shown as a self-hating half-man, addicted to women and the bottle, the movement and mood of the narrative insinuate a contrary impression of him as some sort of deviant 'saint'.—'The mule splashed across the clearing and they entered the forest again. Now that he no longer despaired it didn't mean, of course, that he wasn't damned—it was simply that after a time the mystery became too great, a damned man putting God into the mouths of men: an odd sort of servant, that, for the devil . . .' The priest-hero's equivocal holiness is vindicated and his cowardice, drunkenness, etc., redeemed when, in boys' story fashion, he forgoes his last chance to elude the police so that he may take the sacrament to a dying man. His covert sanctification is sealed by his violent death, through which he attains specious martyrdom. Once again Greene mixes a religious theme with melodrama, suggesting that 'sinfulness' (disgraceful, indecent and indecorous behaviour springing from weakness of character) somehow brings a man closer to God than mere contemptible goodness, decency and self-control.

The Heart of the Matter (1948) is similarly shaped. Scobie, a police official in an African port in wartime, has a discontented wife, Louise, whom he has ceased to love but for whose happiness he has rashly made

himself totally responsible. So that she may go to live happily alone in prosperous South Africa, he gets into debt to a devious Syrian dealer, Yusuf. Alone in his dreary backwater he drifts into an adulterous affair with Helen Roth, a young survivor of a recent shipwreck. When his wife unexpectedly returns he is unable either to give up Helen or to face Louise with his infidelity; and further, as a practising Catholic, he cannot avoid, without giving himself away, taking holy communion while in a state of unconfessed sin. His solution is knowingly to damn himself, as he believes, to eternal separation from God, for the sake of the happiness of the two women, by disposing of himself in a way which will make his suicide look like death from heart-failure. As the story unfolds, this just but desperate man becomes first, through pity, a deceiver and adulterer, an accomplice with Yusuf in a diamond-smuggling escapade, a hypocrite and a liar—but all this so that he may cryptically emerge as the spiritual superior of everyone else in the story. His culminating act is to be understood as one of sublime self-abnegation.—

If he couldn't pray he could at least talk, sitting there at the back, as far as he could get from Golgotha. He said, O God, I am the guilty one because I've known the answers all the time. I've preferred to give you pain rather than give pain to Helen or my wife because I can't observe your suffering. But there are limits to what I can do to you—or them. I can't desert either of them while I'm alive, but I can die and remove myself from their bloodstream. They are ill with me and I can cure them. And you too God—you are ill with me . . . You'll be better off if you lose me once and for all. I know what I'm doing. I'm not pleading for mercy. I am going to damn myself, whatever that means. I've longed for peace and I'm never going to know peace again. But you'll be at peace when I am out of your reach. It will be no use them sweeping the floor to find me or searching for me over the mountains. You'll be able to forget me, God, for eternity. One hand clasped the package in his pocket like a promise.

What is one to make of this? The author of the article on Greene in *Twentieth Century Authors, First Supplement* (edited Kunitz), writes of Scobie: 'He destroys himself and in that act appears to reject God, but out of the very violence and meaninglessness of the act arise a profound spiritual truth—a sense of what François Mauriac, in a discussion of another of Greene's novels, calls "the utilization of sin by Grace."' But the extent to which a sceptical reader will be able to go along with Greene's intimations of a superior sanctity in which self-abnegation leads into self-destruction will depend upon his willingness to trust not only the authenticity of Greene's religious insights but his artistic honesty, and above all his freedom from the urge to special pleading on

behalf of a depressive life-attitude. Unhappily, the more Greene's writings are probed, the less grounds are found for trusting either.

3

In all his work Graham Greene has difficulty with the adult status of his characters. Even when they are not juvenile delinquents, as in *Brighton Rock*, they are all only outwardly grown up. Scratch a Greene man and you find a raw schoolboy; scratch a woman and a hockey-playing schoolgirl appears. In *The Heart of the Matter* both Louise and Helen are fifth-formers at heart; in an animated, intimate moment, Helen tells Scobie about her netball triumphs at college. Two minor characters, Wilson and Harris, come alive to each other when they discover they are old boys of the same public school. And of Butterworth, a suicide, the observation is made: 'When Scobie turned the sheet down to the shoulder he had the impression that he was looking at a child in a nightshirt quietly asleep; the pimples were the pimples of puberty and the dead face seemed to bear the trace of no experience beyond the classroom or the football field. "Poor child," he said aloud.' And the suicide's last message is 'like a letter from school excusing a bad report.'

It is important to note that Scobie does not so much fall in love with Helen as respond pityingly to her vulnerable childishness, with which something in himself compulsively identifies: she becomes for him Innocence in person. To end their affair in obedience to his Catholic code (unaccountably suspended when the affair was begun) would give him '... a clear conscience and a knowledge that he had pushed Innocence back where it properly belonged—under the Atlantic surge. Innocence must die young if it isn't to kill the souls of men.'

Scobie's real but unsuspected infirmity is an incapacity for love, as is unintentionally brought out in the chilling passage where he 'thanks God' that he 'escaped' the ordeal of being present at the death of his only child. His affinity is with all that is negative. 'He felt the loyalty we all feel to unhappiness—the sense that that is where we really belong.' Seeing only futility around him ('... July to April: nine months: the period of gestation, and what had been born was a husband's death and the Atlantic pushing them like wreckage towards the long, flat African beach and the sailor throwing himself over the side...'), he is kept going only by a fixed adherence to the precepts of a religious code which, hostile to life and growth, yet offers to the disobedient a rigid formula by which life can be appraised and judged, i.e. condemned. And as that is all that matters, why the long tedium of living?—'It seemed to Scobie

that life was immeasurably long. Couldn't the test of man have been carried out in fewer years? Couldn't we have committed our first major sin at seven, have ruined ourselves for love or hate at ten, have clutched at redemption on a fifteen-year-old death-bed.'

The same puerility appears in the characters of the next 'serious' novel, *The End of the Affair* (1951), a first-person story told by its central character, one Bendrix, a novelist. While gathering material for a story about civil servants, Bendrix gets to know a respectable bureaucrat, Henry Miles, whose discontented young wife, Sarah (all wives in Greene are uniformly discontented) he then proceeds as a matter of course to seduce. It is wartime, and one night while the sinful couple are entangled on the floor of the novelist's flat there is an air-raid. Bendrix goes downstairs and is knocked out by blast. Finding him 'dead', the residually Catholic Sarah makes an anguished vow to the unknown Deity that if only he be restored to life she will give him up; which she does.

The story opens two years after this event. Bendrix now 'hates' but cannot forget the now unattainable Sarah. One night he meets the cuckolded Henry, who confides to him his fears of his wife's current infidelity. Bendrix cunningly offers to have her watched by a private detective. This man, Parkis, purloins Sarah's private diary, in which Bendrix now reads of her struggle between her renunciation and her continuing love for him. Her religious doubts have led her to an atheist orator, Smythe, but finding his arguments unconvincing she is drawn towards a renewal of Catholic belief through visits to a priest, Father Crompton: hence Henry's aroused suspicions. Bendrix telephones her; to avoid him she leaves the house, although ill, and consequently dies. From a letter she has written, Bendrix learns that, in some unspecified way, she had indeed devoted her life to God in fulfilment of her vow. This has had the unusually rapid effect of making her into a veritable 'saint', a condition attested by the miracles she now begins to work *post mortem*, first saving Parkis's small son from a threatened illness, and then removing a lifelong facial disfigurement from Smythe.

The novel has a certain desperate honesty which is appealing. It is a genuine attempt to set forth the terms of a possible love relationship by a novelist who is hampered by an inability to conceive of the reality of love. Its empty, hopeless and (for the first time) non-Catholic hero confronts the bare possibility of love and belief, but in such a way as wholly to preclude their actualization. The self-chosen circumstances, that his lover is another man's wife and the affair must be conducted secretly and with a sense of guilt, are against him, but in any case it is too late

and he too far gone in egoism and despair, while his partner in adultery can express her love and her faith only by absenting herself from him—somewhat as Scobie expresses his concern for his wife by sending her to South Africa, and then thinks to make the two women in his life happy by 'removing himself from their bloodstream'.

The pathos of the novel lies in its restrained account of Bendrix's miserable inability to give himself in love, or to life. Beginning by making use of Sarah for fictional copy, he goes on to a self-centred exploitation of her as a sexual object. Only when he loses her are his deeper feelings aroused, and then it is jealous hatred which prompts him to hire Parkis to steal her diary. Reading it with bewilderment, he reflects: 'It's a strange thing to discover and to believe that you are loved, when you know there is nothing in you for anybody but a parent or a God to love.' An incapacity for living once more leads to a retreat into childhood.—

When I began to write I said that this was a story of hatred, but I am not convinced. Perhaps my hatred is really as deficient as my love. I looked up just now from writing and caught sight of my own face in a mirror close to my desk, and I thought, does hatred really look like that? For I was reminded of that face we have all of us seen in childhood, looking back at us from the shop-window, the features blurred with our breath, as we stare with such longing at the bright unobtainable objects within.

The obvious weakness of the novella is its combination of slightness of construction and characterization with apparent weightiness of theme. However, the theme implied by the questions which Greene poses to himself through Bendrix as to the possibilities of becoming human and alive or descending to some less than fully human status loses much of its import when it is seen to resolve itself into the minor question of how long an immature adult can continue to cherish an ideal of innocence while living guiltily in a 'corrupt' world. Once again Greene disburdens himself of a story about people who remain puerile beneath their sophisticated pose. Indeed, the 'sanctity' of Sarah, which even indulgent reviewers at the time found hard to take seriously, turns out to be no more than the novelist's wistful idealizing of her innocent childishness. (When, after the funeral, Bendrix opens a cupboard in her former bedroom, he finds a pile of children's books, including *The Children of the New Forest*, *The Golliwog at the North Pole* and a book of verse ' . . . bound in school leather with a label saying that it had been awarded to Sarah Bertram for proficiency in Algebra. Algebra! How one changes . . . Here under my hand was innocence. It seemed such a pity that she had lived another twenty years . . .').

Because of this fixed childishness in Bendrix himself, the counterpart of which he seeks out in the superstitious, schoolgirlish Sarah who can no more love him than he can love her, everything in him that might be positive is able to appear only in the negative form: love as lust, hatred or withdrawal, and faith only as puerile superstition or blank incredulity; at the same time he can relate to others only with hostility. Faced with Sarah's priest-counsellor towards the end of the tale he behaves like a schoolboy defying the headmaster in a *Chums* serial. —

I couldn't get through the tough skin of his complacency. I pushed my chair back and said, 'You're wrong, father. This isn't anything subtle like pain. I'm not in pain. I'm in hate. I hate Sarah because she was a whore. I hate Henry because she stuck to him, and I hate you and your imaginary God because you took her away from all of us.'

'You're a good hater,' Father Crompton said.

Tears stood in my eyes because I was powerless to hurt any of them.

'To hell with the lot of you,' I said.

I slammed the door behind me and shut them in together

And the novel concludes disconsolately:

I wrote at the start that this was a record of hate, and walking here beside Henry towards the evening glass of beer, I found the one prayer that seemed to serve the winter mood: O God, You've done enough. You've robbed me of enough. I'm too tired and old to learn to love, leave me alone for ever.

4

As one might expect, Graham Greene's autobiography, *A Sort of Life* (1971) casts a flood of light on the negative life-attitudes which spills over into his fiction. It begins unpromisingly with a string of disgusting images: a dead dog in his pram as a baby, a tin jerry full of blood after he had had his tonsils out, a 'coloured drawing of a bit of shit' he had made at the age of six for a school periodical edited by an elder brother. We then learn:

I had passed thirteen and things were worse than I had foreseen. I lay in bed in the dormitory of St. John's, listening to the footsteps clatter down the stone stairs to early prep. and breakfast, and when the silence had safely returned I began trying to cut my right leg open with a penknife. But the knife was blunt and my nerve too weak for the work.

What had gone wrong? An unhappy child, Greene at thirteen had had the desolating experience of being removed from the family circle and exiled to the separate boarders' section of the school in which, his father being the headmaster, his family was domiciled. This was in 1917, when the mechanized slaughter in Flanders was at its height. 'The garden across the road, France across the Channel, was now closed to me; I could no longer set foot in the chintzy drawing-room where my mother had read aloud to us and where I had wept over the story of the children buried by the birds. In those early days I had not even been aware that there existed in the same house such grim rooms as those I lived in now ' He felt betrayed, and his loyalties became divided. Perhaps because he had been made to feel to the core of his being that he was unloved, and so must be unlovable, an urge to self-destruction rose up in the boy who was later to become 'a major English novelist'. Having failed to cut his leg he 'tried out other forms of escape' by drinking noxious liquids in the vague hope that they would finish him off. When they did not, he was forced to endure the misery of school for some eight terms, ' . . . a hundred and four weeks of monotony, humiliation and mental pain.' Quite soon in the eyes of the family which had excluded him the young Greene became a case for psychiatric attention, although treatment produced no cure and boredom and depression remained.—'We lived in those years continuously with the sexual experience we had never known And in between the periods of sexual excitement came agonizing crises of boredom. Boredom seemed to swell like a balloon inside the head; it became a pressure inside the skull: sometimes I feared the balloon would burst and I would lose my reason.'

Alcohol provided one means of escape, and ' . . . later at Oxford it served me dangerously well, when for a whole term I was drunk from breakfast till bed.' Russian roulette provided another. In the dismal troughs of boredom Greene would walk out to the nearby common with a revolver carrying a single charge, point it to his own head, and pull the trigger. Meantime, shades of the prison house (a favourite quotation) began to close upon the growing boy.—'I was hemmed in by a choice of jails in which to serve my life imprisonment, for how else at twenty can one regard a career which may last as long as life itself, or at the best until that sad moment is reached when the prisoner is released, in consideration of good behaviour, with a pension?'

In such soil was planted Greene's Catholicism. Engaged to a Catholic girl, while working on a provincial newspaper, Greene applied for instruction to a certain Father Trollope, saying nothing about the engagement and fighting hard against conviction 'on the ground of a dogmatic

atheism'. Finally he capitulated, to a priest who, as seems to have been the rule in the nineteen-twenties, understood his task to be to exact from his converts a primarily notional assent to a propositional Catholic creed, together with unquestioning obedience to church discipline. His first general confession was 'a humiliating ordeal', and his religious promises, he says, he carried with him 'like heavy stones into an empty corner of the Cathedral . . . I took the name of Thomas—after St. Thomas the doubter and not Thomas Aquinas . . . I remember very clearly the nature of my emotion as I walked away from the Cathedral: there was no joy in it at all, only a sombre apprehension. I had made the first move with a view to my future marriage, but now the land had given way under my feet and I was afraid of where the tide would take me. Even my marriage seemed uncertain to me now.' And in fact it seems the marriage was soon to come to grief, leaving Greene an inveterate 'loner'.

This joyless passage from congenital unbelief to theistic convincement was evidently a conversion only in name. As Greene was to state in 1938, 'I am a Catholic with an intellectual if not an emotional belief in Catholic dogma'; and, 'I had not been converted to a religious faith. I had been convinced by specific arguments in the probability of its creed.' (Greene: *Journey Without Maps*, 1938.) But passive assent to belief in God as an abstract proposition is not the same as active commitment to faith in God as living reality, while the attempt to order one's life to accord with an authoritarian plan which is subverted by the actual currents of the emotional life can hardly fail to have discordant results.

This discordance is woven into the novels where Greene's lonely and misunderstood heroes, caught between a formal commitment to religious faith and an immoral mode of living, deal with the disparity not by amendment of life but by a tortured persistence in misdoing—which the novelist then twists into a semblance of sanctity through the sinful one's compassionate identification with the 'damned' in 'hell'—that is, with those in like case with himself. The sterile creed is justified in turn by the tenacity with which it is clung to by the reprobate, despite the self-condemnation it entails. At all costs he must hold life and religion apart. Then, no other course being open to him, he exits.

Theologically, Greene's pseudo-Catholic religiosity appears to be neither incarnational nor sacramental. There is not, nor could there well be, a single mention of Christ, the incarnate Son of God, in Greene's writings. Greene's 'God' is not the Creator and Redeemer of the world, but rather an abstract, a-cosmic deity who 'manifests' himself negatively by a studied absence from the created world, which thereby becomes, or remains, desecrated and anomalous.

A philosophical approach to Greene's cryptographic thinking might be attempted through a correlation of the three key concepts, *love*, *experience* and *meaning*. If (following N.V. Banerjee in *Language, Meaning and Persons* [1963]) we accept that *meaning* presupposes participation in a common plan directed towards a future fulfilment, then the Greene hero with his hopeless, backward-looking view is excluded from it. Because for him the world is not a field of interrelated purposive activities but a waste terrain of rejection and alienation drained of value, he *cannot experience*; therefore he cannot develop and must remain childish, empty—and bored. At the heart of his inner vacuity is a woeful inability to give and to receive *love*, to relate affirmatively and freely to others as persons. Imperviousness to experience is already to be seen in Pinkie in *Brighton Rock*, of whom Graham Martin has observed: 'It is his failure to belong to his own experience that matters. Loss of meaning, loss of control, loss of contact, not simply with others, but, except in crude glimmerings, with one's own actual experience— . . . ' And this imperviousness is linked, in a way which returns us to Greene's aberrant theology, with his *innocence*.

Innocence is the theme-word in Greene's writings as a whole. Since for him the word appears to stand-in for *value* in an absolute and inclusive sense, without it his whole work would collapse. *Innocence* is counterweighted by its contrary, *corruption*. As a negative which takes positive form, *innocence* conjoins itself with *ignorance*, so that corruption in turn takes the initial form of *knowledge*. Both terms converge upon sexuality. Greene's severely restricted range of feeling-thought forces him into an extraordinarily narrow notion of 'sin' and 'evil'. Sin always means sexuality. Innocence means the a-sexual or pre-sexual state of childhood. As in *Brighton Rock*:

The Boy retorted with sudden venom: ' . . . You're green. You don't know what people do . . . You're innocent.' . . . His fingers pinched her wrist. 'You're green,' he said again. He was working himself into a little sensual rage, as he had done with the soft kids at the council school. 'You don't know anything,' he said, with contempt in his nails.'

'What people do' refers to adult, corrupting sexuality, or participation in the inescapable generative/ degenerative processes of nature. Despising Rose's ignorant innocence, Pinkie yet views that initiation into adult sexual status, marriage, with horror.—

. . . If he married her, of course, it wouldn't be for long; only as a last resort to close her mouth and give him time. He didn't want *that* relationship with anyone: the double bed, the intimacy, it sickened him like

the idea of age. He crouched in the corner away from where the ticking pierced the seat, vibrating up and down in bitter virginity. To marry—it was like ordure on the hands.

Entering despite these feelings into abhorrent sexual relations with the *good* and *innocent* Rose, the evil and corrupt Pinkie compounds the horror by insisting that their union is 'mortal sin' and that both are accordingly 'damned'.

Yet where in the relations between innocence and corruption does the one end and the other begin? Pinkie, walking down the Brighton street, and brushed against by a child with its leg in an iron brace, recoils in disgust.—'They [children] took his mind back and he hated them for it; it was like the dreadful appeal of innocence, but *there* was not innocence; you had to go 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.'

But it is far better, more *innocent*, not to be born; for the root of Pinkie/ Greene's vision of life is an appalled conviction that the created world itself is inherently monstrous and evil: ' . . . the horror of the world lay like infection in his throat.' The specific evil acts which corrupt Pinkie's presumed innocence are consequent upon his unconsenting emergence into a world which, as with the Manichees and Bogomils of an earlier epoch, is immitigably unholy, abandoned to its own bestial devices by the withdrawal into his own remoteness of the true, pure God. But here is a paradox. Pinkie, for all his corruption by evil, remains *innocent* in that he is untouched by his own experience, and incapable of growth. Without directly stating it, Greene presents Pinkie in a way which suggest that this frozen innocence itself *constitutes* the evil of his character.

As a psycho-fictional document *Brighton Rock* transparently exposes the connexions between a neo-Manichean world-view and the pathological revulsion from sexuality. The rationale of the Greene universe seems to be this.—The absence of God (who is able to be present only in the wafer of the sacrament, orally received) signifies the absence of love, and so of the possibility of the redemption of genital sexuality through love and fidelity in the personal and sacramental commitment of marriage. The horror aroused by the loveless sexual act forces the outcast loner to seek regressively for value in an idealized a-sexual innocence; yet this innocence, lacking power to sustain itself, is forced to turn into its contrary, corruption. For the Greene man the sexual relationship can at best be one of repulsive male pity for the female 'other', whether she be used in a socially subversive adulterous affair or

in the simple cash relationship of wealthy client to poor prostitute. True, there is a possible way out of his predicament in the celibacy enjoined upon the Catholic priest; but his weakness is such that celibacy remains an abstract ideal for the concupiscent sinner who is forced willy-nilly into corruption through his imperative sexual needs. So evil, concentrated into sexuality, compounds itself by a compulsive continuance. The sinner must either submit passively to his own corruption, or make his exit from the meaningless world through *felo-de-se*.

The situation is epitomized in a short story entitled 'A Visit to Morin', (*A Sense of Reality and other stories* (1963)), which depicts the not uncommon plight of the professing Catholic who does not believe. The narrator, Dunlop, finds himself at Christmas time in a part of France where lives a once famous French novelist. By chance he encounters the old man in church at midnight mass, to which both have gone as onlookers. Morin is a shipwrecked man. 'The eyes gave him away: they seemed to know too much and to have seen further than the season and the fields. Of a very clear pale blue, they continually shifted focus, looking close and looking away, observant, sad and curious like those of a man caught in some great catastrophe which it is his duty to record, but which he cannot bear to contemplate for any length of time.' The novelist takes him to his house and he talks about faith to his agnostic visitor; no longer a believer, he is rather 'a carrier of belief, like a man can be a carrier of disease without being sick. Women especially . . . I had only to sleep with a woman to make a convert.'

Morin denies that he has lost his *belief*, a different matter.—'I will put it this way. If a doctor prescribed you a drug and told you to take it every day for the rest of your life and you stopped obeying him and drank no more, and your health decayed, would you not have faith in your doctor all the more?' For twenty years, he explains, he avoided confession and excommunicated himself voluntarily, since he was living in sin with a woman from whom he had no intention of parting.—'Five years ago my mistress died and my sex died with her. . . . I can tell myself now that my lack of belief is a final proof that the Church is right and the faith is true. I had cut myself off for twenty years from grace and my belief withered as the priests said it would . . . For twenty years I have been without the sacraments and I can see the effect. The wafer must be more than wafer.' Morin still deliberately refuses the sacrament so as to retain the conviction which he no longer dare put to the test that his very lack of belief is an argument for the faith and for the Church. Only this permits him to continue living. If living it can be called.

Greene may have written this sombre tale with an actual French novelist in mind, but his own situation would seem akin to Morin's. He too had been sought out by Catholics with difficulties.—'I would claim not to be a writer of Catholic novels but a writer who in four or five books took characters with Catholic ideas for his material. Nonetheless for years—particularly after *The Heart of the Matter*—I found myself hunted by people who wanted help with spiritual problems that I was incapable of giving. Not a few of these were priests themselves . . . ' (*In Search of a Character* (1964)).

All this cannot but raise the question of Greene's fundamental seriousness, his integrity as an artist, and so once more the relation of the 'novel' to the 'entertainment'. Evelyn Waugh's reputed sardonic advice to Greene when, after *The End of the Affair*, the latter had confided to his fellow Catholic his intention to drop religion from his work and turn to political subjects, comes to mind: 'Oh, I wouldn't give up writing about God at this stage if I were you; it would be like P.G. Wodehouse dropping Jeeves half way through the Wooster series.' Is Greene then no more than a blasé fabricator of offbeat thrillers, bringing in religious motifs to enhance his status and pull in a captive Catholic audience, or is he a serious writer personally committed to the view of life he propounds or projects? The answer is apparent. By presenting successive fictional scenarios in which the only outcome of the action can be the suicide of the hero, Greene is in danger of coming to peddle a formula which repetition can only trivialize even to triteness. The fourth or fifth novel in such a sequence would have to become parody or burlesque. Yet had Greene been essentially 'committed', it is painful to have to say, he must long since have followed the examples of his sanctified sinners and done away with himself, so earning the qualified respect we accord to those who, however wrongheaded, have at least the courage of their perverse lack of convictions.

For what *are* Greene's convictions? The truth seems to be that he is both committed and uncommitted to his never quite explicit, perhaps because never fully conscious *weltanschauung*, just as at thirteen he had tried and yet not tried to cut his leg open with a penknife. The matter is one of decision. As with Russian roulette, to leave it to chance to decide whether one shall live or die may be to find oneself with only 'a sort of life' on one's hands. And so with Greene's unconverted conversion. As a non-Catholic Catholic believer who did not believe, Greene came to write with superficial profundity about tedious adventure, joyless pleasure, lustful love, heroic suicide and saving damnation. The same crooked strategy of deception is then employed so that he may evade the

plain logic of self-destruction demonstrated in his tales by inconspicuously shifting his ground in such a way that the credal crisis which demanded this desperate remedy is impassively covered up and ignored as though it had never been. Instead of living and thinking his situation through to a conclusion, which perhaps must have been a painful one, the proponent of salvation-through-damnation-and-suicide himself pushes pseudo-Catholicism itself to the margin of his concerns, leaving the negation it conceals to announce itself, after a few exploratory sorties into the wastelands, as declared unbelief. The 'Catholic' novelist stealthily de-Catholicizes himself, and with so little fuss that hardly anyone notices.

5

The last of Greene's novels to make any attempt at all to fulfil the function of the novel, to engage the reader's sympathy for characters who have not altogether given up the struggle to live like human beings—although it is a weak, thin novel and the characters are on the verge of giving up, and indeed *do* give up, although they have not as yet lapsed into outright cynicism and depravity—is *The End of the Affair*. A bad good novel, it marks the first stage in its author's extrication of himself from a now otiose religiosity. Its Catholic furnishings, moved discreetly into the background, concern only the 'saintly' Sarah, not the unsaintly Bendrix. A hero who for the first time is not interested in injecting his burdensome life with significance through a souped-up belief in hell and his own worthiness to be damned, Bendrix remains a rootless *voyeur*, a displaced person who eavesdrops on the lives of others to gather material for his novelist's trade.

With the relinquishment of religion goes an abandonment of value—here, the strengthless value of a cherished *innocence*. This is to be seen in the hero of the next story, *The Quiet American* (1956), a good bad novel.

Thomas Fowler—the names tell us something—a correspondent in French Vietnam for a British newspaper, is an ageing man with a broken marriage in England. Fowler has given up any attempt to live a godly, sober, and righteous life, even in a backhanded way. He has a native housekeeper, Phuong, who shares his bed and prepares his pipes of opium; for he is a drug addict. On to the scene comes Alden Pyle, attached to a U.S. trade mission. A sentimental idealist, and a better marital prospect for an ambitious girl, Pyle falls for Phuong and steals her from the older man. Further, with misguided zeal he dabbles in the local politics, making bombs out of smuggled plastic compound. These

go off in a street demonstration, killing several bystanders. Fowler then betrays Pyle to the communists, who murder him. The story opens in point of fact with Fowler back with the nubile Phuong and calmly smoking opium as he chats with the police after they have found Pyle's body; only later does his part in the killing become clear.

Ostensibly, the story tells of the harm done by well-meaning but unlicked simpletons, as contrasted with practised, world-weary cynics like Fowler who hold sardonically aloof from social reform and regard women with amused contempt as purchasable commodities rather than as soul-mates or plaster madonnas. Pyle, 'impregably armoured by his good intentions and his ignorance', is a danger to others.—'Innocence always calls mutely for protection when we would be so much wiser to guard ourselves against it: innocence is like a dumb leper who has lost his bell, wandering the world, meaning no harm.'

But on another level the tale is a covert allegory of the adolescent and the adult, Pyle representing for Fowler a former self he must disown and destroy to become what he now is. In a portentous phrase from an earlier work, 'Innocence must die young if it is not to kill the souls of men.' Rather than identifying himself pityingly like Scobie with a personified Innocence, Fowler ruthlessly liquidates it, or *him*. His feelings towards Pyle are ambivalent. Although a callow young fool, isn't he, even so, the better man?—'Suddenly I saw myself as he saw me, a man of middle-age, with eyes a little bloodshot, beginning to put on weight, ungraceful in love, less noisy than Granger perhaps but more cynical, less innocent . . . All the time that his innocence had angered me, some judge within myself had summed up in his favour, had compared his idealism, his half-baked ideas . . . with my cynicism. Oh, I was right about the facts, but wasn't he right too to be young and mistaken, and wasn't he perhaps a better man for a girl to spend her life with?'

Fowler both commends and condemns himself for his life in which he has settled for a still active sexuality helped out by pipes of opium in place of love and friendship, for self-centred quiescence in place of altruistic action for the common good, and for instant sophistication in place of hard-earned wisdom refined from the crude ore of experience.—'I know myself, and I know the depth of my own selfishness. I cannot be at ease (and to be at ease is my chief wish) if someone else is in pain . . . Sometimes this is mistaken by the innocent for unselfishness, when all I am doing is sacrificing a small good . . . for the sake of a far greater good, a peace of mind when I need think only of myself.' Fowler pays a regretful lip-service to decency, but his life is a calculated routine in which a woman is of interest only as a paid

ministrant to his sexual, culinary and opiate needs. But the first of these is beginning to pall.—'I'm bored with the subject anyway. I've reached the age when sex isn't the problem so much as old age and death. I wake up with these in mind and not a woman's body. I just don't want to be alone in my last decade, that's all. I wouldn't know what to think about all day long . . . ' Fowler's one respectable quality is a certain honesty; he calls things by their proper names, and barely disguises from himself the fact that he is rotting away with ingrown negation.

Having liquidated Innocence in the person of Pyle he now has a clear field, but for what? For the ministrations of the captive Phuong to his protracted dying. Death is now the dark meaning of life. 'Why', he asks himself, 'should I want to die when Phuong slept beside me every night? But I knew the answer to that question'—that every transient happiness is fated to end up in deprivation and loneliness. Only death is certain. 'Death was the only absolute value in my world. Lose life and one would lose nothing again for ever.' And religion?—'I envied those who could believe in a God and I distrusted them. I felt they were keeping their courage up with a fable of the changeless and the permanent. Death was far more certain than God, and with death there would be no longer the daily possibility of love dying. The nightmare of a future of boredom and indifference would lift.' So Fowler arrives at an explicit nihilism. 'I could never have been a pacifist. To kill a man was surely to grant him an immeasurable benefit. Oh yes, people always, everywhere, loved their enemies. It was their friends they preserved for pain and vacuity.' Like Scobie in the earlier novel he, too, wants to 'get out, get out'. But rather than his own junkie person he arranges the liquidation of his earlier innocent self in Pyle. That gone, he can continue henceforth on terms of bored familiarity with a corruption that is no longer so called, since it has become the norm. Fowler is a *survivor*.

A Burnt Out Case (1961) dots the 'i's' and crosses the 't's' of his nihilism and makes as nearly explicit as possible Greene's disavowal of Catholic belief. Querry, a famous architect, has come to the end of his rope. Both life and creed have thinned to nothing; he has nothing more to say in his art, and his 'other passion', love of women, has left him exhausted and bored. Wanting only to find peace, perhaps in death, he journeys up the Congo river to find an outward correlative to his inner state: a leper colony run by missionary priests where physically burnt-out cases abound. Here he takes into service a cured leper who bears the ironical name of Deo Gratias. This man suffers an injury when away from the colony, and Querry, finding him, stays with him all night in the

open, provoking a cranky and disaffected priest, Father Thomas, to seize upon this humane action and to spread the rumour that the community has a veritable 'saint' in its midst. Meantime Querry's friendship is sought by Rycker, the manager of a nearby oil-mill, an ingratiatingly sanctimonious Catholic who has married a young Belgian girl, Marie, to serve his present needs *à la* Fowler, and nurse him later in his declining years. Infected by Father Thomas's hagiomania, he alerts a vulgar journalist, Parkinson, to make a case for Querry's 'sanctity' in a sleazy French magazine. Querry goes to see Rycker to make an annoyed protest, but finding him ill in bed, unwisely departs with the restive and dissatisfied Marie to the nearby town where they innocently hire adjoining rooms at the one hotel and spend the night in conversation. The next day an outraged Rycker arrives and, accusing Querry of seducing his wife, pulls out a gun and shoots him dead, an 'innocent adulterer'.

It is plain to see that this is *The Heart of the Matter* turned inside out, or upside down. Instead of being insinuated by his author into cryptosanctity through his self-abnegating readiness for eternal damnation, the protesting hero, himself one of the walking damned, now has a flagrantly spurious sanctity obligingly thrust upon him by others, a patent misconception which, almost in a 'saintly' manner, he is constrained punctiliously to disavow.

'Will you listen to me, Rycker? I'm trying to speak gently because you are sick. But all this has to stop. I'm not a Catholic, I am not even a Christian. I won't be adopted by you and your Church.'

Rycker sat under the crucifix, wearing a smile of understanding.

'I have no belief whatever in a god, Rycker. No belief in the soul, in eternity. I'm not even interested.'

Not only has Querry's outwardly Catholic belief evaporated, but his incapacity for living can no longer be covered up by any formula, not even the formula 'love of women'. He unburdens himself to the Superior in these words: 'I suffer from nothing. I no longer know what suffering is. I have come to the end of all that too . . . To the end of everything.' And so in a way he has. But flatly to state his condition is one thing; to state it in a way which traces Querry's sickness to its source and relates it to some norm of sanity and health is a creative feat beyond Greene's capacity. His dissolute, vacuous hero is finished, washed up, *kaput*, because that's how life inscrutably *is*. Not only is Querry himself unable to evaluate his own condition, but neither can he be assessed by the down-to-earth Catholics around him because—such is the relative status of belief and unbelief toward which Greene has moved—his state of

composed nullity is at least preferable to their crass credulousness, oily sanctimoniousness or thick-skinned complacency. So in spite of his burnt-outness and the boredom which consumes him, Querry emerges after all in his author's intention as much the most respectable character in the tale, no plaster 'saint', maybe, but a decently tired and worn-out artist with more honesty, modesty and good sense than the addled dolts who would mock him with a spurious halo. The effect is one of double-take, in which Querry, wearily acknowledging his own dereliction, is foisted on to the unwary reader, in a surreptitiously flattering way, as yet another 'damned saint', his assassination by the enraged Rycker being as much a martyrdom as that of his priestly predecessor in *The Power and the Glory*: a specious martyrdom.

6

Few novelists, writing over a comparable period of time have given their readers as little imaginative sustenance as Greene. To some extent this is disguised by Greene's socio-political up-to-dateness and the cosmopolitan settings of his tales. But rather than a widening of interest and a deepening grasp of human life they centre upon an obsessional concern with the same inescapable issue, the situation of the inadequate loner whom the author, identifying with him rather more closely than is fitting, both wants to present with honest realism and yet to justify as some sort of superior being. This effort, at first helped out by a twisted religiosity collapses from within, and in the result we are shown a rogue's gallery of morally defective characters who are insinuated into our sympathies as retrograde saints and heroes, terminating in the burnt-out sensualist Querry. Yet Querry's fatigued 'coming to the end of everything' is misleading. More pointedly he has failed to make a beginning, has never really severed the bond with childhood and the nursery, a situation indicated in a quaint scrap of dialogue with the insufferable (because Catholic) Rycker. —

'What prayers do you use, Querry?'

'None—except occasionally, from habit, in a moment of danger.' He added sadly, 'Then I pray for a brown teddy bear.'

Greene's non-entertainment novels are 'serious' only in that they purport to deal with issues of salvation (of a sort) through (a sort of) damnation. The religious argument demonstrating itself to be frivolous or at least misplaced brings about its own exhaustion and excision, and

Greene's very numerous readers today are left with entertainments only. The genre in which the veteran fictioneer has come to excel, while high in readability, is low in significance. The late-model Greene differs from his fellow practitioners in the genre in his more open cynicism, for he is intelligent enough to know he is writing about nothing, and the pointlessness of the action which other thriving fabricators of boys' stories for adults either do not recognize or find it politic to conceal, turns out to be the very point of a Greene excursus.

For example, in *The Comedians* (1966), a disenchanting exile, Brown, returns in his late fifties to a hotel bequeathed him by his mother in depressed Haiti, where between routine visits to the local brothels he resumes a pointless *affaire* with the wife of a resident South American diplomat. On the boat he has been accompanied by a raffish adventurer, Jones, and a naively high-minded pair of U.S. senior citizens, the Smiths, who plan to open a vegetarian restaurant and cultural centre with the approval of the Haitian Ministry of Social Welfare. Events bring them into collision with the minions of the 'Papa Doc' regime, the sinister *Tontons Macoute*. Jones, forced into association with some incompetent insurgents, comes to a sticky end. The Smiths slowly get wise to the nature of the regime and decamp, while the narrator loses both mistress and hotel and sinks at last into mean obscurity as the partner in a funeral parlour in the Dominican Republic. The *Comedians* of the title are those who, like Brown himself, are unable to become involved in the human enterprise, enacting instead comedies of their own devising on the fringes of existence. Brown expatiates: 'My mother had taken a black lover, she had been involved, but somewhere years ago I had forgotten how to be involved in anything. Somehow somewhere I had lost completely the capacity to be concerned.' As a boy he had believed in the Christian God, under whose shadow life was a very serious affair; now it was only his sense of humour that enabled him sometimes to believe in Him. 'Life was a comedy, not the tragedy for which I had been prepared, and it seemed to me that we were all . . . driven by an authoritative practical joker towards the extreme point of comedy.'

For a short time Green actually turned to burlesque. *Travels with my Aunt* (1969) and *May We Borrow Your Husband? And Other Comedies of the Sexual Life* (1967) are extended jocosities which for the most part turn upon a contrast of ignorant innocence with knowing depravity and a more or less hilarious play with inverted notions of the sacred and the profane. One remarks the increasingly polite profanity and urbane indecency of Greene's writing, while noting that an unrelieved venery moves in to replace the banished religiosity. Yet how short a distance

Greene has travelled, in terms of sexual revulsion, may be seen when a passage from *Brighton Rock* is put side by side with one from *The Comedians*.—

'You can't teach me the rules,' the Boy went on with gusty anger. 'I watched 'em every Saturday night, didn't I? Bouncing and ploughing.' His eyes flinced as if he were watching some horror. He said in a low voice: 'When I was a kid, I swore I'd be a priest.'

'A priest? You a priest? That's good,' Dallow said. He laughed without conviction, uneasily shifted his foot so that it trod in a dog's ordure.

'What's wrong with being a priest?' the Boy asked. 'They know what's what. They keep away—' his whole mouth and jaw loosened: he might have been going to weep: he beat out wildly with his hands towards the window—Woman Found Drowned, two-valve, *Married Passion*, the horror—'from this.'

* * *

'Doctor Magiot's a communist,' she said.

'I suppose so. I envy him, he's lucky to believe. I left all such absolutes behind me in the chapel of the Visitation. Do you know they even thought once that I had a vocation?'

—Perhaps you are a *prêtre manqué*.'

'Me? You are laughing at me. Put your hand here. This has no theology.' I mocked myself while I made love. I flung myself into pleasure like a suicide on to a pavement.

Pinkie is still in his teens, Brown a man in his fifties, but both are emotionally stuck at the same point of recoil from the horror of the natural reproductive function, yet grasped helplessly by the gravitational pull of a separated sexual lust which is metaphorically equated with self-destruction. This is no case of the novelist's sympathetic imagination exploring the feelings of those trapped in a self-made hell: Greene simply is unable to present human life except in these Manichean terms.

To explain why this should be so would demand a longer analysis than can be attempted here, though it might here be suggested that to whatever damage Greene had suffered in childhood was added (he was born in 1904) the trauma of adolescence at an English public school during the first of the mechanized wars. (The titles of three of his earlier sensational fictions, *England Made Me*, *A Gun for Sale*, and *It's a Battlefield* between them neatly summarize the generational situation.) Greene's case is that of a writer of some talent and intelligence whose

psychological development has been shockingly arrested at a pre-adolescent stage, for whom therefore the realm of adult experience has become inherently evil and corrupting, a field for crime, deception and espionage, and for loveless, compulsive sex. The earlier pseudo-religious novels show him trying to grapple in an adolescent way with the problem of 'evil', or rather, trying to vindicate the 'goodness' of the weak man who is trapped by the nature of things into 'sin'. But since in a godless and loveless world evil must be paramount, and since corruption is as inevitable as death, at the end the Greene hero simply gives up and takes a melancholy or humourous satisfaction in his own corruption. Of *The Honorary Consul* (1973) the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer, after admitting that it is so much a return to Greene's earlier manner as 'almost to be a pastiche', goes on to say: 'They [the characters, who include a married priest, a minor novelist, a consul, a police chief and a whore] do the things that one has come to expect of Greene's characters: they talk about God and the Church, they betray one another, they die; and these customary actions are narrated in a voice that after all these years has become as familiar as a hangover—a sour, joyless voice which has changed scarcely at all since the days when it told us that the purser took the last landing card in his hand, that Mr. Tench went out to look for his ether cylinder, and that Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him. It is all familiar, it has worked before and it works again. But it is not pastiche, far from it; it is a new melodrama, skilful, professional, flawless. Greene is back at the old stand, as good as ever he was.'

Granted the skilled professionalism which in Greene does duty for an artistic conscience, this is to commend a piece of work, 'sour' and 'joyless' as it is, for the expertise with which it is carried through while remaining silent as to its value and whether it was worth carrying through at all. The reviewer's admissions support the evidence of the tales themselves that for all his earlier pretensions and the acclaim of over-impressionable reviewers, Greene has never in fact been other than a confectioner of melodramas. His claim to attention is that he has used the melodrama in a unique way as a vehicle for the projection of a jaundiced, depressive view of life which derives directly from his own psychopathological condition, and that for some years, as a consequence, he was successful in getting himself taken seriously as a 'Catholic novelist', and even as an uncommonly profound one, fit to rank with writers like Bernanos and Mauriac, his superiors in every way. But when all the Catholic trappings are shed, what remains? The *T.L.S.* reviewer points out, though without further comment, that it is ' . . . the

concept of *machismo*, that sense of masculine pride that is so deep in the Spanish character' (*sic*); which here, for the first time in a Greene novel, has moved to the centre of the action.

From pseudo-Catholic religiosity to Latin-American machismo: a remarkable progression indeed. For what is machismo? According to a penetrating account by V.S. Naipaul ('Argentina: The Brothels behind the Graveyard'. *New York Review of Books*, September 19, 1974) of the part the cult plays in a modern South American state, machismo is the resort of men so diminished by the cultural vacuousness of their society that no meaningful activity remains to them beyond the mere puffing up of their male sexual prowess.—'There is the machismo of the football field or the racing track. And there is machismo as simple stylishness; the police motorcyclist, for instance, goggled and gloved, weaving about at speed, siren going, clearing a path for the official car. But machismo is really about the conquest and humiliation of women. In the sterile society it is the victimization, by the simple, of the simpler . . .

'Machismo makes no man stand out, because every man is assumed to be a macho. Sexual conquest is a duty. It has little to do with passion or even attraction; and conquests are not achieved through virility or any special skills . . . Money makes the macho. Machismo requires, and imposes, a widespread amateur prostitution; it is a society spewing on itself.' These are caustic words; but their substantiation is in the whole article, which should be read.

Given Greene's obsession with innocence and corruption in the context of a meaningless world, the descent from a histrionic Catholicism to the emptiness of machismo bears all the dispiriting signs of inevitability. To be sure, the degradation of woman, the inferior male's incapacity for relationship and for positive human feeling, expressed (as depicted in the fictions subsequent to *The End of the Affair*) in his joyless frequenting of prostitutes, is not yet machismo. Machismo is the positive form of the negation, the bravado with which the shameful act is brought about and carried through. It marks a further stage in personal and cultural devastation. And this is the moral terminus to which Greene's work leads his admiring readers. Of course, for the most part they do not notice it, or if they do, like the *T.L.S.* reviewer they seem not to want to perceive its significance. But this is less a comment upon Greene than upon the entire fabric of the culture which contains and supports him: our culture, of which we ourselves are a part.