

## GRAHAM GREENE

*Like many writers, Greene resisted the appellation of Catholic novelist, since he did not want readers to be seeking catechetical exactitude in his stories.*

In what is arguably his first Catholic novel, *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene contrasts a weak, alcoholic fugitive priest with his austere pursuer. There are others contrasts in the book as well -- between the hunted man who cannot escape the demands of his ministry and his soft, comfortable self before the revolution; between the second nocturne tale of martyrdom read by pious children and the real life flawed candidate for the firing squad with whiskey on his breath -- but the basic contrast is between the political and the religious. All efforts to see the significance of human life in this-world terms are inadequate to the way it really is.

Other Catholic novels are *The Heart of the Matter*, *The End of the Affair* and *A Burnt-Out Case*. The series comes to an end in 1973 with *The Honorary Consul*. Greene still had years to live and many books to write, but his imagination had switched from a religious into a political gear.

*The Heart of the Matter* takes its motto from Charles Peguy. "At the very heart of Christianity is the sinner. No one is more competent on the matter of Christianity than the sinner -- unless it be the saint." Major Scobie damns himself out of pity for a waif-like war widow in colonial Africa. Greene is at his best presenting Catholicism through the medium of

failed Catholics, sinners. Faith is not meant to produce sinners, of course, but being a sinner is a condition of entry.

Like many writers, Greene resisted the appellation of Catholic novelist, since he did not want readers to be seeking catechetical exactitude in his stories. To be a spokesman for the faith is a very different thing from having an imagination permeated with belief.

The persistent theme of Greene's fiction is betrayal, and sin is the ultimate treachery. Disloyalty to friends and country provide variations on the theme, and they are all Greene has left when he reverses the outlook of *The Power and the Glory*. The motto of *The Honorary Consul* is taken from Thomas Hardy. "All things merge in one another -- good into evil, generosity into justice, religion into politics..."

*Religion into politics*. That merger deprives Greene's later fiction of the pulse of the novels that begin with the story of the Mexican martyr. During the war, Greene was a spy and afterward he defended the homosexual traitors Burgess and Maclean. There began then his odd flirtation with totalitarian governments and Central American dictators and his increasingly virulent anti-Americanism. This seems to have had its origin in the pique he felt at being kept out of the United States because of his brief Oxford affiliation with the Communist party.

Not entirely, of course. In *The Lawless Roads*, the non-fiction account of his trip to revolutionary Mexico, Greene sees America as the

great Pelagian colossus to the north, where sin is unrecognized and the purpose of life is earthbound, materialist, glitzy. Mexico, backward, savage and bloody, is a place where the drama of salvation can be played out.

In *The Third Man*, the put-down of America is just British snobbery -- Americans like ice cream -- as later in the prologue to *The Comedians* it will be conveyed through a comic also-ran presidential candidate. In *The Quiet American*, the Vietnam novel, the eponymous American causes havoc by trying to do good, but there is no theological contrast to this chuckle-headed Pelagianism, just a lofty and unearned superiority on the part of the Brit narrator, with his opium habit and native mistress..

Graham Greene became a Catholic prior to his marriage. He was a journalist in Nottingham at the time and his account of the *terminus ad quem* of this conversion can be found in the first of his uninformative autobiographical volumes, *A Sort of Life*. The priest to whom he went had the improbable name of Trollope (perhaps this is a little joke). Greene found the cathedral gloomy and the priest repellent, fat, soft, smooth skinned. He turns out to be a converted actor and Greene warms to him. "It was quite a while before I realized that my first impression was totally false and that I was facing the challenge of an inexplicable goodness."

Greene describes the instructions he took as a time of battle. He didn't disbelieve in Christ, he didn't even believe there was a God. What happened? "I can only remember that in January 1926 I became convinced

of the probable existence of something we call God, though now I dislike the word with all its anthropomorphic associations and prefer Chardin's 'Noosphere'..." Greene is writing more than forty years later, of course, and he says his memory fails him. Among the "anthropomorphic associations" he dislikes would appear to be the Incarnation. If this were an accurate description, it sounds like a timid Deism rather than a conversion to Roman Catholicism.

One learns to distrust Greene's accounts of his own life, particularly the most personal aspects of it. He manages to remember his wife's name in his memoirs, but his children are anonymous if alluded to at all. He left his wife and took up with a woman he delighted in calling his mistress. *The Burnt-Out Case* tells of a famous architect who goes to Africa to escape his reputation as a Catholic artist. He no longer believes what supposedly inspires him and he seeks desperately in a leper colony for what he has lost. Is that Greene? Perhaps.

Just as Greene's anti-Americanism led him to express a preferential option for the reds (*The Human Factor*), so in matters religious he flirted with the heterodox and the bizarre (Chardin).

It is depressing to think that his radical chic and trendy anti-Americanism, the distancing of himself from his all too famous Catholicism, was a bid for the Nobel prize he never won and surely deserved more than most who received it.

Greene was technically one of the greatest writers of our time.

When I was learning to write, I analyzed his novels, breaking them into their components, studying the way he achieved his effects. To this day I have to check myself from writing poor imitations of his prose. I cannot think of a better technical model for an aspiring writer.

I have not mentioned the plays, or the film scripts, the essays, the occasional writings. Greene was a gentleman enamored of the moral slums, but he ended what he had not wanted to be, a consummate man of letters. And a Catholic writer -- of a sort.