

CHAPTER IV
HIS CATHOLICISM



As we have already mentioned, evil, violence and brutality obsess Greene's mind! He could find no meaning in the Anglican Church ; he wanted an answer to suffering and misery. This he found in the Catholic Church.

The Anglican Church could not supply the same intimate symbols for heaven : only a big brass eagle, an organ voluntary, "Lord dismiss us with thy blessing," the quiet croquet lawn where one had no business, the rabbit and the distant music.

Those were the primary symbols : life later altered them. The Mother of God took the place of the brass eagle ; one began to have a dim conception of the appalling mysteries of love moving through a ravaged world.¹

Therefore, he was converted to the Catholic faith and later married Vivien Dayrell-Browning, a Roman Catholic.

In the forms of the Roman Catholic Church he found a measure of an answer to the problems that had vexed him as a child. The Catholic Church offered a reason for suffering and misery, for crime and brutality ; it offered the hint of an explanation as to why a fifteen-year-old girl and twenty-year-old boy were found headless on a railway-line, why Irish servant girls met their lovers in ditches, and why the professional prostitute tried to keep the circulation going under her blue and powdered skin.

Greene's Catholicism deeply colours his works. Roman Catholicism is the mainspring of The Power and the Glory. The hero of this novel is a Roman Catholic priest, the whiskey-priest. The whiskey-priest in trying to escape from the state in which he is the last representative of

¹Graham Greene, The Lawless Roads (London : Longmans, 1939), pp. 11 - 12.

the Church. He returns to his native village, where he has an illegitimate daughter Brigida and narrowly escapes detection by the Lieutenant of Police, who is looking for him. Later he turns up in the town looking for wine with which to celebrate Mass, and is ironically arrested for violating the anti-liquor laws. During the night he spends in the crowded prison cell, a microcosm of his world, the priest comes to an appreciation of God in Man. In the filth and stench he sees human nature at its lowest ; and he identifies the evil in the world with that in himself. As one woman harangues the priest to hear her confession and as two prisoners find comfort in the sexual act, their cries of pleasure reminding him of his weakness and his daughter Brigida, the priest sees the people of God, and he understands more clearly than ever before the condition of His kingdom. In the lovers and the other inmates he sees the types and symbols of eternity :

Such a lot of beauty. Saints talk a lot about the beauty of suffering. Well, we are not saints, you and I. Suffering is to us just ugly. Stench and crowding and pain. That is beautiful in the corner - to them. It needs a lot of learning to see things with a saint's eye ; a saint gets a subtle taste for beauty and can look down on poor ignorant palates like theirs. But we can't afford to.²

Wedged in beside an old man who murmurs about an illegitimate daughter, the priest is overcome by an overwhelming pity for suffering and misery. He remembers from experience the beauty of evil : "how much beauty Satan carried down with him when he fell."³ He sees and feels God in the poor and the helpless ; and he finds it possible to pity

²Graham Greene, The Power and the Glory, p. 168.

³Ibid., p. 169.

the half-caste who seeks to betray him. Having found his own kind, the whiskey-priest feels the need of confession. As he tells his fellow prisoners that he is a whiskey-priest and the father of a child, he longs for the simplicity of death. He prays for Brigida, although he knows in his heart that the evil in her is too fixed to overcome. Yet in his dedication to her, he begins to orient himself into the scheme of God ; he opens his heart to grace, and he begins his journey to recognition. Having been released, unrecognized, from prison, he is on the point of escaping to a safe state when he is called back to minister to a dying gangster, a call he obeys though he knows it is a trap. He is arrested. Over the body of the gangster, the priest and the lieutenant debate. The lieutenant argues that the priest, although himself a good man, is a danger to the well-being of the state and that his destruction is necessary to secure that well-being. He insists that the priest's religion does not free people from want and misery, and that his does. " 'We'll give them food instead,' " he says, " 'teach them to read, give them books. We'll see that they don't suffer.' " ⁴ To this the priest makes the only answer he can. The poor, he says, are in greatest favor with God, and heaven is theirs. He agrees with the lieutenant that the only certainty of life is death, but he disagrees with him as to what constitutes the essence of living. He points out that he who rules through power and fear is open to the temptations of power and fear, and he insists that unless the minister of the *secular* order maintains his motives in honesty and truth, nothing but corruption can result from his office :

It's no good your working for your end unless you are a good man yourself. And there won't always be good men in your party. But it doesn't matter so much my being a coward - and all the rest.

⁴Ibid., p. 251.

I can put God in a man's mouth just the same - and I can give him God's pardon. It wouldn't make any difference to that if every priest in the Church was like me.⁵

Speaking with the authority of his Church, the priest is nevertheless aware of his inadequacies as a man; and he has found the mercy of God incomprehensible :

I don't know a thing about the mercy of God : I don't know how awful the human heart looks to him. But I do know this - that if there's ever been a single man in this state damned, then I'll be damned too I wouldn't want it to be any different. I just want justice, that's all.⁶

Alone in his cell while awaiting execution, he discovers that his love for human beings extends only to Brigida, his evil daughter. And he attempts to bargain with God, offering his damnation for her salvation. "Oh God help her. Damn me ; I deserve it, but let her live for ever." In the last moments he realizes the enormity of human failings, and his tears are those of genuine contrition.

Greene wants to show the power and the glory of the Church. On the surface, the whiskey-priest is a bad priest. However, he accepts what he is. Despite all his failures of character, he cannot help being a priest. The biggest duty of a priest is to hear confession. He comes back to hear a handit's confession, though he knows he is going to be captured. He goes to his death as a priest. If the poorest servant of the Church can behave like this, it is indeed the Church of power and of glory. Though the whiskey-priest is a Roman Catholic, what he represents transcends the narrow limits of any one religious belief.

⁵Ibid., pp. 252 - 253.

⁶Ibid., pp. 259.

The Heart of the Matter has a religious theme. Major Scobie, a middle-aged police officer in British West Africa, is passed over for promotion. His wife, Louise, for whom he feels only pity and responsibility, urges him to allow her to go for a holiday to South Africa, to escape her "friends." To avoid making her unhappy, Scobie borrows from Yusef, a merchant suspected of diamond smuggling. A torpedoed ship brings Helen Rolt into the pattern of Scobie's life. Scobie falls in love with her because she is pathetic. When Louise returns from South Africa, she is informed that Scobie and Helen are lovers. To see whether or not Scobie has given up his mistress, Louise insists that he accompany her to Communion. He knows that he must crucify either God or Louise. The suffering of God, however, is unreal and remote; that of Louise is nearer. He chooses sacrilege and damnation by taking Communion without having received absolution at confession : "O God I offer my damnation to you. Take it. Use it for them."⁷ With the sacrilege comes the commissioner-ship that Louise has longed for. Now "of the devil's party", Scobie knows that he will go from "damned success to damned success"⁸. He knows that he has destroyed ^{himself} to keep from bringing hurt to either Helen or Louise, and he determines to set them free of him. He reasons that, if he kills himself, he will stop crucifying God ; and it is God whom he loves above all things :

... O God, I am the only 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. I can only imagine it. But there are limits to what I can do to you - or them - I can't desert either of them while I am alive, but I can die

⁷Ibid., p. 272.

⁸Ibid., p. 276.

and remove myself from their blood stream. They are ill with me . . . I can't go on; month after month, insulting you. I can't face coming up to the altar at Christmas - your birthday feast - and taking your body and blood for the sake of a lie. I can't do that. You'll be better off if you lose me once and for all.⁹

He will hurt God once for all - deprive God of himself as he will deprive himself of God. A voice within tempts him to virtue as to sin :

" You say you love me, and yet you'll do this to me - rob me of you forever. I made you with love And now you push me away, you put me out of your reach." Scobie answers, "No, I don't trust you. I love you, but I've never trusted you. If you made me, you made this feeling of responsibility that I've carried about like a sack of bricks."¹⁰

This is Scobie's sin : he prefers to trust himself, in his limited knowledge of love, rather than God, who is all love. He cannot put his faith in trust of God ; for his faith is love and pity is its image. Scobie cannot comprehend the "appalling" nature of the mercy of God. He knows that the choice for damnation is his alone as he drinks the narcotic. Aloud he says, "Dear God, I love . . ."¹¹

At the end of the novel Father Rank returns to give comfort to the living, to reestablish the norm of the Church and to give hope for Scobie's soul, even though he committed suicide. "The Church knows all the rules," he says. " ' But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart.' "¹² He insists that, if Louise has forgiven Scobie, then God can be no less forgiving. Louise remarks that Scobie really loved no one but God.

⁹Ibid., p. 315.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 316 - 317.

¹¹Ibid., p. 326.

¹²Ibid., p. 333.

The novel is pervaded by the Catholic problems, but they are not its sole basis ; Kenneth Allot and Miriam Farris point out " Discussion of the meaning of The Heart of the Matter is doomed in advance to sterility if it does not take into account the words composing the book have been organized primarily with an artistic, rather than a philosophical or theological, intention."¹³

In The End of the Affair, the central conflict is a religious one. The action of The End of the Affair is limited chiefly to an affair between the hero and the heroine. Henry Miles is important in the struggle, because he is Sarah's husband. Bendrix and Sarah meet at a cocktail party ; they become lovers. Because she loves Bendrix too well, Sarah promises God that she will never see him again if only God will ~~restore~~ him to life, for she believes Bendrix to have been killed in a bomb explosion. To make her keep her promise, God sends His grace in every conceivable way : an unanswered telephone keeps Sarah from talking to Bendrix ; a racking cough prevents her kissing him when she does see him ; a husband's early return ties her to her home when she has decided to abandon her promise ; and death, at the right moment, keeps her from losing all. Sarah succumbs to the grace of God and becomes a saint. Bendrix, however, at the end of the novel, is doubtful ; and he must be, for he maintains the balance between the secular order and the religious order. Because of the flashback technique that Greene uses, the last physical occurrence of the novel's action appears on the first page of the book - Bendrix sits down to tell his story. He speaks of those early days when "we were lucky enough not to believe."¹⁴ Still the novel is

¹³Kenneth Allott and Miriam Farris, The Art of Graham Greene(London : Hamish Hamilton, 1951), p. 214.

¹⁴Graham Greene, The End of the Affair, p. 3.

Bendrix' journey of exploration, of recognition ; and as he writes his and Sarah's story, he comes to a realization of the place of God in the real world. Bendrix is unable to "conceive of any God who is not as simple as a perfect equation, as clear as air."¹⁵

In Brighton Rock, "Greene for the first time relates the theme of corrupted innocence, the theme of betrayal, the motif of the chase, and his own symbols of evil to a specifically religious theme : the Roman Catholicism of the central characters."¹⁶ Pinkie is a Roman Catholic. He believes in hell and the devil because he knows the exquisite torture of pain ; suffering is for him the only reality. When Rose asks him if he believes in hell, he answers :

"Of course it's true ... what else could there be ? ... Why ... it's the only thing that fits. These Atheists, they don't know nothing. Of course, there's Hell. Flames and damnation ... torments."¹⁷

When his lawyer Prewitt quotes from Marlowe, " 'Why this is hell, nor are we out of it,' " Pinkie looks at him with horrified interest, for he thinks that he alone knows the secret. The symbols of hell have been constantly around him : the man who collects debris along the Brighton walks, the beggar who has lost the whole of one side of the body, Rose's parents who sell her for fifteen guineas. Life for Pinkie is his parents on Saturday night. Nature speaks to Pinkie of an eternity of pain ; "Worms and cataract, cancer ... children being born ... dying slowly."¹⁸ Intimate with evil as he is, Pinkie can recognize its opposite when he sees it.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁶A.A. DeVitis, Graham Greene (New York : Columbia University Press, 1966) p. 20.

¹⁷Graham Greene, Brighton Rock, p.66.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 304.

" 'I'll be seeing you,' " he says to Rose, " ' You an' me have things in common.' "¹⁹ Rose and Pinkie are opposite sides of the same coin ; one cannot exist without the other. Yet Pinkie makes the mistake of thinking that goodness and ignorance are one. He fails to perceive that Rose recognizes his evil and nevertheless loves him. Their marriage is that of heaven and hell : "She was good, he'd discover that and he was damned : they were made for each other."²⁰ At the end of the novel, Rose goes to her confessor and insists that she is unable to repent her failure to damn herself alongside Pinkie. The priest speaks to her of Péguy, the "sinner" who could not accept the thought that God would allow any of ^{his} creatures to suffer damnation ; he speaks to her of the "appalling strangeness of the mercy of God". His is the voice of the Church, attempting to reestablish a mean once the passions of men have spent themselves. He comforts the living, and he asks Rose to hope and pray, for the Church does not demand that any one believe that a soul may be cut off from mercy. He makes the final commentary on the action when he says,

'... a Catholic is more capable of evil than any one. I think perhaps-because we believe in Him - we are more in touch with the devil than other people.'²¹

Greene's Roman Catholicism has given rise to a great deal of critical commentary. Henry James said that "We must grant to the artist his subject, his idea, his donnée : our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it."²² But many

¹⁹Ibid., p. 33.

²⁰Ibid., p. 168.

²¹Ibid., p. 332.

²²"Henry James : The Religious Aspect," in The Lost Childhood (London : Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1951), p.39.

critics have not been prepared to grant Greene so much. Greene's données are often based on Catholic dogma and belief. There is such a thing as "mortal" sin; Christ is "really and truly" present in the Eucharist; miracles can occur in the twentieth century. This arouses objections and suspicions from non-Catholic audience and critics.

In The Emperor's Clothes, Kathleen Knott says that the convert to Catholicism takes his religion much more seriously than one born into it.

It seems to be much easier for Catholic writers who are born Catholic, for instance Mauriac, to stick to psychological truth than it is for converts. This may be because it is much easier to ignore Catholic theory when it is acquired below the age of reason. Anglo-Saxon writers probably have a special disadvantage in this respect.²³

Miss Knott goes on to observe that she finds the situation described in Greene's The Power and the Glory credible because the actions of the characters result from the interplay between a sentimental - religious education and the concrete circumstances of socialistic, government intolerance. But for The Heart of the Matter and The End of the Affair she says :

To be artistically satisfying- the situation must be objectively described. The author must not imply that, for esoteric reasons, he knows more about the answers to the problem than the characters do. You can write a human book about a Catholic if you do not at the same time write a book about Catholic theories of human nature.²⁴

Greene's novels have offended Catholics as much as non - Catholics. The Power and the Glory, for instance,

²³Kathleen Knott, The Emperor's Clothes (London : 1954), pp. 310 - 11.

²⁴Ibid., p. 309.

provoked a condemnation from the Holy Office itself. In an exchange of letters with Elizabeth Bowen and V.S. Pritchett (Why do I write?) Greene admitted that loyalty to his own imagination involved him in a certain "disloyalty" to his Church. By this he meant that in pursuing his artistic aims he could not consult the counsels of religious prudence.

Since the publication of Brighton Rock in 1938 the framework of Greene's novels, with the exception of The Quiet American, has been Roman Catholicism.

Greene has been faced with a problem regarding his artistic and religious integrity. He concerns himself with the capacity of the human heart for sacrifice and greatness within a world governed by a God who seems unreasonable, hostile and oftentimes indifferent ; and he concerns himself with the all - pervasive nature of grace, the incontestable mystery of good and evil, and the inability of man to distinguish between the two. However, his appreciation of the orthodoxy of his belief does not govern the artistic conception of his work. He is responsible to both his craft and his faith.

Jacques Maritain discusses in Art and Scholasticism the problem of evil in the world and the novelist's responsibility to his audience. The novelist's purpose, he says, is not to mirror life as the painter does, but to create the experience of it. It is true that the novel derives its rules of conduct from the real world ; but, as a work of art, its validity depends on the quality of the life experience it creates. It becomes the responsibility of the novelist to understand with what object he portrays the aspects of evil which form the materials of the true art work.

The essential question is from what attitude he depicts and whether his art and mind are pure .

enough and strong enough to depict it without connivance. The more deeply the modern novelist probes human misery, the more does it require super-human virtues in the novelist.²⁵

According to Maritain the only writer who can be a complete artist is a Christian, for only he has some idea of the potentialities of man and of the factors limiting his greatness.

A.A. DeVitis says in Graham Greene that many of Greene's commentators and critics have failed to understand the important fact that in his novels, Greene describes a human condition, and that the experience of life developed within that human condition is not representative of a religious bias. Greene himself says in a letter to Elizabeth Bowen and V.S. Pritchett :

If I may be personal, I belong to a group, the Catholic Church; which would present me with grave problems as a writer were I not saved by my disloyalty. If my conscience were as acute as M. Mauriac's showed itself to be in his essay God and Mammon, I could not write a line. There are leaders of the Church who regard literature as a means to an end, edification. I am not arguing that literature is amoral, but that it presents a different moral, and the personal morality of an individual is seldom identical with the morality of the group to which he belongs. You remember the black and white squares of Bishop Blougram's chess board. As a novelist I must be allowed to write from the point of view of the black square as well as of the white: doubt and even denial must be given their chance of self-expression, or how is one freer than the Leningrad group?²⁶

In the novels since Brighton Rock, with the exception of The Quiet American, Greene creates an experience of life

²⁵ Jaques Maritain, Art and Scholasticism (New York, 1949), p. 171.

²⁶ Why Do I Write?, pp. 31 - 32.

in which the religion of the chief characters is Roman Catholicism. His characters are the mixture of good and evil. If a novelist glorifies good and refuses to recognize the beauty of evil, the beauty that Lucifer carried with him when he fell; and if the novelist attests only the validity of a religious dogma, he is "a philosopher or religious teacher of the second rank."²⁷

Greene is primarily a novelist ; he is neither a theologian nor a philosopher. In his book In Search of a Character, Greene says :

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.²⁸

Greene also states in his essay on Henry James that

The novelist depends preponderantly on his personal experience, the philosopher on correlating the experience of others, and the novelist's philosophy will always be a little lop-sided.²⁹

When Greene concerns himself with the problems of good and evil, he does not so much as they exist within the Catholic Church but as they exist in the great world. Although Catholicism pervades the plots of his novels, Greene is not concerned in justifying the activities of his religion. It can be said that Greene is a writer who deals with expressions of life within a Roman Catholic framework. His preoccupation is chiefly with the fall of man and with the possibility of redemption.

²⁷"Henry James : The Religious Aspect," in The Lost Childhood (London, 1952), p. 39.

²⁸Graham Greene, In Search of a Character, (New York, 1961), p. 60.

²⁹"Henry James : The Religious Aspect,"