

# GRAHAM GREENE: EITHER — OR

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Graham Greene is, in one sense, unique: he is a popular Catholic novelist and playwright who writes in English. Chesterton and Belloc had a limited appeal and neither of them was a novelist. Maurice Baring's long shadow has become a shade; and Compton MacKenzie (past) and Evelyn Waugh (present) seem to do better when not directly concerned with Catholic matters. Bruce Marshal made a stir with *Father Malachy's Miracle* and followed it up with other successes, but he is, after all, a lightweight and has never enjoyed Greene's international reputation. One remembers — just — *The Keys of the Kingdom* and that Gregory Peck did his best in the film of that name; and one recalls — with a shudder — Robinson's more recent success with *The Cardinal* which "rocked America from coast to coast." But Graham Greene has nothing in common with these things. To what, then, attribute his success?

I think that the answer is that he writes about people, human beings. And he writes about them in their moments of profound choice. In this he has much in common with the Existentialists who are also alive to the great challenge: either — or. He is not an apologist for the Catholic Faith or Morals as Chesterton was (the honest journalist — a paradox that might have amused him); he is not an exponent of the Catholic view-point in history as Belloc was (whose axe was less ground than wielded to cleave his opponents' skulls); and although his plots are of the liveliest, he never uses sensationalism for its own sake, or offends the reader with an assumption of knowingness which is in reality a lack of charity and good taste.

He has divided his work into two classes: novels (to which must be added his one play, *The Living Room*), and entertainments; but the distinction is more one of degree than of kind. For example, which of the two following passages is entertainment, which is "novel writing?"

1. "In the light of the spill she was again surprised by the doctor's knowledgeable stare, but it was a frozen knowledge which never changed. She looked away and looked back and it was the same. I never knew he was as bad as that, she thought. I can't stay here. She even wondered whether they would accuse her of his death. These foreigners, whose language she could not understand, were capable of anything. But she delayed too long, while the spill burned down, because of an odd curiosity. Had he too once had a girl? The thought robbed him of impressiveness, he was no longer terrifying dead, and she examined his face more closely than she had ever dared before. Manners went out with life. She noticed for the first time that his face was curiously coarse-featured; if it had not been so thin it might have been repulsive; perhaps it was only anxiety and scant food which had lent it intelligence and a certain sensibility. Even in death, under the shaking blue light of a slip of newspaper, the face was remarkable for its lack of humour. Perhaps, unlike most men, he had never had a girl. If he had lived with somebody who laughed at him a bit, she thought, he would not now be here like this; he wouldn't have taken things so seriously; he'd have learned not to fuss, to let things slide; it's the only way. She touched the long moustaches. They were comic; they were pathetic; they could never let him seem tragic. Then the spill went out and he might have been buried already for all she could see of him and soon for all she thought of him, her mind swept away by faint sounds of a cruising car and of footsteps".

2. "When he woke up it was dawn. He woke with a huge feeling of hope which suddenly and completely left him at the first sight of the prison yard. It was the morning of his death. He crouched on the floor with the empty brandy-flask in his hand trying to remember an Act of Contrition. "O God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins... crucified... worthy of thy drea-

dful punishments". He was confused, his mind was on other things: it was not the good death for which one always prayed. He caught sight of his own shadow on the cell wall; it had a look of surprise and grotesque unimportance. What a fool he had been to think that he was strong enough to stay when others fled. What an impossible fellow I am, he thought, and how useless. I have done nothing for anybody. I might just as well have never lived. His parents were dead — soon he wouldn't even be a memory — perhaps after all he wasn't really Hell-worthy. Tears poured down his face; he was not at the moment afraid of damnation — even the fear of pain was in the background. He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted — to be a saint."

My selection is a fair one, I think, since the second passage is easy to spot for anyone at all familiar with Greene's works. It comes, of course, from *The Power and the Glory*, the priest's thoughts the morning of his martyrdom. The first passage is from *Stamboul Train*, an Entertainment, Coral Musker's reactions in the railway shed when she finds herself alone with Dr. Czinner, the dead patriot. It seems to me that the level of the writing in both these passages remains the same.

The reason is not hard to find. For Greene life is a matter of choice. There is a period of tension before the choice is made, there is the choice itself, and there are the consequences. The ultimate anti-climax of all this is death; but it is also the last challenge: have you chosen well?

This pattern, I think, can be found again and again in Greene's work. The Confidential Agent is a Party man, no longer believing in his Party but still loyal to the ideal the Party has betrayed. Dr. Czinner, in *Stamboul Train*, is another "dedicado" to a lost cause. The sufferings of both these men are a direct consequence of their choice.

When we move into the amphitheatre of the Christian ethic, the drama becomes not less, but vastly more interesting. The rules are so much stricter; the choice so much more far-reaching in its consequences. It is in this context too, that Greene raises the problem of suicide (Hamlet was before him). The factors in the situation may be so dilemmatic that the only way out is self-murder — even charity itself would seem to demand it. But this is against the rules of the game. Suicide is the one sin that, by definition, remains unforgiven: ultimate despair.

I think Greene handles this situation with sound artistic insight and a characteristic optimism in the workings of grace. Who knows what happens in those last few moments before temporal extinction? In *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie, the central character, commits suicide to spare his wife the humiliation of finding out he has a mistress, and to escape the intolerable position — from a religious point of view — his deception has forced upon him. (Actually, we are told his choice is not so much wrong as useless: his wife knows.) But in his last moments, devotion to duty, the habit of a lifetime, reasserts itself. It is clear he has a chance.

"It seemed to him as though someone outside the room were seeking him, calling him, and he made a last effort to indicate that he was here. He got on his feet and heard the hammer of his heart beating out a reply. He had a message to convey, but the darkness and the storm drove it back within the case of his breast, and all the time outside the house, outside the world that drummed like hammer blows within his ear, someone wandered, seeking to get in, someone appealing for help, someone in need of him. And automatically at the call of need, at the cry of a victim, Scobie strung himself to act. He dredged his consciousness up from an infinitesimal distance in order to make some reply. He said aloud, "Dear God, I love..." but the effort was too great and he did not feel his body when it struck the floor or hear the small tinkle of the medal as it span like a coin under the ice-box — the saint whose name nobody could remember."

The medal (the — perhaps — too obvious instrument of grace) was given to Scobie by a poor ship's captain whom he had befriended.

In Greene's one play up to date, *The Living Room* (which, incidentally, had a very successful run in London) the special problem of choice, i. e., when it involves suicide, is taken a step further. The young girl, a Catholic, is in love with a middle-aged married man whose wife is a hopeless hysteric. The invalid priest, the young girl's uncle, is paralysed, not only in body, but, it would appear, in his basic function as a director of souls. When she asks him for guidance, his advice is perfunctory, almost mechanical (well he knows it!), and she takes the poison her lover's hysterical wife had played with melodramatically, but left untouched. She takes the poison, but her mind is already hopelessly deranged. She imagines herself once more a child, thinking as a child, praying as a child, trusting God as a child: in her madness her uncle's advice has become a reality.

There are other instances in Greene's writings where the problem of choice is, it seems to me, much more of a problem. In *A Gun for Sale*, the gangster dies bitterly regretting his own weakness: that he had "trusted a skirt". The young heroine, having first gained his confidence and sown the seeds of human feeling in his warped little soul, betrays him to the police because of her very understandable disgust at the despicable nature of his crimes.

In *The Third Man* (I am thinking of the film version), the title character is presented as almost completely vicious. His one redeeming trait is that he trusts his friend. He will come into the Allied Zone (where he is wanted by the police for causing the deaths of many children through selling the hospital authorities inferior drugs) only if his friend calls him. He comes and is betrayed.

There is, then, for Greene the right choice (*The Power and the Glory*), the mistaken or useless choice (*The Heart of the Matter*, *The Living Room*), the problematic choice (*A Gun for Sale*, *The Third Man* — and perhaps, *England Made Me*), and, finally, the wrong choice.

In *The End of the Affair*, his last novel to date, the heroine, after being spied on by a detective engaged by her jealous lover

to find out who it is she really loves, reveals herself as loving God. Up to a point, the technique of the detective story is employed; but the unknown criminal is God. The lover — quite fairly, I think — is not satisfied with this (even when he finds his beloved is a miracle-worker), but reasserts with violence his unbeliever's creed.

"I thought, you've failed there, Sarah. One of your prayers at least has not been answered. I have no peace and I have no love, except for you, you. I said to her, I'm a man of hate. But I didn't feel much hatred; I had called other people hysterical, but my own words were over-charged. I could detect their insincerity. What I chiefly felt was less hate than fear. For if this God exists, I thought, and if even you — with your lusts and your adulteries and the timid lies you used to tell — can change like this, we could all be saints by leaping as you leapt, by shutting the eyes and leaping once and for all: if you are a saint, it's not so difficult to be a saint. It's something He can demand of any of us, leap. But I won't leap. I sat on my bed and said to God: You've taken her but You haven't got me yet. I know your cunning. It's You who take us up to a high place and offer us the whole universe. You're a devil, God, tempting us to leap. But I don't want Your peace and I don't want Your love. I wanted something very simple and very easy: I wanted Sarah for a lifetime and You took her away. With Your great schemes you ruin our happiness like a harvester ruins a mouse's nest: I hate You, God, I hate You as though You existed. . . .

"I wrote at the start that this was a record of hate, and walking there 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".

It seems to me this is a case of the wrong kind of choice.

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