

# The Spiritual Splendors of Weakness and Myopia

Graham Greene: *The Human Factor*; Simon and Schuster; New York.

by Mary Ellen Fox

Ashenden, James Bond and George Smiley, those notable protagonists of the novel of espionage, are way stations signaling the changing nature of the genre. Somerset Maugham's *alter ego* was an amateur who nonetheless carried out his patriotic obligations during World War I in accordance with the strictest professional code. Bond, an amalgam of science fiction with the post World War II sexual pop scene, seems to have been created just for the moving picture screen. Ian Fleming's hero, much less of a literary personality than Maugham's Ashenden, was a reaction to the realities of the Cold War with its absolute moral and ideological positions put into a comic strip aesthetics and seasoned with a middle-aged writer's libidinous imagination. Yet, whether reality is comprised of the consequences of minutiae or a glamorous, action-packed never-never-land, duty to king and country was unquestioningly, even enthusiastically performed. This seems like a fairy tale compared to today's spy novels. The world of John Le Carré, which is chronologically much closer to Bond than to Ashenden, is a grubby little universe furnished with grubby little files and peopled with grubby little bureaucrats living in grubby little bed sitters. The most complete and significant turn-about, however, has been a reevaluation of purpose and a questioning of principles. The novel of espionage—a predominantly British product—appears now to be a very British way of coping with political factualities and the national attitudes toward them.

Graham Greene's *The Human Factor* is a continuation of both the author's own literary tradition and that of the

genre. It further develops the deromanticization of the secret agent as a deskbound code cracker and paper pusher, who increasingly questions the necessity of maintaining loyalty to the home office. Greene delved into the platitude, shabbiness and cheapness of the allegedly romantic professions and vocations long before Le Carré did. He produced, in this respect, literary achievements of magnitude. His Catholicism, or rather the never-ending substantiation of his conversion, brought into imaginative use with a writing acumen and intensity unrivaled in contemporary world literature, helped him to create an unique body of work. *The Human Factor* remains well-grounded in the same intellectual and stylistic tradition. It is an alloy of Greene's Catholic literary sensibility dealing with important moral problems, which has produced *The*

*Power and the Glory*, *The End of the Affair* and *The Heart of the Matter*, with his "entertainments" such as *This Gun for Hire*, *The Ministry of Fear* and *The Confidential Agent*. However, a difference must be registered. *The Human Factor* is also an ideologically obnoxious book with disturbing moral implications.

Maurice Castle, outwardly drab, greying, dependable, works for the British secret service, processing African intelligence. When a leak is discovered, he is—incomprehensibly, considering his background—the last to be suspected. The superiors in his department focus their distrust on a younger and more flamboyant colleague and ultimately—and unconvincingly, to this reader—murder him to prevent further damages. They are unaware that underneath

"*The Human Factor* is an elegant work . . . It's a marvelous novel, crystalline and understated, that tenderly, cruelly, almost regretfully refuses to gratify our romantic expectations."

—*Newsweek*

"Graham Greene should long since have been accorded the Nobel Prize. He is 'integrity's' laureate, whether Stockholm accepts him or no."

—*The New Republic*

"Patriotism has fragmented into love . . . Graham Greene continues to enrich *The Way We Live Now*."

—*Esquire*

"The world's most gracefully gifted and practiced storyteller operating at full power."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Probably the best espionage novel ever written."

—*UPI*

" . . . one does not have to agree with everything in this book to enjoy it."

—*Chicago Tribune Book World*

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Castle's facade of placid reliability is a man of divided loyalties and intense hatreds. When Castle did field work in South Africa, he learned to loathe the government of apartheid there, which made his love for Sarah, a black and his future wife, a crime. Their escape from South Africa was aided by the Communists. A mixture of gratitude to his benefactors, as well as powerful antipathy toward his own country which supports the South African regime, turns Castle into a double agent for the Soviets, to whom he feeds top secret information pertaining to British involvement in South Africa.

Castle can be associated with other anti-establishment figures canonized by today's liberal image makers. In point of fact, he is of the same fabric as Daniel Ellsberg and even John Dean, who pit themselves against the decision-making powers to make what they consider short-term betrayals for the long-term good. Being ideologically motivated is enough to exonerate them in the eyes of contemporary assessors. By many standards these days, Castle is a virtuous man, since the South African government is in the liberal consciousness an unallayed Evil and his own country he betrays is comprised of expedient murderers, according to his experience. Greene's position on this seems clear enough.

However, as an impressively talented writer with a subtlety of approach to character and circumstance, Greene never used to be at ease with such a black and white evaluation of complex matters as betrayal and guilt. They are subjects he has frequently explored, with considerably more depth in other novels than in this one. His "whiskey priest" in *The Power and the Glory* is torn by two obsessions: his awareness of his sinfulness and his overpowering urge to transcend his frailties and become a martyr. It is a monumental struggle. In *The Heart of the Matter*, Deputy Commissioner Scobie, perhaps Greene's most humane character, betrays his faith with the best of intentions: pity for those around him.

Torn asunder by love and compassion, he destroys himself in the eyes of his Church by false communion and suicide disguised as natural death.

Therefore, what surprises in *The Human Factor* is that the tension between transgression and conscience seems curiously absent in Castle. Greene does not present him racked by guilt, not even when Davis, the wrong man, is killed because of Castle's sabotage. The responsibility, suggests Greene, is totally that of his British employers. Even the Communists are blameless compared to the British. As Castle confides to Sarah: "When people talk about Prague and Budapest and how you can't find a human face in communism I stay silent. Because I've seen—once—the human face. I say to myself that if it hadn't been for Carson, Sam would have been born in a prison and you would probably have died in one. One kind of Communism—or Communist—saved you and Sam." This kind of argument—which Greene never refutes by presenting any example of circumstance to the contrary—is as morally logical and defensible as is endorsing the policies of Nazism because of one decent SS officer. It is also obvious to the reader unimpaired by political prejudice that Sarah's and Castle's rescue in Soweto was motivated more by politics than by altruism: the help extended to them by righteous Communists is calculated to bring dividends. Castle is thus a dupe, a manipulated character, and is consequently lacking in the stature necessary to make any of Greene's ideological or literary points. Our sympathy for and interest in him therefore becomes tepid and perfunctory, more an obligation extorted by the narrator than a genuine sympathy generated by the story itself. Castle does not make a wrong existential choice: it makes him. His treachery is insistently presented as due to his intense love for his wife facilitated by the author's obviously unfair treatment of other considerations. From the very beginning all his actions are geared toward their being together—very understandable from the emotional perspective, but hardly sufficient justification to betray his country

without putting such a decision into a larger human context. He is not even too successful in carrying out his personal goals, ending up behind the Iron Curtain with little hope of ever seeing Sarah again. The only judgment Greene does pass on his protagonist is that Castle is a pitiful bungler—another exercise in literary unfairness as it is Greene's ideological preferences that make him a contemptible loser. When Castle senses things closing in on him and is pressured to bail out, he sends his wife away and then must get rid of the family dog. He dispatches the animal with a pistol, but later learns that it wasn't killed instantly, that it lingered for hours in agony. The good intentions—hatred of tyranny, love for his wife, pity for animal and human suffering—that motivate Castle pave the way to a hell of death, betrayal and isolation.

Castle is disturbingly unaware of the implications of his behavior. When thanked by a British Communist for all that he has done for the Party he protests, "I've helped you over Africa, that's all." Don't they—Castle and Greene—realize that there is no such thing as "that's all" in this situation, that such a position even if based on ignorance, is morally and pragmatically inexcusable and untenable? The old "domino theory" of spheres of influence applies here as well: it takes very little imagination to connect the triumph of Communist forces in Africa with the struggle of Soviet dissidents, a fact of life intrinsic to the very actuality which we can no longer ignore. By writing a book—even under the guise of an "entertainment"—that sympathizes with and thus gives tacit approval, even an underhanded glamor, to the "undeserved" miseries and modern dramatics of Castle's lot, and at the same time not clearly pointing out the political and moral consequences of such behavior, Greene casts serious doubt on his position as a serious contender for the Nobel Prize. Even though so many voices all over the world have long expressed surprise that he has not yet been honored with it. □



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# Feelin' Good as a Catholic Dilemma

Mary Gordon: *Final Payments*; Random House; New York.

by Christopher Manion

Isabel Moore, it seems, has a problem: her father, whom she nursed through eleven years of illness, has died, and she must get on with the business of living—sell the house, get a job, meet new friends, and decide what to do with her life. She must step gingerly across the threshold to a world which she has scarcely noticed since she was nineteen. All in all, the makings of a good story. But Isabel Moore has another problem: she is a Catholic. That is, she was *raised* a Catholic, and part of her problem lies in the truth of what every Catholic learns in grade school: there is no such thing as an *ex-Catholic*. And that is precisely what Isabel Moore wants to be. She has lived eleven years in one kind of unreality and seeks comfort (she would like that term) in another. The reader might find the story line uninspired, and the transparent development of the supporting characters a blessing in disguise. It saves more attention for Isabel's confrontation with her father, his faith, and her future.

To this subtle sequence of still lifes, which culminates in the epiphany of Isabel Moore, author Mary Gordon devotes a talent which manages to depict brutality and devotion with an equally soft touch. In fact, they often seem synonymous. This is a part of Isabel Moore's problem, and it, of course, becomes Mary Gordon's problem because she chooses to articulate the Catholic Isabel and the Catholic Church with the same tired runes usually reserved for the runaway priests who elope with the nun who taught your sister in sixth grade. These, as we are all supposed to know, are

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drunk, insensitive priests, dealing with hungry children whose parents send money to some lunatic in Canada who thinks he has the stigmata. There is no relief. The bigotry is by nature oppressive, even hackneyed (like ex-communists, ex-Catholics are the most devoted critics of their former selves), but in Isabel Moore we see no escape to reality, only a resurrection into nothingness. The pearl of great price becomes a blackened, charred remnant of a faith easily discarded for whatever bleak "life" is left in the world.

Bleak, indeed. Isabel's two childhood friends, Liz and Eleanor, represent the two sources of her inspiration for the future. Liz is married, has two children, and lives in the country. Her Irish politician husband has many lovers, among whom he soon includes Isabel; Liz, chastened, enjoys a lesbian lover who raises horses next door. Eleanor, on the other hand, offers the lifestyle of the single city girl—long books, relaxing baths, leisurely Sunday brunches. She lived with her boyfriend until he got tired of her after six years and kicked her out. She might go back to graduate school. In her slow emergence into the world, Isabel oscillates between these two influences with wide-eyed naiveté. The only experience all three really share is a common hatred of the Church which they inherited from their childhoods.

More on the supporting cast: Margaret Casey, who kept house for Isabel's father after his wife died (when Isabel was three), represents everything tawdry in the faith which hasn't already been discredited by Isabel's father and all his priest friends. Isabel remembers her "when the touch of her damp finger could sicken me for the afternoon." Margaret now lives in upstate New York and writes Isabel letters which wallow in self-pity under the guise of accepting suffering; and Isabel detests her. Almost as much as she detests herself. For Isabel bears a burden of guilt which stretches like an unbroken line from the bed where

her father found her with his best student (this, she is convinced, caused his stroke three weeks later) to the finger of the wife of the man she wants to marry—if he gets a divorce—shaking at her an inch away from her face, in the middle of her crowded office. The unredeemed quality of her shame—one so perverse that the Church has no name for it, thus cannot forgive it—drives Isabel to pursue her own self-imposed soteriology—hence the eleven years of "selfless" service to her father's dying corpse, and the culminating exile in service of Margaret Casey, in search of meaningless suffering which will nicely reflect the brutality of the faith which she hates, but cannot replace. Like her father, it is dying but refuses to die. In seeking to love the unlovable Margaret she redeems the lack of meaning which surrounded the sickbed in Queens and the bed in the next room where she had been found with her lover. God demands

"There is however, more: the electric prose. On whether love is measured by sacrifice: 'wrong . . . because the minute I gave up something for someone I like them less' . . . On sexual technique: 'He handled my breast as if he were making a meatball.' A first-class writer declares herself with knowing art."

— John Leonard  
in the *New York Times*

payment for her "special gifts"—intelligence, beauty—and she accepts this cruelty without question.

The reader searches in vain for a glimmer of insight to illuminate the redemptive value of suffering in the eyes of the Church which Gordon pretends to portray. The perceptive qualities woven through the other dimensions of the narrative—a cool, unemotional freshness in touching things human, even emotion itself—imply by default the shabby, tired quality of the Catholicism of Isabel Moore. Surely, we must think to ourselves, such a perceptive author would have portrayed a richer faith if the Faith were indeed richer.