
Of Monsignors & Monkeys

Graham Greene: *Monsignor Quixote*; Simon & Schuster; New York.

Bernard Malamud: *God's Grace*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

by Robert C. Steensma

Graham Greene and Bernard Malamud are two writers whose novels are rarely received apathetically by either reviewers or general readers. Unlike many of their contemporaries who infest the best-seller lists, both are masters of the delicate art of reaching, touching, and holding the hearts and minds of their readers. Greene's *Monsignor Quixote* (his twenty-second novel) and Malamud's *God's Grace* (his ninth) are not exceptions, for both men are fascinated with a theme highly unpopular in trendy circles these days: the relationship between God and man in a modern world which has sold its spiritual and intellectual birthrights for a mess of pottage. Consequently neither novel has made the best-seller lists, and neither will do much to soften the indignities that both authors have suffered at the hands of the Nobel Prize committee for literature. Since neither Greene nor Malamud is addicted to anti-American posturizing or to catering to Third World chic, it is understandable that the committee would award the 1982 prize to Gabriel Garcia Márquez, a Colombian whose talent is distinctly inferior to that of Greene or Malamud.

Both novels deal with men—an aging Spanish priest and a young American scientist—who try to find their way in worlds which have crumbled—figuratively in Greene's story, literally in Malamud's—as the foundations have been eaten away by the termites of modern secularism or blasted to bits by nuclear weaponry. These men often despair of

Professor Steensma teaches English at the University of Utah.

their worlds and see themselves as what the priest's companion describes as "fictions . . . in the mind of God."

Greene's story is that of Father Quixote, a descendant of Cervantes's famous innocent, who tends his spiritual flock in a small Spanish town. Harassed by his bureaucratic bishop, he stumbles through his pastoral duties, is elevated to the rank of Monsignor when he humbly befriends a traveling Vatican official, and sets out on a brief vacation trip with his faithful friend, a communist ex-mayor affectionately nicknamed Sancho. As they rattle across the countryside in Rocinante, the priest's wheezing old car, they are involved in a number of seriocomic episodes before Monsignor Quixote returns to El Toboso, badly bruised in heart and mind by his encounters with the church hierarchy and the police, to celebrate a hallucinatory last mass and to die in the arms of his faithful Sancho.

Malamud's plot, too, is modern in its setting and its implications. Calvin Cohn, an American paleologist and son of a rabbi, is the only human survivor of a nuclear war between Djanks and the Drushkies; he is living on a tropical island with a young chimp named Buz who has been trained to speak English. Like Robinson Crusoe, Cohn tries to recreate his civilization, but he must do so with a group of simians with biblical names like Esau and Mary Madelyn. In this overly long parable, as in so much of his work, Malamud's symbolism is both impressive and at times heavy-handed. Those unfamiliar with scriptural echoes of Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac, and Christ and Mary Magdalene are faced with some heavy reading.

One fact is clear: both Greene and Malamud are probing the dilemma of modern man in a world that he did not create and does not understand, a world in which God is either playing hide-and-seek with His creation or has chosen to live and rule elsewhere. The Monsignor, Sancho, and Cohn are men who have

found that the modern world is a spiritual desert and that the only hope for survival is to be found in the Church (for the Monsignor), the Communist Party (for Sancho), or whatever world one can rebuild from the rubble (for Cohn).

Monsignor Quixote, despite the daily disappointments he receives from his condescending bishop, his shrewish housekeeper, his well-meaning Sancho, and his poor, sinful parish, tries to persevere in his Christian vision, which is viewed by others as "deeds of chivalry in a world that didn't believe in those old stories." He tries to find spiritual comradeship in Sancho, but the two spend most of their time vigorously debating their different beliefs: Christianity versus Marxism, spirituality versus materialism, Christ versus Brezhnev. Sancho claims that communism has survived despite Stalin and the Politburo; Quixote asserts that Christianity has endured in spite of Judas and the Catholic Curia. The politician Sancho longs for a world in which all material needs are satisfied by the state; Quixote's eyes are on the next world, but he never forgets the present one. A curious pair, an odd couple, but Quixote and Sancho symbolize the enduring human dilemma. Quixote is an innocent, but so is Sancho, and they are not as far apart as they might seem. Each has his scriptures, his saints, his doubts; each is deeply disturbed by injustice. Stopping to eat under a rock which has been painted with a red hammer and sickle, the Monsignor says that he would rather eat under the sign of the cross, but Sancho replies, "What does it matter? The taste of the cheese will not be affected by cross or hammer. Besides is there much difference between the two? They are both protests against injustice."

Father Quixote falls into several comic mistakes as a result of his Christian innocence. He mistakes a condom for a balloon, spends a restful night in a brothel he believes to be a hotel over-

staffed with friendly young ladies, and uncomprehendingly watches a porno movie to which he has been drawn by its seemingly pious title, *A Maiden's Prayer*. As his ancestor fought the windmills, Monsignor Quixote attacks a festival in which visiting Mexicans cover a statue of the Virgin Mary with paper money. Confronting these blasphemers, he roars, "How dare you clothe her like that in money? It would be better to carry her through the streets naked." But in his outburst he finds an answer to the prayer he made after viewing the porno movie: "O God, make me human, let me feel temptation. Save me from my indifference."

But it is the uncertainty of this world and the next that gives a focus to Quixote's life. In a dream he sees Christ saved from the agony of the cross by a legion of angels; thus "there was no final agony, no heavy stone which had to be rolled away, no discovery of an empty tomb." He awakens to realize that such a miracle would destroy Christianity, a religion in which doubt has to be the beginning of faith: "There was now no ambiguity, no room for doubt and no room for faith at all." In spite of our best humane and religious impulses, "We all make cruel parodies of what we intend."

Monsignor Quixote is a book which has much to say about faith and doubt, religion and politics, God and Marx. The modern world, for Greene, is devoid of belief and values and offers only death and insanity to the unbeliever. Sancho and Quixote, though poles apart in their theology and politics, can still find some degree of happiness in sharing those simple things that symbolize the goodness and wholeness of life—wine, cheese, bread, a journey.

Malamud's book, on the other hand, is a snarl of unresolved complexities and ambiguities. At the beginning, in a confrontation with God, Cohn hears the reasons for the catastrophe: "They have destroyed my handiwork, the conditions of their survival: the sweet air I gave them to breathe; the fresh water I

Editorial Note

I must disagree with Professor Steensma concerning his evaluation of Graham Greene as a master "of the delicate art of reaching, touching, and holding the hearts and minds of . . . readers." He once was that kind of author, but after the last 20 years of his bizarre ideological juggling and a constantly deteriorating stylistic mannerism, he hardly qualifies any longer for these literary superlatives. If Greene is not addicted "to anti-American posturing," or "Third World chic" (of which he was one of the spiritual fathers), I don't know who is, or who does it better; in this respect, certainly no modern writer can do it with a more "delicate" touch, never losing the American best-seller list and book market from his, or her, sight.

Monsignor Quixote's central message is the parity (philosophical, historical, moral) of Catholicism and communism. "[I]s there much difference between the two?" asks Greene's communist protagonist, and Greene seems to proclaim gleefully that there is none. To anyone who lives with open eyes and a functioning mind at the end of the 20th century, this is a bold-faced lie, wicked demagoguery. Torquemada, his villainy notwithstanding, knew nothing about Stalin but Stalin knew all about Torquemada; the difference between the Inquisition and the gulag is both quantitative and qualitative, as Greene should well know. He chooses a pose of coy ignorance which his admirers call artistry. I call it intellectual and moral convenience—a despicable stance which Greene has successfully pretended to combat throughout his entire career. *Monsignor Quixote* is a charmless and dull novel. It's also witless—in spite of a continuous effort to be witty—and boring, regardless of all his exertions to appear winsome. Greene wanted to take on the most time-honored glory of the Catholic body of writing: the lighthearted dialogue between the faithful (if not the most intellectually sharp) of God and his perennial philosophical detractor—the rationalist, materialist agnostic. But discussing eschatology and ethics with a light, engaging touch—as did Swift and Sterne, Voltaire

and Diderot, Daudet and France, and finally, in our time, Giovanni Guareschi in his *Il Piccolo Mondo di Don Camillo*—proved to be beyond his reach. Guareschi's Don Camillo is a simpleton illuminated by God's merciful brilliance; Greene's Quixote is merely a simpleton, one that is singularly unattractive in his verbal and intellectual communication. It is obvious that the Romance literatures are characterized by one inimitable trait—their writers seem to possess a sense of ironic humility toward and mock obedience to the fundamental truths which so easily turn into a sort of graceful dogmatism, and which finally project humaneness at its best. The Northern, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon tradition of literature appears somewhat deficient when compared to the French, Spanish, or Italian know-how in this respect, and Greene's last novel is an abysmal reminder of this rule. Guareschi's Don Camillo, the country priest, never overwhelms his friend and opponent, a small-town communist mayor; nor does he ever fully persuade the reader. He wins his arguments on the strength of submitting his all-too-human weakness of mind and heart to a higher authority which he trusts—not blindly, but because he is convinced of its supreme sagacity. Guareschi does not fear his adversary puncturing his religious ossification of thought: in direct confrontation, Don Camillo's religiousness and Catholicism's own humanism, all occasional obscurantism notwithstanding, comes out as victorious, warm wisdom—exactly what Greene is unable to project. His effort, in fact, is so inept as to make one wonder whether he really believes in the superiority of spirituality over Marxian dialectics, a quandary which, of course, excludes him from the delights of celebrating small but meaningful victories. And as for his gift for literary sensitivities—once so exquisite in *The Power and the Glory* and *The End of the Affair*—it has failed him miserably this time. Thus, from *Monsignor Quixote* Graham Greene emerges as a writer of shallow insights, banal tone, stilted argumentation, stuffed ear, and wooden tactility of style.

—L.T.

blessed them with, to drink and bathe in; the fertile green earth. They tore apart my ozone, carbonized my oxygen, acidified my refreshing rain. Now they affront my cosmos. How much shall the Lord endure?" Man has not only

"One is, I think, supposed to feel a horror and a pity; but God's grace is mainly ennui, so what's the point?"

—Village Voice

destroyed nature and civilization, but also his own moral fiber. God tells Cohn, "I made man to be free, but his freedom, badly used, destroyed him. In sum, the evil overwhelmed the good. The Second Flood, this that now subsides on the broken earth, they brought on themselves. They had not lived according to the Covenant. . . . Therefore I let them do away with themselves. They invented the manner; I turned my head. That you went on living, Mr. Cohn, I regret to say, was no more than a marginal error. Such things may happen."

Cohn doggedly tries to reconstruct his old civilization but at every step, like an Old Testament patriarch, he finds his hopes frustrated by the same old human cussedness that angered Moses and Isaiah. The apes in his small world lie, quarrel, sulk, intimidate, cower, mutilate, rape, kill, and cannibalize. Cohn himself degenerates to the point where he impregnates the lisping chimp, Mary Madelyn, in a scene of such bad taste that it could have been written by Erica Jong. Cohn is driven by the hope that the religious teachings of the Judaic tradition might develop a humane civilization among these brutes, that "if this small community behaved, developed, endured, it might someday—if some chimp Father Abraham got himself born—produce its own Covenant with God." But the island becomes only another failed utopia in which the idealistic vision of the founder is smashed by reality as Cohn feels Buz's razor at his throat.

Malamud's allegory weaves in and out of the narrative in such a way as to frus-

trate the reader. Who is Cohn? A second God trying to create a new world or just attempting to correct the mistakes He made in the first? Who is Buz? God the Father, Abraham? What precisely is the significance of Esau and Mary Madelyn?

What is symbolized in the death of Cohn, bound and kneeling, at the hands of Buz? Any attempt at exegesis in this novel creates more problems than it solves. Malamud's olio of rabbinic lore, farce, parable, theology, and word games just doesn't work. His short stories and novels are marked by their evocation of human concerns, but such is not the case with *God's Grace*.

Fighting the Better Fight

Franky Schaeffer: *A Time for Anger: The Myth of Neutrality*; Crossway Books; Westchester, Illinois.

The Wealth of Families: Ethics and Economics in the 1980's; Edited by Carl A. Anderson and William J. Gribbin; The American Family Institute; Washington, D.C.

by Leo Browning

Anger seems a peculiarly unchristian emotion. After all, Jesus taught his disciples to turn the other cheek when struck and chided His apostles for their vengeful desire to call fire down from heaven upon inhospitable Samaritan villages who turned away their Master. However, the use to which the Galilean put His scourge made of cords strongly implies that when the issue is something larger than personal affront, anger may

Mr. Browning expresses his religious faith and filial commitment as a church organist and father in the Midwest.

Monsignor Quixote and *God's Grace*, whatever their merits or weaknesses, are reminders that there are still writers who are willing to do more than pander to popular taste, who believe that commitment to beliefs and values is necessary for the survival of mankind. Although they die as a result of their battles against the world and the flesh, Quixote and Cohn also win victories of a sort in being true in their quests to solve what the professor at the end of Greene's book calls the "infinite mystery." Neither the priest nor the scientist solve the mystery, but at least each shows that a quiet and humble heroism is still possible in a world the Monsignor calls "a desert without end." By their struggles, Monsignor Quixote and Cal Cohn prove that human beings are more than "fictions . . . in the mind of God." □

well be the appropriate Christian response. It is precisely such righteous wrath that Franky Schaeffer wishes to encourage with *A Time for Anger: The Myth of Neutrality*. And though he wishes particularly to foster ire among evangelical Christians like himself, Schaeffer persuasively contends that all Americans now live in "times in which anyone with a shred of moral principle should be profoundly angry." Indeed, despite Schaeffer's extensive use of conservative Protestant theologians and writers such as his father, Francis Schaeffer, and his frequent quotation of Scripture, he casts his net widely enough to give his argument cogency with Christians of different orientation and even—though surely to a lesser degree—with moral secularists. When the voices of Mother Teresa, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, C.S. Lewis, Sir William Blackstone, George Will, and Leopold Tyrmand join in a single message and when key elements of that message are echoed by decidedly more liberal commentators such as Hodding Carter, Harvey Cox,