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THE WORKS OF

GRAHAM GREENE

HUMAN lives tend to be repetitious attempts to solve problems set in infancy. The terms of the nursery, teat, potty and lead cannon, are abandoned for adult symbols, the pipe, the bank balance and the Bren gun. But the form of the emotional struggle remains infantile. The ability or the disability, the 'bent' of the man, has been shaped years before he learns the conjugation of 'amo' or that work is prayer.

In no man is this plainer than in the imaginative worker. Plumber or platelayer, welder or joiner, has material to work, with little choice of alternative. But poet and novelist lift from experience images to fit a fantasy, excited most by outside events, which chime with the unconscious. Even the greatest writers repeat metaphors, characters, and plots which are mere variations of a central theme. Dostoevski, for example, rings changes on the 'pure harlot', Natasha, Sonya, Grushenka.

The novelist, who sets himself the task of portraying and interpreting the life of his time, is hampered by personal predilections as much as by limitation of experience. His eye is not the impartial lens of a camera; and his brain is more sensitive to some tints of experience than of others. The world, willy-nilly, becomes a personal world, bearing a certain resemblance to external reality, yet changed like an image in a mirror.

Few living English novelists derive more material from the daily newspaper than Graham Greene; yet even fewer reduce everything to so uniform a vision. The setting may be London or Liberia, Stockholm, Brighton or Tabasco. But

The Power and the Glory, by Graham Greene. Heinemann, 7s. 6d.

they are all in Greenland. The main character may be a drunken, adulterous priest, as in *The Power and the Glory*, a boy murderer, as in *Brighton Rock*, a hare-lipped gunman, as in *Gun for Sale*, or the pseudo-Harrobian cad of *England Made Me*. They are accurately observed. They speak their own language, usually. They have their convincing histories. Yet they are the same breed, Greenlanders. They are like a collection of sepia photographs.

Yes, they are seen in sepia, a world observed through sunglasses. But they have more in common than the tint of the observer's glass. They are declassed for one thing. Either, like Minty and Anthony Farrant in *England Made Me*, they have fallen in the world. They look with envy on the prosperous, conventioned middle class, where they would fit but for some, usually adolescent, lapse. They know more, they have suffered more; but knowledge is evil, suffering is like lemon juice to an oyster. Or like Rose Cullen from boredom, or Anne, the chorus girl, from a sense of justice higher than social justice, they have abandoned their class, still afraid, but rather excited. Or else, like the boy in *Brighton Rock*, Conrad Drover in *It's a Battlefield*, Ivar Krogh in *England Made Me*, they have risen from one class without being absorbed into another.

Greenlanders are homeless men, pining for domesticity, the kettle on the hob, warmth, security, love or tenderness, an end to all hate and struggle. Yet for a number of reasons this is impossible. Andrews is fleeing from fellow-smugglers and betrays them for lust instead of love. Conrad Drover loves his condemned brother's wife, but kills his love and the chance of domestic happiness by going to bed with her. The hare-lipped gunman has never dared to love, but when the police are after him for murder, he trusts a woman and is betrayed. Farrant, divided between love for his sister and lust for floosies, can always get a job because he's quick with figures, and never keeps it, because his fingers are as quick. *The Confidential Agent* must perform his mission. The drunken priest, persecuted by Red Shirts, must minister to his flock. Only the Boy in *Brighton Rock* has no hankering for

quietude, no vision of carpet slippers on a hearthrug. But the girl has, whom he marries to cover his crime.

In 1935, Greene made a journey through Sierra Leone and Liberia. It was a horrifying experience in itself: rats, fever, disease, discomfort and ignorance. The novelist, like one of his characters, went beyond the boundaries of his known society. But it was also the symbol of a return to childhood. ('Hell lies about us in our infancy.') When he returned, he wrote:

'One was back, or, if you will, one had advanced again, to the seedy level. This journey, if it had done nothing else, had reinforced a sense of disappointment with what man had made out of the primitive, what he had made out of childhood. Oh, one wanted to protest, one doesn't believe, of course, in "the visionary gleam", in the trailing glory, but there was something in that early terror and the bareness of one's needs, a harp strumming behind a hut, a witch on the nursery landing, a handful of kola nuts, a masked dancer, the poisoned flowers. The sense of taste was finer, the sense of pleasure keener, the sense of terror deeper and purer. It isn't a gain to have turned the witch or the masked secret dancer, the sense of supernatural evil, into the small human viciousness of the thin distinguished military grey head in Kensington Gardens with the soft lips and the eye which dwelt with dull lustre on girls and boys of a certain age.

'He was an old Etonian. He had an estate in the Highlands. He said: "Do they cane at your school?" looking out over the wide flat grass, the nursemaids and the children, with furtive alertness. He said: "You must come up and stay with me in Scotland. Do you know of any girls' schools where they still—you know—" He began to make confidences, and then, suddenly taking a grip of the poor sliding brain, he rose and moved away with stiff military back, the old Etonian tie, the iron-grey hair, a bachelor belonging to the right clubs, over the green plain among the nursemaids and the babies wetting their napkins.'—*Journey without Maps*, page 264.

'The seedy level!' That is the location of Greenland.

The sadist and the masochist, the impotent athlete, the incestuous brother and sister, the coward, the braggart, the man with the tic, the hare-lip, the spy-maniac, the torturer of spiders and the collector of small foreign coins, the diseased dentist in a foreign port, the one-legged military man managing a road-house, the rich Jew despised by aristocrats, the bullied chambermaid in an all-night hotel, the Major ordering whores by telephone ('a pig in a poke'), the lawyer who married beneath him lusting after typists who pass his window, the adulterous butler; they are as different, if not as chalk from cheese, at least as spurs from rubber drawers; but they are all seedy, the ingloriously vicious.

'The first thing I can remember at all was a dead dog at the bottom of my pram . . . Another fact was the man who rushed out of a cottage near the canal bridge and into the next house; he had a knife in his hand; people ran after him shouting; he wanted to kill himself.

'Like a revelation, when I was fourteen, I realized the pleasure of cruelty; I wasn't interested any longer in walks on commons, in playing cricket on the beach. There was a girl lodging close by I wanted to do things to; I loitered outside the door hoping to see her. I didn't do anything about it, I wasn't old enough, but I was happy; I could think about pain as something desirable and not as something dreaded. It was as if I had discovered that the way to enjoy life was to appreciate pain.'—*Journey without Maps*, page 30.

Nostalgia for childhood commonly takes the form of desiring to return to the state of irresponsibility, and happiness. But Greene desiderates the age when terror was really terrible and evil not the furtive Etonian in the Gardens, but Satan, and almost glorious. To most adults, the departure of fear is pride of maturity; but to Greene, it is the fading of a cherished vision. Greene is most objective, least morbid in sketches of childhood. *The Basement Room*, *The End of the Party*, *I Spy*.

'Hatred demands allegiance.' In pursuit of the seedy, he tries to recapture the horror of childhood in adult terms, at the same time that he is showing up its shabbiness. The

elaboration of a subtle imagination creates a world as harsh, treacherous, violent and cowardly to the adult mind, as the witch on the nursery landing was to the child. The heightened image, the acceleration of nature, the dynamic-static comparison ('The sympathy didn't belong; it could be peeled off his eyes like an auction ticket from an ancient flint instrument'), the sharp cutting of sentences, the emphasis on decay, deformity, and the bizarre make real a nightmare for the duration of reading.

'In the great public-school grounds above the sea the girls trooped solemnly out to hockey: stout goalkeepers padded like armadillos; captains discussing tactics with their lieutenants; junior girls running amok in the bright day. Beyond the aristocratic turf, through the wrought-iron main gates they could see the plebeian procession (going to the races), those whom the buses wouldn't hold plodding up the Down, kicking up the dust, eating buns out of paper bags. The buses took the long way round through Kemp Town, but up the steep hill came the crammed taxicabs—a seat for anyone at ninepence a time—a Packard for the members' enclosure, old Morrisises, strange high cars with family parties, keeping the road after twenty years. It was as if the whole road moved upwards like an Underground staircase in the dusty sunlight, a creaking, shouting, jostling crowd of cars moving with it. The junior girls took to their heels like ponies racing on the turf, feeling the excitement going on outside, as if this were a day on which life for many people reached a kind of climax. The odds on Black Boy had shortened. . . .'—*Brighton Rock*, page 142.

It is brilliant, the combination of speed with humour, observed fact with the fresh image (armadillo, amok, aristocratic, ponies), the skilful transitions, antitheses, anticipations. And yet . . .

Finishing any book by Greene, whether a travel-book, novel or 'entertainment' (potboiler to you), I have felt 'Brilliant! And yet . . .' I want to analyse two of the reasons for 'And yet . . .'

Greene is a Catholic and I do not believe in, like or admire

the Catholic Church. But this is not the reason for disagreement. In *The Lawless Roads*, he writes:

'And so faith came to one—shapelessly, without dogma, a presence above a croquet lawn, something associated with violence, cruelty, evil across the way.¹ One began to believe in heaven *because one believed in hell, but for a long while it was hell only one could picture with a certain intimacy*—the pitchpine partitions in dormitories where everybody was never quiet at the same time: lavatories without locks: "There, by the reason of the great number of the damned, the prisoners are heaped together in their awful prison . . ." walks in pairs up the metroland roads, no solitude anywhere, at any time. 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.'

The passage which I have italicised contains my dissatisfaction. Greene believes even now more strongly in evil than in goodness. Scatological references abound in his work. The sexual act is always portrayed as degrading (with the possible exception of two people copulating in a crowded Mexican prison amid excrement). Greenelanders have no joy, gaiety, humour or playfulness. They do not think profoundly, nor act constructively. Whenever Greene portrays a man of constructive action, he fails. Ivar Krogh, in *England Made Me*, never comes alive. The numerous communists who appear in Greene's work (and he is as fascinated by communists as he is ignorant of their organization, discipline and aims) are either Greenelanders such as Surrogate and Conder in *It's a Battlefield* or ideological 'humours', such as the Captain of Police in *The Power and the Glory*. There is much action in Greeneland, but it is the swift and scattered action of a game of hide-and-seek.

My first 'and yet' is not confined to the falsity of a similar mood. The falsity goes even deeper in the novels, as opposed

¹ Greene went to a school of which his father was headmaster. Weekends he could creep into his home; weekdays he was a boarder.

to the 'entertainments'. Analysis of *Brighton Rock* will show what I mean. The plot of *Brighton Rock* is that 'the Boy', who is leader of a bookmakers' protection racket, murders a hanger-on of a rival gang in revenge for the murder of his old boss, and to cover his tracks is led to meet and then marry a pathetic little waitress, who might give evidence against him. A cheery sort of Wife of Bath who was with the murdered man just before he was done in isn't satisfied with the coroner's verdict and finally lays bare the crime. This plot, modelled on the Brighton race gangs of a few years back, is material for a good straightforward realistic melodrama.

But Greene is concerned with a philosophical theme, the contrast between human right and wrong, and divine good and evil. The Boy is a Catholic. *Corruptio optimi pessima*. His wrongdoing has a dimension of sin, which his unbelieving associates do not share. '*Credo in unum Satanum*,' he states. The waitress, Rose, also a Catholic, consciously commits mortal sin, because she loves the Boy. With her eyes open, she goes to Eternal Damnation. Ida, the jovial detective, doesn't believe in that sort of stuff. But she does believe in Right, Wrong, and Justice being done.

All three are recognizable characters at the beginning of the book. But by the end, the conflict between their own natures and the philosophic purposes for which the author is using them has torn them to pieces. They should be laid bare, but they are laid out.

The same falsity is apparent in *The Man Within*, where a very improbable vamp is introduced into a Lewes inn in order to seduce the hero into doing his duty and justify the philosophic pattern.

My second 'and yet' is that with the exception of *England Made Me* and *It's a Battlefield* (still in many ways his best novel), all his novels and entertainments have the same formula, the hunted man. Though he has expended tremendous care on the construction of sentences, diversity of incident, and originality of setting, he has been content with the same method of precipitating character. The pursuit

element (Kate pursuing Anthony, Conrad Drover the Commissioner of Police) enters into even the two novels mentioned as exceptions. The new novel, *The Power and the Glory*, is about a hunted priest.

When Greene went to Tabasco, he was told that the last victim of Garrido's clerical persecution was a 'whiskey' priest, who survived for years in the swamp and jungle, administering the sacrament until he was caught and shot. The theme combined religion and the hunted man. *The Power and the Glory* is the result.

I find it difficult to assess this novel purely as a work of imagination, because I know Mexico, and the Mexican Indian is not a true Greenlander. So when the priest, returning to a village, where his daughter by an Indian woman lives, finds the child at the age of six tittering with precocious sexuality and obscenely exposing herself to her father, my certainty that this is untrue of an Indian village child makes it hard for me to judge the validity of the suspicion that the incident is as wrong æsthetically as it is factually.

Leaving reality aside, however, I find the book unsatisfying because the nature of the theme is in violent conflict with its treatment. The novel moves at the same time too fast and too slow; there is too much action—the game of hide-and-seek—and too little development. An epic theme, which should slowly have gathered speed and power, has been treated as a thriller. The reader moves so fast—from character to character and event to event—(the author's first attempt to deal with a long passage of time)—that the total effect is dissipated in the confusion of detail. If incidents had been simplified and given greater weight, the priest's open-eyed return to martyrdom would have been inevitable. As it is, the swift, nervy tempo of the writing makes it capricious.

To conceive *The Power and the Glory* in its proper form demanded a poet's imagination. Greene has the imagination of a poet, but it is directed to smaller things than plot, the image, the setting, the word. His conception of plot has been a mixture of satire and pathos. He is preoccupied with the

anti-climax, the seediness of the old Etonian in the Gardens after the epic terror of the witch on the nursery landing. In the past, he has got away with it,—and the anti-climax is the easiest literary device to practise, because your characters can't answer back when you let them down. But in *The Power and the Glory* he chose a theme too ambitious for the anti-climatic technique. If he is to continue along this course, he will have to enlarge the territory of Greenland and get it a more variable climate.

Other books by Graham Greene

Novels

<i>The Man Within</i>	Heinemann
<i>It's a Battlefield</i>	Heinemann
<i>England Made Me</i>	Heinemann
<i>Brighton Rock</i>	Heinemann

Entertainments

<i>Stamboul Train</i>	Heinemann
<i>A Gun for Sale</i>	Heinemann
<i>The Confidential Agents</i>	Heinemann

Short Stories

<i>The Basement Room</i>	Cresset Press
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Travel

<i>Journey Without Maps</i>	Heinemann
<i>The Lawless Roads</i>	Longmans

SELECTED NOTICES

The Locks of Norbury, by the Duchess of Sermoneta. Murray, 18/—.

The Eve of Victorianism. The Reminiscences of Emma Sophia Countess Brownlow. Murray, 6/—.

The Duchess of Sermoneta, delving back among her English ancestry, has written a long, rambling book, full of old letters and forgotten stories, which throws no particular light on anything, but is pleasant reading. Had the *Locks of Norbury* been invented by a painstaking 'period' novelist in order to display his knowledge, they would seem exaggerated: they made too many unusual marriages, knew too many odd, interesting people. The delightful thing is that, for once, it is all perfectly true. The founder of the family, William Lock the first, was a wealthy man of mysterious parentage, who married Frederica Schaub, the daughter of a Swiss diplomatist in the service of George II, and built Norbury Park, where he lived in great contentment with his wife and family, and entertained, as his friends, Fanny Burney, Sir Thomas Lawrence, Fuseli, the Angersteins and Madame de Stael. His son Charles was English Consul in Naples in 1799, where his well-bred young wife incurred the immediate dislike of the middle-aged strumpet Lady Hamilton, and young Lock himself quarrelled with Nelson. He had a passion for sight-seeing which ended fatally, for he died of a fever caught while exploring the plains of Troy. His wife, Cecilia, was one of the twenty-three children of that remarkable Duchess of Leinster who disarmed the criticism of her relatives when she married her sons' unprepossessing Scottish tutor by declaring that she knew she was in the wrong, but he loved her to adoration, 'and that's very captivating'. After her husband's death, Cecilia Lock devoted herself to her children, but was not always fortunate in settling them, marrying Emmy, the eldest, to a monster of an Italian count.