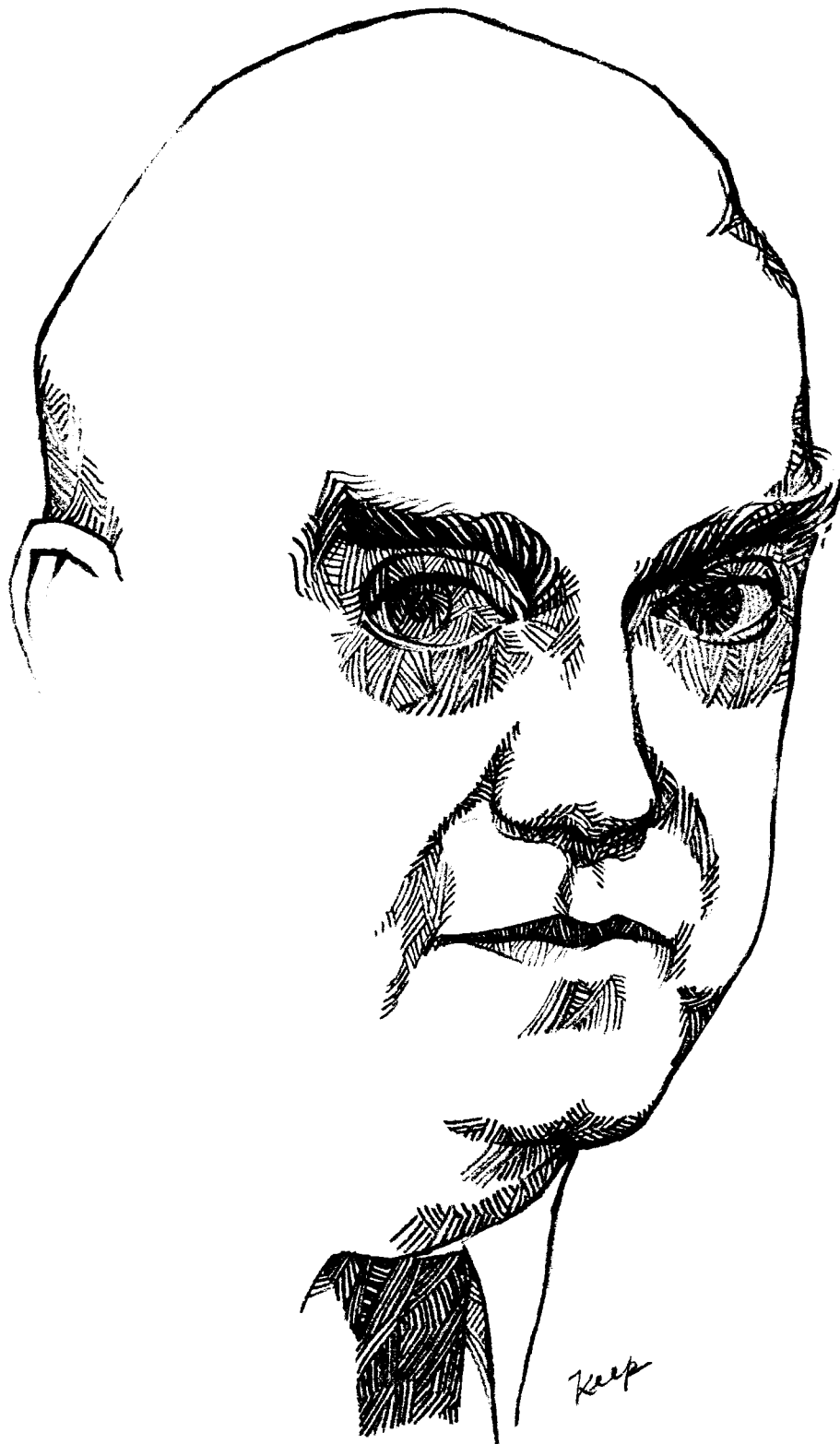


# *PORTRAIT*



Graham Greene

# Graham Greene: The Man Within

## by Martin Turnell

GRAHAM GREENE has divided his fiction into two groups: novels and "entertainments." His aim is evidently to draw a distinction between his serious work and the lighter fare: the adventure stories or "thrillers." A few of his critics have remarked on the resemblances between the works of the two groups, but they have not explored the implications. It is difficult not to feel doubts about the validity of the distinction. A writer may try his hand at different forms of writing, but the man behind them all is the same person. The genuine writer cannot cut himself in two, turning on or shutting off his deepest interests and preoccupations at will, or take time off from his study of the human condition in order to provide his audience with light reading.

When we look more closely at the two groups, we find in fact that there are a number of basic similarities, that the differences are much more a matter of angle or emphasis than either form or material. It has been said of Greene that he has adapted the technique of the adventure story to serious themes and produced something which has been described as "spiritual melodrama": a much more damaging formula than its inventor appears to have realised. The central figure in the best of the novels from *The Man Within* to *A Burnt-out Case*, and in the "entertainments" from *Stamboul Train* to *The Ministry of Fear*, is the hunted man: the man who is literally on the run like Andrews in *The Man Within*, the "whisky priest" in *The Power and the Glory* or Raven in *A Gun for Sale*, or characters like Scobie and Querry who are seeking escape from some inner weakness and the psychological situation it has created. The resemblances do not end there. Among the most distinctive features of Greene's characters are an unhappy childhood, a domineering father and an ambivalent attitude towards a minor public school.

The central character is a product of environment. Whatever the social level, whether it is genteel as in

*England Made Me*, or proletarian as in *A Gun for Sale*, his weaknesses are the outcome of a decaying social system. The main characters in *England Made Me* have betrayed everything they once stood for and are reduced to a group of "exiles" and "outcasts" gyrating in a "wilderness of [their] own contriving."

It is perhaps the sense that he is depicting a society which has lost its nerve which accounts for another of Graham Greene's most pronounced characteristics. "It had been a massacre on the Elizabethan scale," we read of one of the closing scenes in *The Ministry of Fear*. The works of both groups are dominated by an atmosphere of violence and extremes: an atmosphere in which the misfit turns into the rebel and the fugitive; the misfit who is a danger to a disintegrating society, but is also in some way superior to it.

I have said that the writer behind all the books is the same person. It follows that they provide an expression, or better an outlet, for something in his personal make-up. This, as we shall see, explains the limitations of the novels and the intrusion into the "entertainments" of some of the themes of the novels. It also explains the highly accomplished craftsmanship which is common to both: the narrative gift, the slickness in the presentation of the story, the cinematic "cutting," the ingenious interweaving of the themes, and a journalistic flair for the vivid detail.

2.

IT WAS JUST BECAUSE the visible universe "... was determined for him at an early age," Greene wrote of Henry James, "that his family background is of such interest" (*The Lost Childhood*).

There is no doubt that his own early years were at least as important for his later development as they were for James. He was born in 1904, educated at one of the lesser public schools where his father was headmaster, and at Oxford. He rebelled against the conditions of school life, ran away and was sent to a psychoanalyst

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MARTIN TURNELL, an Associate Editor of RAMPARTS, lives in London, where he works for the BBC.

for treatment. This is how he describes it in the terrifying essay called "The Revolver in the Corner Cupboard" in *The Lost Childhood*:

*"I emerged from those delightful months in London spent at my analyst's house—perhaps the happiest months of my life—correctly orientated, able to take a proper extrovert interest in my fellows (the jargon rises to the lips), but wrung dry."*

The treatment did, indeed, have what are now known as "side effects." They were boredom and aridity. In earlier years there had been several semi-serious attempts at suicide: drinking hypo; eating deadly nightshade; swallowing large quantities of aspirin before a swim in the deserted school baths. Now, he says, "I had stumbled on the perfect cure" for boredom. "The perfect cure" was the game with the revolver which gives the essay its title. What he did was to load one chamber, spin the drum and then:

*"I put the muzzle of the revolver in my right ear and pulled the trigger. There was a minute click, and looking down on the chamber I could see that the charge had moved into place. I was out by one."*

There are some revealing glimpses of school life and the early years in *The Lawless Roads* and *Journey Without Maps*:

*"... one was aware of fear and hate, a kind of lawlessness—appalling cruelties could be practiced without a second thought; one met for the first time characters, adult and adolescent, who bore about them the genuine quality of evil. There was Collifax, who practiced torments with dividers; Mr. Cranden with three grim chins, a dusty gown, a kind of demoniac sensuality; from these heights evil declined towards Parlow, whose desk was filled with minute photographs—advertisements for art photos. Hell lay about them in their infancy" (The Lawless Roads).*

It was this sense of evil, first experienced as a school-boy, which led to faith. Faith came to him as something "associated with violence, cruelty, evil across the way." "One began to believe in heaven," he adds, "because one believed in hell."

Greene tells us that he has always suffered from nightmares. They play a considerable part in the novels. I shall suggest presently why one of them, described in *Journey Without Maps*, is of special significance:

*"It was only many years later that Evil came into my dreams: the man with gold teeth and rubber surgical gloves; the old woman with ringworm; the man with his throat cut dragging himself across the carpet to the bed."*

When he left Balliol he took up journalism and worked for a time on a provincial newspaper at Nottingham where, in 1926, he became a Catholic:

*"There seemed to be a seediness about the place you couldn't get to the same extent elsewhere, and seediness has a very deep appeal: even the seediness of civilisation,*

*the 'tarts' in Bond Street, the smell of cooking greens off Tottenham Court Road, the little tight-waisted Jews in the Strand. It seemed to satisfy, temporarily, the sense of nostalgia for something lost..." (Journey Without Maps).*

These fragments of autobiography throw considerable light on Greene's sources and on the conception of life that we find in his fiction: the rebel against convention and respectability who becomes the "hunted" schoolboy; an abnormal streak which drives the adolescent to gamble with his life as Scobie will gamble with his soul; the association of religion with violence and cruelty and evil. The taste for "seediness" produced the admirable account of Brighton in *Brighton Rock* and the provincial setting in *A Gun for Sale*, but here there is a reservation to be made. Although it is superficially impressive, the "seediness" belongs to the surface; it becomes a substitute for a genuinely searching criticism of society or, indeed, of "the fallen world" which has been called the essential setting of the novels.

There is something which is artistically more important than any of these traits. "If ever a man's imagination was clouded by the Pit, it was James's," Greene wrote in the essay from which I have already quoted. There is a striking contrast in the presentation of evil by the two novelists. In James it is felt to be the sign of a mature view of life; in Greene it is not. James's evil is a powerful, diabolical force which leaves no room for complacency. Greene's is something which belongs to childhood and adolescence: it is associated with the school bully, the sadistic or perverted schoolmaster, and a figure which might have come from a "horror comic" or an early horror film: "the man with gold teeth and rubber surgical gloves." The absence in the novels of any genuine apprehension of evil, or the presence of an evil which is symbolised, significantly, by the juvenile delinquent and the "spiv," explains our feeling that the novels somehow lack an adult approach to experience, that they deal with experience at an immature level. It may also explain the existence of the "entertainments."

### 3.

SOME OF THE PRINCIPAL characteristics of what was to become the Greene hero are apparent in Andrews, the protagonist of the first novel:

*"Andrews's character was built of superficial dreams, sentimentality, cowardice, and yet he was constantly made aware beneath all these of an uncomfortable questioning critic."*

Andrews is the smuggler's son: the son of a violent, domineering father who has been blighted in childhood and who betrays the gang by turning king's evidence, but whose cowardice is also responsible for the death of the vastly superior woman he was to have married. The characteristics that he shares with a number of future Greene heroes are three: "superficial dreams," "senti-

mentality," "cowardice." The "superficial dreams" are a sign of the immaturity of the Greene world. They turn the character into a misfit because the gap between illusion and reality prevents a proper appreciation of the issues at stake and of his own motives. "Sentimentality" and "cowardice" are inseparable: the deadly combination which in *The Heart of the Matter*, for example, will be responsible for every kind of betrayal in ascending order: friends, family, country, Church.

We should notice, too, the reference to the "uncomfortable questioning critic" which is taken up again in the closing pages and leads to the triumphant assertion:

*"I am that critic, he said with a sense of discovery and exhilaration."*

The words suggest a strength, an insight into his own motives, which are not in fact there. It is the illusion of strength on the part of the weak man which fosters his weaknesses and produces the moral confusion that is particularly characteristic of the protagonists of the "Catholic novels."

Whatever its shortcomings, there is one factor of great importance in Greene's first novel. It is the band or gang of smugglers. It is scarcely too much to say that in the later novels "groups," "parties," "gangs," "bands" and "rings" — particularly "spy rings" — become the hub round which the entire action revolves.

The presence in the novels of gangs, bands and rings is directly related to another characteristic. Writers on Greene have commented on the part played in his work by topical events. *The Name of Action*, his second novel, was the first of several books dealing, directly or indirectly, with dictatorship and revolution. *England Made Me* was suggested by an international financial swindle; *The Power and the Glory* by the religious persecution in Mexico; *The Ministry of Fear* by the Second World War; and other books like *Brighton Rock*, *Stamboul Train* and *The Confidential Agent* by the gangsterism, spying and political assassinations which have become the commonplaces of life in the twentieth century.

The topical setting has obvious practical advantages. The situation suggests the landscape and the figures, enabling the novelist to establish his characters with the minimum of trouble. For in each of his books he is provided with a group which is part of the setting, and almost ready-made: the smugglers in *The Man Within*; the financiers and expatriates in *England Made Me*; the travellers in *Stamboul Train*; the "spivs" and juvenile delinquents in *Brighton Rock*; police, peasants and expatriates in *The Power and the Glory*; civil servants, police and natives in *The Heart of the Matter*; the missionaries, lepers and more expatriates in *A Burnt-out Case*.

This explains the position of the protagonist. The novels deal with the protagonist's contacts with the group. He may be attached to the group, a prisoner of

the group or a fugitive from it, but in every case the effect is twofold. It sets up a movement of opposition and contagion. When he is not actually a fugitive, the protagonist feels that he is a misfit, an outsider who does not really belong, but at the same time his contacts with it foster his weaknesses, provide the temptations which eventually bring him down.

The pattern is clearest in the Catholic novels. The Catholic — the wayward Catholic or the bad Catholic or the lapsed Catholic — is at the centre. He is surrounded by the minor characters who represent various shades of belief, unbelief or disbelief, as they represent various degrees of corruption. The Catholic novels have been compared to moralities. The comparison is illuminating, but we may suspect that in reproducing something of the simplification that we find in a morality the novelist was making a virtue of necessity. When we come to examine the Catholic novels more closely, we shall find that the complexity of the central characters has been considerably exaggerated, that the surface bustle, the fast moving action, which are common to the novels and the "entertainments," give the impression of a complexity which is not really there. The minor characters are essentially stock figures, stereotypes who in slightly different guises turn up in different books: the man from the minor public school trying in vain to live it down in *England Made Me* and *The Heart of the Matter*; the Fellows in *The Power and the Glory* who, though not Catholics, are a preliminary sketch for the Scobies; the "churchy" mother, always reading from saints' lives, in *The Power and the Glory* and Rycker, the miserable *rat de bénitier*, in *A Burnt-out Case* with his "babydoll" wife; the racketeer in *Brighton Rock* and still more Ida Arnold who is pure caricature: the product of a secularised lower-middle class society who believes only in the antics of the planchette, good naturedly opens her legs to all-comers, but "knows the difference between right and wrong?"

#### 4.

IT IS INTERESTING to watch the growth of the religious element in the novels. It appears for the first time in the person of a minor character in *England Made Me*. Minty is the public school boy, the failure, the remittance man eking out a living as a small-time journalist in Sweden. He is honest, decent, chaste, the victim, as surely as Anthony Farrant in the same novel, of environment: a product of the decay of the genteel tradition. Catholicism is represented in the next book, *Brighton Rock*, by the protagonists: the delinquent youth and the waitress who marry in a register office and have just enough conscience to know that they have done wrong. What needs emphasis is that from the time of its appearance in the novels, religion is not something which imposes itself on society or on a group: it is essentially a product of modern conditions

The Name of Action

**THE MAN WITHIN**

**A BURNT-OUT CASE** Brighton Rock

*The POWER and the GLC*

Heart of the Matter

**A GUN FOR SALE** STAMBOUL TRAIN

England Made Me

and is determined by them. It points the way to the sort of Catholicism that we shall find in *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter* and *A Burnt-out Case*.

What Catholicism represents first and foremost in those novels is a highly emotional charge; an atmosphere in which theological problems, or rather moral-theological problems, are bandied about; in which religious standards are constantly evoked only to show how very far short of them the behaviour of the protagonists falls. The world of Graham Greene is not the world of hum-drum, conventional religion: it is the world of a highly idiosyncratic religion which is continually distorted by the author's personal point of view. He purports in the main religious novels to take us behind the scenes, to discover special virtues in people whose conduct is invariably at odds with their profession. In this way he contrives to suggest that it is somehow the idiosyncratic, the personal, the morally unorthodox which is pleasing to God. The Catholicism that he portrays is the result of compromise with "the fallen world"; it is the fallen world which imposes its shape and colour on religion, but the fact that religion is religion gives the novels their supercharged atmosphere.

What I want to suggest is that the lurid atmosphere in which the whisky priests, the Scobies, the Querrys move and have their being has had the effect of misleading Greene's critics, diverting them from their proper

task, which is the scrutiny of the writer's text, and encouraging them instead to discuss general theological problems: to speculate on the ways of God to man. In a recent issue of *Ramparts*, for example, we find the reviewer of *A Burnt-out Case* speculating about the protagonist's chances of salvation as earlier writers on Greene had speculated about Scobie's: almost equally divided into those who thought him damned and those who almost saw him as a new kind of saint.

"*A critical method*," writes the reviewer in *Ramparts*, "*which limits itself to examination of style, psychology, character, naturalism and the like will overlook the most central aspect of Greene's work: man as a metaphysical being.*"

This is the reverse of the thesis that I am going to defend here. What I shall argue is that there is something badly wrong with the quality of the religion in Greene's novels and that this is reflected in his use of language. That a critic should be able to brush aside "style, psychology, character, naturalism and the like" at this stage is striking evidence of the way in which Greene has got away with it, has succeeded by the peculiar atmosphere which his fiction generates in putting his critics off the scent, leading them away from the place where their enquiry should start: his prose style.

The critic whom I have just quoted praises *A Burnt-out Case* because in it he finds "none of the flashy sentences and trite figures of speech which abound in his



earlier works." This praise, as we shall see later, is not undeserved: the fault lies in treating "the flashy sentences and trite figures of speech" as though they were no more than blemishes in novels dealing importantly with "man as a metaphysical being," in the assumption that the great theme is somehow independent of the language in which it is expressed, that it transcends mere words. The only answer we can make is that if great themes are treated in a language which is "flashy" or "trite," we shall almost certainly discover that there is something seriously wrong with the treatment.

In Greene's first novel we find this sentence:

"The blackberry twigs plucked at him and tried to hold him with small endearments, twisted small thorns into his clothes with a restraint like a caress, *as though they were the fingers of a harlot in a crowded bar*."

The italics in the quotation are mine. I think that the Ramparts critic would probably describe the words as "flashy": to me they are something more and something different. This is a typical Greene image of a kind which recurs in nearly all the later novels. It is of the essence of these images that they call attention to themselves. They seem to do so by trying to establish what Aristotle, in his definition of metaphor, called the discovery of similarity in dissimilars. The comparison between the thorns catching the fugitive's clothing and the harlot fingering his flies in a bar is plainly too far-fetched to be a success. But it does show already Greene's tendency to operate by over-statement, to add a dash of sensationalism to the commonplace, to heighten ordinary experience. What is also characteristic is the way in which the author draws on the sexual connection for this type of image. These are other samples:

"*The school and he were joined by a painful reluctant coition, a passionless coition that leaves everything to regret, nothing to love, everything to hate, but cannot destroy the idea: we are one body*" (England Made Me).

"*He saw a girl in a dirty shift spread out on the packing-cases like a fish on a counter*" (The Heart of the Matter).

"*The dangerous desire to confide grew in Father Thomas's mind like the pressure of an orgasm*" (A Burnt-out Case).

The recurrence of the sexual image in book after book, in the least appropriate contexts, suggests that there is something obsessive about the novelist's preoccupation with sexuality. The image of the girl in the dirty shift "spread out on the packing cases like a fish on a counter" reinforces the impression created by the first example: that sex is somehow furtive, dirty, degrading. It is a curious fact that though Greene's novels abound in incidents of fornication and adultery, I cannot remember a single instance of a really satisfactory connection even in the "entertainments." It is either an

act dripping with guilt or a quick wiggle which is over in a matter of seconds:

"*She only regretted the promptitude of the embrace . . . He was with her, he was in her, he was away from her, brushing his hair, whistling a tune*" (It's a Battlefield).

The obsessiveness becomes much more pronounced in the "Catholic novels." These samples come from *Brighton Rock*:

"*He lay still thinking: 'What a dream!' and then heard the stealthy movement of his parents in the other bed. It was Saturday night. His father panted like a man at the end of a race and his mother made a horrifying sound of pleasurable pain.*"

"*You could know everything there was in the world and yet if you were ignorant of that one dirty scramble you knew nothing.*"

"*Phil opened an eye — yellow with sexual effort — and watched her apprehensively.*"

In still another passage Pinkie broods over

"*the frightening weekly exercise of his parents which he watched from his single bed.*"

Graham Greene once reproached the present writer for saying of the last two quotations that they showed an abnormal attitude towards human nature. He is well known to be a warm admirer of the late Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* with its emphasis on the novelist's "point of view." He argued that in *Brighton Rock* you have to allow for the writer's "point of view," that the emphasis on the "single" bed and the odd use of the adjective "yellow" could not be interpreted as a reflection of his own attitude because in this book he was depicting an abnormal character. I cannot help thinking that he tries to use the "point of view" as an alibi. It is true that Pinkie is in some respects abnormal, but it does not seem to me that you can detach a novelist as easily as this from his creatures, that the characters through which he chooses to represent the world must be a reflection of his own preoccupations, or, more accurately, a projection of his own obsessions. I can only subscribe to the observation by the authors of a laudatory study of Greene who speak of "the fear of the body evident from the beginning in Greene's fiction and strongest in *Brighton Rock*" (K. Allott & M. Farris: *The Art of Graham Greene*, pp. 236-7).

## 5.

THE POWER AND THE GLORY is the most popular of Greene's novels. The reasons are plain. The theme of the persecution of religion by the police state is more than topical: it is one of the greatest dilemmas of our time and marks the merging of the topical into the universal. There is a blend, too, of what seems best in the novels and the "entertainments." The "hunted man" appears to be a valid symbol of the problems of the age. The distinction between the priest's function

and the human failings of the holder provides the novelist with a perfect opportunity of demonstrating his thesis on the difference between conventional Catholicism and the behind-the-scenes Catholicism. It is because the formal division between the priest and the man corresponds to a division in the author's own personality that it is a curiously suitable vehicle for his talents, for the diffusion of that highly charged atmosphere which is regarded as pre-eminently Greene's.

The contrast between the office and its holder is glaring. The priest chose the priesthood, on his own showing, out of vanity. He was the son of humble parents who wanted to "get on" and a vocation for the priesthood was the obvious way. When the persecution breaks out he becomes a drinker, a "whisky priest." Without any genuine love or passion he seduces an Indian woman when visiting her village to administer the sacraments, and there is a child. Yet he is superior to Padre José, the priest who conformed to the state decrees, abandoned his calling and married. And because he is so, the "whisky priest" becomes a martyr. The title underlines, and seems intended to underline, the novelist's thesis. Those who appear holy in the eyes of the world are something far different in God's eyes: it is the sinner—almost the public sinner—the man riddled with every human weakness except one who is the real saint.

Technically, the novel is a considerable advance on any of its predecessors and its range is a good deal wider. There is a systematic attempt to present the different kinds and degrees of belief and unbelief, to show how they harmonise or conflict, reinforce or qualify one another. The unshakable belief of the priest is matched with the unshakable disbelief of the Communist lieutenant, or what he takes for unshakable disbelief. "He was a mystic, too," we are told, "and what he had experienced was vacancy—a complete certainty in the existence of a dying, cooling world, of human beings who had evolved from animals for no purpose at all." Yet he remains somehow unsure of himself, mysteriously attracted to the priest whom he is to execute. There is a similar contrast in the people behind them: the childlike faith of the frightened downtrodden Indians and the hopeless resignation of the urban crowds who have been "cured of superstition" and have nothing better to do than mill aimlessly round until the curfew sends them slinking home. There are other individual contrasts: the priest and the cowardly Padre José who even refuses the unbelieving lieutenant's invitation to shrive the "whisky priest" before he is shot; the unreal piety of the "churchy" women; the Lutherans who "don't hold with the Mass"; the believing half-caste who plays the role of Judas and the unbelieving bandit who tries to save the priest; Mr. Tench and the Fellows, expatriates who have no religion and whose world has crumbled.

The role of children in the novel is particularly striking: the priest's illegitimate daughter who is already corrupted by the world and spiritually doomed; the unbelieving daughter of the Fellows who was moving towards the priest or the faith he stands for when she met with a violent end. Most curious of all is chorus of native children, unimpressed by the communist militia and mocking Padre José when his wife calls him, impatiently, to bed.

The contrasts are driven home by the multiplication of "the points of view." Most of the action is seen through the eyes of the "whisky priest," but we also have the points of view of the lieutenant, Padre José, Mr. Tench, the Fellows. What this adds up to is a firm, clear structure, the appearance of strength and solidity, the suggestion of depth.

If we applied the customary standards, if we gave the highest marks to the novelist who treats man as a "metaphysical being," we should evidently have to award very high marks to *The Power and the Glory*. But, as soon as we look more closely at the text doubts arise; we have the impression that there is a gap between the ambitious superstructure and the materials out of which it is built—the language. The flashy or sensational images which had made sporadic appearances in the earlier novels come streaming from the novelist's pen:

*"The man's dark suit and sloping shoulders reminded [Mr. Tench] uncomfortably of a coffin, and death was in his carious mouth already."*

*"He followed her meekly, tripping in the long peon's trousers, with the happiness wiped off his face like the survivor of a wreck."*

*"A few men moved in the hammocks—a large unshaven jaw hung over the side like something left unsold on a butcher's counter . . ."*

The comparison between the priest's sloping shoulders and a coffin points, crudely, to his end. There is exaggeration in the comparison between the vanished happiness and a "survivor of a wreck." We get a shock when an unshaven jaw is compared to "something left unsold on a butcher's counter." The image is applied to one of the Communist policemen and expresses, melodramatically, not merely disapproval of the scruffy Communists, but what I have called the author's decidedly sour attitude towards the human race.

I want to turn now to a longer passage which purports to describe the priest's unspoken thoughts on his way back to the village where he had seduced the peasant woman:

*"In any case, even if he could have gone south and avoided the village, it was only one more surrender: the years behind him were littered with similar surrenders—fast days and fast days and days of abstinence had been the first to go; then he had ceased to trouble more than occasionally about his breviary—and finally*

he had left it behind altogether at the port in one of his periodic attempts to escape. Then the altar stone went—too dangerous to carry with him. He had no business to say Mass without it: he was probably liable to suspension, but penalties of the ecclesiastical kind began to seem unreal in a state where the only penalty was the civil one of death. The routine of his life like a dam was cracked and forgetfulness came dribbling in, wiping out this and that. Five years ago he had given way to despair—the unforgiveable sin—and he was going back now to the scene of his despair with a curious lightening of the heart. For he had got over his despair too. He was a bad priest, he knew it: they had a name for his kind—whisky priest, but every failure dropped out of sight and mind: somewhere they accumulated in secret—the rubble of his failures. One day they would choke up, he supposed, altogether the source of grace. Until then he carried on with spells of fear, weariness, with a shamefaced lightness of heart.”

The first thing we notice is the catalogue of failures, or supposed failures; then the string of images suggesting disintegration and collapse: the “cracked dam,” the forgetfulness “dribbling in,” the “rubble of his failures,” “choke up the source of grace.” One is struck by the sense of satisfaction, the complacency with which the failures are paraded though in fact no priest on the run could possibly be expected to observe what are in the main matters of mere ecclesiastical discipline. This makes us suspicious. Are we really listening, we wonder, to the story of a hunted priest, a man who is subject to human weakness like the rest of us, but who nevertheless behaves heroically when he has to choose between apostasy and death? Or is there something specious about it all? Are we having a covert emotional appeal made to us by the use of a religious theme and setting? Are we simply listening to what is at bottom a somewhat melodramatic tale about a man hunt? I think we are. My suspicions are confirmed by the language: the facile, emotion-laden images and the adjectives: “cracked dam”; “rubble of his failures”; the juggling with the words “despair,” “the unforgiveable sin,” “surrender.” I think that there is something more besides. I think that under the pretext of using the “point of view” a highly personal, a decidedly unbalanced view of life is being projected into a situation and a character with which it has very little to do.

Let us look at some more samples of the priest’s unspoken thoughts:

“But at the centre of his own faith there always stood the convincing mystery—that we are made in God’s image—God was the parent, but he was also the policeman, the criminal, the priest, the maniac and the judge. Something resembling God’s image dangled from the gibbet or went into odd attitudes before the bullets in a prison yard or contorted itself like a camel in the attitude of sex. He would sit in the confessional and

hear the complicated dirty ingenuities which God’s image had thought out: and God’s image shook now, up and down on the mule’s back, with the yellow teeth sticking out over the lower lip, and God’s image did its despairing act of rebellion with Maria in the hut among the rats.”

This time there can be no doubt. These are the novelist’s reflexions on life which are being put into the priest’s mind. The novelist takes a very poor view of human nature. The passage begins with a formal reference to “the mystery at the centre of his faith . . . that we are made in God’s image.” But at once there is a sudden switch and a sudden descent: God’s image is identified with an oddly assorted collection of individuals: the policeman at the top of the list, the judge at the bottom, the priest sandwiched in between the criminal and the maniac. The “gibbet” seems to contain an allusion to the Crucifixion and the criminal being hanged; the “bullets” to martyred priests being shot. There is a violent contrast between them and the next presentation of God’s image: “contorted like a camel in the attitude of sex.” The way in which the dying movements of what we assume to be a martyr merge into the writhings of the fornicator illustrate very well what I said earlier of Greene’s method of using the conjunction of religion and sex to heighten the emotional appeal of his work. For the sensational element lies in the reference to the Crucifixion and the triumphal ride into Jerusalem which are brought into close proximity with illicit sexual intercourse:

“Something resembling God dangled from the gibbet . . . or contorted itself like a camel in the attitude of sex.”

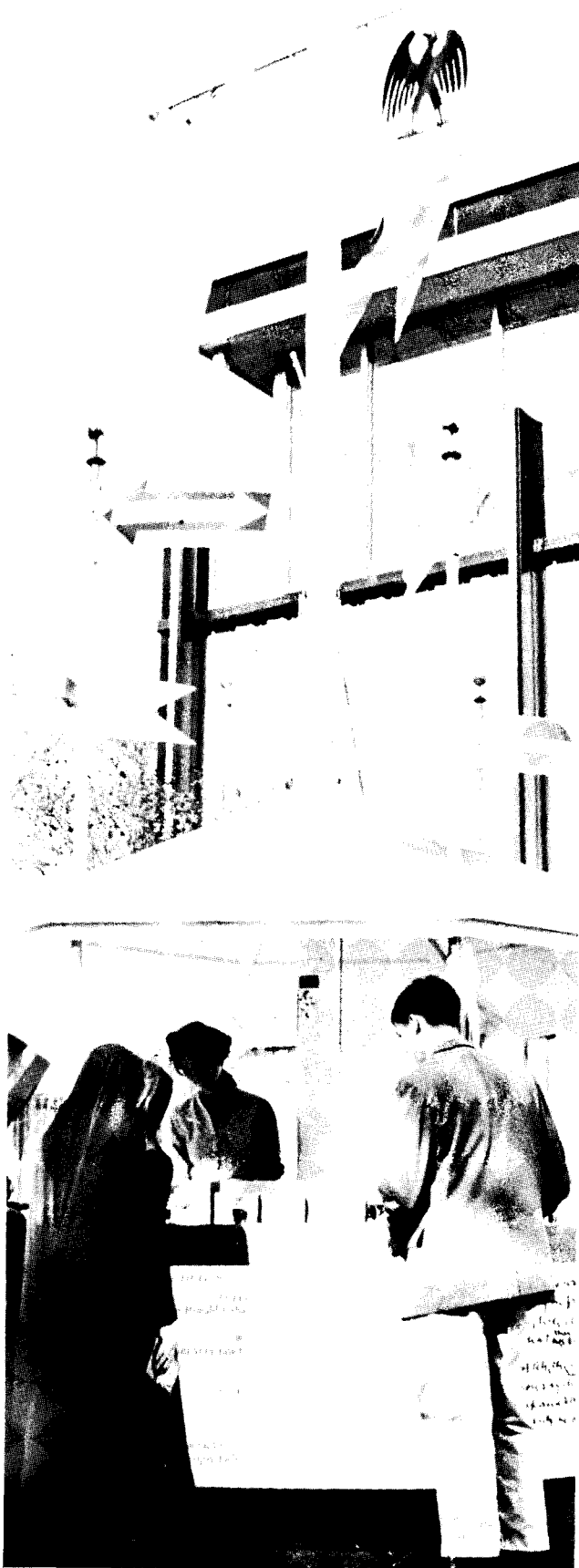
“God’s image shook now, up and down on the mule’s back . . . and God’s image did its despairing acts of rebellion with Maria in the hut among the rats.”

There is a curious gloating over the disreputable behaviour of human nature which is apparent in the repeated, sneering references to “God’s image”: God’s image doing this or that, but whatever it is, it is nearly always discreditable: “the complicated dirty ingenuities which God’s image had thought out” where there is a deliberate appeal to the salacious, an attempt to elicit the response: “Wonder what they were?”

We must observe the tone in both passages: the whining, self-pitying tone, the rhythmless prose, the careless writing: “contorted itself . . . in the attitude of sex.”

When the priest, seen from a distance by the dentist, finally crumples up before the firing squad, we are not filled with admiration for the simple man who in spite of everything died an heroic, a martyr’s death. We feel that an enormous effort has been made to show that, in human terms at any rate, martyrdom is a thoroughly squalid affair; that the real saint, far from being like the one in the book the “churchy” woman reads to her children, is the man who departs as far as possible from the teaching of the Church, who is faithful in one thing





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only. He may have gone with Maria among the rats, but at least he didn't behave like Padre José.

6.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER is a companion piece to *The Power and the Glory*, but we shall see that in one respect at least it is notably inferior to the earlier novel. It deals like *The Power and the Glory* with an immature world, a world whose inhabitants are morally, mentally and emotionally undeveloped. They are arranged broadly in three tiers: police, administrators and natives who correspond to the police, expatriate traders and natives in *The Power and the Glory*. Children play an important part, but in this novel they underline and prolong the immaturity of the adult world instead of providing a criticism of it as to some extent they do in *The Power and the Glory*. What is more obvious in *The Heart of the Matter* than in almost any of the other novels is that Greene's world is a world of mediocrities. His protagonists are examples of what has been called in another context "the unheroic hero." They are never distinguished by their moral or intellectual qualities: the hallmark of the Greene hero is grievous moral weakness. The only two saints in his work appear to achieve sanctity by accident. The clergy are remarkable only for their inadequacy which seems a reflection of the moral weakness of the laity. Their futility or their silence hastens the disaster; they arrive on the scene with empty words of comfort when it is too late and the protagonist is dead.

There is the same sharp contrast in *The Heart of the Matter* as in *The Power and the Glory* between the public and the private image, the office and its holder. The policeman's uniform confers an outward authority which is strangely at variance with the lack of inner authority of the individual. It also has the effect of concealing personal weakness from public view. The same is true of the civilian administrators whose position as state employees sometimes hides criminal tendencies. One is given premature retirement, another is transferred, for putting his hand into the till. A third commits suicide as the only escape from an intolerable situation.

Scobie, working as a police officer in an appalling backwater, has earned a reputation for integrity. He is known as "the Just": a local Aristides in the British bureaucracy who is respected alike by colleagues, friends and the native population. The novel is largely devoted to an exposure of the man, to showing how undeserved the flattering title is. It is true that he is not scruffy or disreputable or given to the bottle or to other men's beds. The source of his downfall is precisely what is esteemed a virtue by the secular world: his humanity, his feeling for his fellow human beings, in a word—a very terrible word in this novel—his

"pity." It is a terrible word because virtue is turned inside out, because what is ordinarily a virtue becomes a fatal weakness. We are reminded here of the essential mediocrity of Greene's characters and of the "uncomfortable questioning critic" of his first novel. It is a sign of Scobie's immaturity and of his singular lack of insight into his own motives that he is taken in by his private cant about "pity":

*"He had no sense of responsibility towards the beautiful and the graceful and the intelligent. They could find their own way. It was the face for which nobody would go out of his way, the face that would soon be used to rebuffs and indifference that demanded his allegiance. The word 'pity' is used as loosely as the word 'love': the terrible promiscuous passion which so few experienced?"*

The word occurs again in an account of Scobie watching his poor, silly, snobbish wife sleeping:

*"He watched her through the muslin net. Her face had the yellow ivory tinge of atabrine: her hair which had once been the colour of bottled honey was dark and stringy with sweat. These were the times of ugliness when he loved her, when pity reached the intensity of a passion. It was pity that told him to go: he wouldn't have woken his worst enemy from sleep—leave alone Louise?"*

No one would describe these passages as distinguished prose, but their purpose is clear. Scobie's special pleading is really aimed at the reader. The comparison between the fortunate and the unfortunate, the use of a phrase like "terrible promiscuous passion," the pathetic account of Louise's ugliness, are intended to make us swallow the author's thesis about "pity." The faults in the writing are still more evident in another passage in which Scobie reflects on his responsibilities towards his wife:

*"He had always been prepared to accept the responsibility for his actions, and he had always been half aware too, from the time he made his terrible private vow, how far this action might carry him. Despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim. It is, one is told, the unforgiveable sin, but it is the sin the corrupt or evil man never practises. He always has hope. He never reaches the freezing point of knowing absolute failure. Only the man of good will always carries in his heart the capacity for damnation."*

There is a similarity between the tone and content of this passage and the passages I quoted from *The Power and the Glory*: the same sad, whining tone; the same absence of vitality. It is filled, too, with special pleading and the same bad arguments. The wicked man has a better chance of salvation than the man of good will who, we are told in a characteristically emotive phrase, has taken a "terrible private vow," which after all is nothing more than to make an unprepossessing wife happy.

If *The Power and the Glory* is one of the most popular of Greene's novels it is because there is at least a show of motive for the whisky priest's actions when he finds himself isolated and on the run in a hostile country. Scobie's "pity" is far less convincing. He is a very ordinary individual with the traditional public school virtues—decency, uprightness, kindness, integrity—who finds himself married to an undistinguished wife. He also has the characteristic public school vice: the sentimentality which underlies the heartiness and the supposed manliness that are sedulously inculcated by the schools. In the overheated atmosphere of a Greene novel the sentimentality produces disproportionate results. For Scobie's sentimental pity for the underdog completely undermines his character, revealing the extreme brittleness of his virtues. He is guilty of one betrayal after another: his duty as a police officer, his loyalty to a faithful servant, his marriage vows, and finally his vows to the Church. A blubbing Portuguese captain is more than enough to make him betray his trust to his country and to do so without any serious struggle or apparently without any realisation of the enormity of the offence. He is a believing Catholic, but simply in order to avoid paining his wife or arousing suspicion about his liaison with another woman he makes a sacrilegious communion which could have been avoided without the slightest difficulty. Finally, he commits suicide on the pretext that it is the only way to avoid making two women unhappy, but in reality because he cannot face the situation created by his weakness—it would be too much for his famous "pity."

I have suggested that in one particular respect *The Heart of the Matter* compares unfavourably with *The Power and the Glory*. The superiority of *The Power and the Glory* lies in the fact that the priest's simple faith does provide a point of reference, a positive standard which enables us to see the actions of the other characters in some sort of perspective. It is precisely this that is lacking in *The Heart of the Matter*. I have tried to show that Scobie's "pity" is a sentimental illusion. What is more serious is that the illusion is bolstered up by a sinister element of casuistry. It is suggested in one place that the Crucifixion was a form of suicide. This decidedly unorthodox suggestion becomes the excuse for Scobie's suicide which by implication is compared favourably with the suicide of the civil servant, the commonplace agnostic suicide of a young man who could not face material difficulties which were more real than Scobie's sentimental difficulties. We hear much in the novel of corruption and decay, but the casuistical sleights of hand seem to me to point to something corrupt in the novel itself. For what we find in it is not so much an absence of moral perspective as a deliberate destruction of perspective in the interests of melodrama.

The truth is that the sensational events like the sacrilegious communion and the suicide have no real motivation. The author set out to write a "theological thriller" about a Catholic gambling with his soul which leaves us in doubt (as it was bound to) about the result of Scobie's "last throw." The protagonist is "rigged." What clearly happened is that situation preceded character as it would in an adventure story. The result is that we have an incredible character used as an inadequate illustration of an impossible thesis.

## 7.

WHEN WE LOOK at Greene's "Catholic novels," we see that each of them sets out to define a certain attitude towards belief. In his two most famous works it is the point of view of the weak man inside the Faith: in the two later novels it is the point of view of the unbeliever and the man who has lost his faith. I think we must add that the criticism of religion in them is more drastic than anything in the works which preceded them.

*The End of the Affair* is not a good novel and I only intend to deal very briefly with it. On the first page we read:

*"I hated Henry—I hated his wife Sarah too . . . So this is a record of hate far more than of love."*

These are the terms in which Bendrix, the novelist-narrator, speaks of his dead mistress and the man whose wife he stole. The book creates the impression of being the projection of painful personal equations into imaginary characters. We should not be deceived by the miracles. It is indeed a story of hate—the word reverberates all through the book—the story of the most destructive emotion known to erring human nature. The author's intentions—his unconscious intentions—appear to be summed up by the cremation of the saint at the end: the symbolical destruction of a loved-and-hated religion.

*A Burnt-out Case* was coolly received by some of Mr. Greene's admirers on the grounds that it lacks the "spontaneity" of its predecessors. It is the absence of the so-called "spontaneity" which commends it to me. If it is the best of the novels, it is because there appears to be a serious attempt to examine a situation without generating the supercharged atmosphere of *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*. The theme is similar to that of the two earlier novels, but is stated much more explicitly in the dedicatory letter:

*"This is not a roman a clef, but an attempt to give dramatic expression to various types of belief, half-belief and non-belief, in the kind of setting, removed from world-politics and household preoccupations, where such differences are felt acutely and find expression."*

There are the missionary priests at the leproserie who are too busy with works of corporal mercy to have time to worry over the subtleties of moral theology — the only one who does come near to losing his faith — or whether their strange guest goes to mass or not; the unbelieving doctor; Rycker, the spoiled priest; the natives all mixed up over God and the tribal god, Nzambi; and the stranger. A clue is provided by the blurb:

*"A leper who is cured has sometimes gone first through the stage of mutilation — he is known as a 'burnt-out case.'"*

There is clearly an intellectual thesis here: that there is a parallel between the physical states through which some lepers pass and the mental states of some men. The missionaries think, in so far as they leave themselves time to think of him, that Querry is a believer who is going through a period of aridity. He puts it differently and with an amusing salaciousness which is characteristic of his creator:

*"I'm no genius, Rycker. I am a man who had a certain talent, not a very great talent, and I have come to the end of it. There was nothing new I could do. I could only repeat myself. So I gave up. It's as simple as that. Just as I have given up women. After all there are only thirty-two ways of driving a nail into a hole?"*

It is one of the virtues of the book that the situation, or the state of the protagonist, is a simple one: we are spared the dubious moral conflicts as well as the melodrama of the other novels. Interest is maintained — the adventure story again — by the fact that we do not know the answer. The priests and the "churchy" Rycker interpret Querry's state of mind in one way; he himself does so in quite another. There is the "big moment" when he is suspected, quite wrongly, of adultery with the babydoll Mme Rycker and shot dead by her husband in a drunken fury. And we are left wondering whether he was in fact on the verge of conversion: we are not left in any doubt about his superiority over all the other representatives of the different types of belief and half-belief excepting only the unbelieving Dr. Colin.

The originality of the novel lies in the creation of a new concept. For the "burnt-out case" ranks with the "hunted man" and the "outsider" of the other novels and of other novelists. It is in Greene's work as much an author-projection as they and its implications are disturbing.

8.

GRAHAM GREENE has spoken firmly about the novelist's duty of not trying to write works of edification which is a betrayal of his talent. He has also said, with the same firmness, that he is a Catholic who writes novels and not a Catholic novelist. The same thing, we know, has been said by other Catholics like Mauriac and Cayrol. One suspects that it is a distinction without difference. For whether we speak of a Catholic who writes novels or a Catholic novelist, we have the right to assume that his work will be informed by an objectively valid scheme of values which will enable him to see experience in perspective. The lack of any such scheme in the contemporary novel explains one of its principal weaknesses. Men are thrown back on personal relationships, personal feelings, personal standards of integrity, only to find that they are constantly letting one down. Feelings do, indeed, become used up, worn out, as surely as in Greene's "burnt-out case," and there is nothing left.

What must be said of the Catholic who writes novels is that we expect something different, but that we only get it to a limited degree. Faith is usually invoked in order to demonstrate its inadequacy in the critical situations of life and most of the characters end up in a moral mess which is not very different from the emotional messes of the characters in the secular novel. Comparison between contemporary religious writing and the writing of the past are inevitable. In the past religion imposed the pattern: the individual expressed himself within a well-defined framework. Today religion no longer creates the pattern or shapes the man; it is to a very large extent shaped by man's emotions. Instead of the pattern being formed by the impersonal, the enduring, the normal, it is formed by the personal, the fortuitous, the abnormal, until in the end religion itself becomes a single factor in a private world of hatred, lust and guilt.

So it is with Greene. The novels are essentially a projection of something personal in his make-up. The personal factor is not controlled, set in its proper perspective by any system of impersonal values, or rather the impersonal is swamped by the personal. The religion which gives the books their undeniable power is an idiosyncratic religion and a direct product of the state of society in which the novelist is living: not the dominating factor, but the single factor in the private world of hatred, lust and guilt.

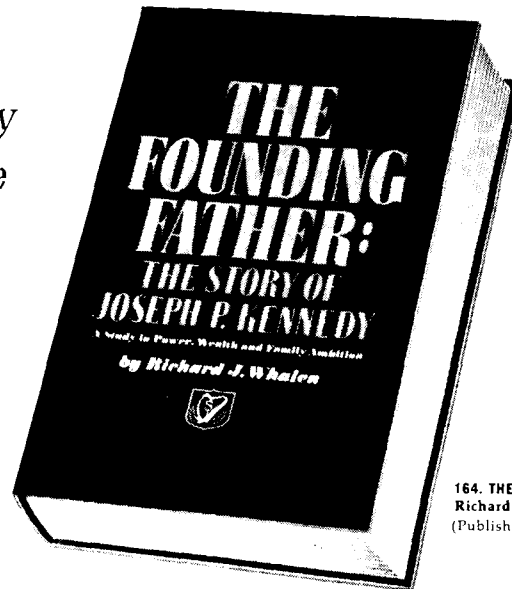


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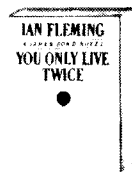
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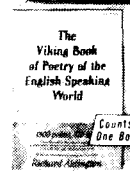
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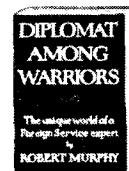
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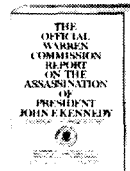
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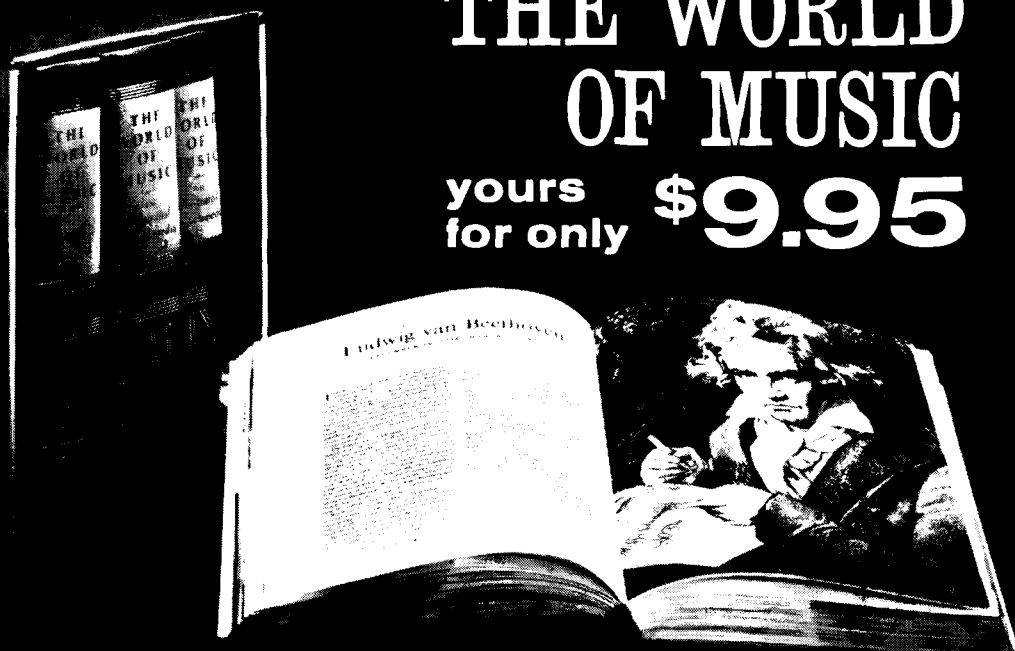
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