



GRAHAM GREEN - - A CATHOLIC WRITER?

Graham Green should be of some importance to the Catholic, and demands, from his very literary stature in both Catholic and non-Catholic circles, careful examination. Because of his ambiguity towards the Faith, however, Greene has presented himself as a problem to the Catholic critic. As a result, Catholic criticism often vigorously attempts to minimize his influence in the literary world. And again, due to his connections with the Catholic Faith, there is within non-Catholic criticism a growing conviction that Greene's influence should be checked. So we have, then, Greene's plight in a nutshell.

Unlike most novelists, Greene has taken in his work a step beyond the ordinary bounds of a novel. For he has moved into theological and philosophical realms, an advance which may prove fatal to a novelist. Greene has, then, exposed himself to a great deal of criticism on many different levels of thought, and often enough does not escape unscathed.

Green, though not a prolific writer, has produced a fairly large number of novels. Some of his works are of poor quality while others are entertaining but no more. It is his major novels that are of interest here. And of these, four may well be of enduring value: *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), *The End of the Affair* (1951), and *A Burnt-Out Case* (1961). Of these four, *The Power and the Glory* (*Labyrinthine Ways*) is generally recognized as his best. Yet the word 'best' is and always will be tendentious, until time and critical evaluation have sifted the writings slowly and carefully. For instance, *Brighton Rock* (1938) although written before any of the above mentioned novels, is only now beginning to climb to a possible prominence.

In case the reader is not familiar with any or all of Greene's four major novels it might be helpful to review them briefly since constant reference will be made to them throughout the article.

The Power and the Glory—the story of a drunken priest's flight from God, and his life during the Mexican persecution of the 1930's. After being apprehended by an atheist officer of the state, the so-called whiskey-priest is shot. It is essentially a story of flight by man and pursuit by God.

The Heart of the Matter—the story of Scobie, an upright policeman who little by little is betrayed by his own pity for people. Thinking that he has ruined both his wife and his mistress and betrayed God, he commits suicide. Due to some ambiguous events revealed after the poison has been taken, there is reason to wonder whether Scobie was condemned to hell or not.

The End of the Affair—the story of Sarah and Bendix who are involved in a sinful love affair. Sarah, thinking that a miracle was performed for Bendix, fulfills a quick promise made to God and leaves him. Slowly but surely, and in spite of Bendix's futile efforts to fight God and His designs for her, the picture of Sarah is beautifully rounded out as she dies a saintly death.

A Burnt-Out Case—the story of Querry, a famous architect who escapes from civilization and journeys to the Congo, dead to both love and hate. Yet through a series of unavoidable happenings he seems to return to a road which might lead back to God. He is killed, however, and the reader is left wondering about his fate in eternal life.

Graham Greene, though generally accepted as an excellent writer and avidly read by many, is attacked from many sides and on many points, for it seems that virtually every critic who reads him finds something objectionable in his writings. There are, then, a score of objections to Greene,

some more, some less valid. Yet the validity of these criticisms appears in most cases to stem from the enlarging of small faults to the point where they seem to be crippling. Such criticisms must be seen for what they truly are. But, besides these, there are major objections, which if true, need not be blown up out of size, for they would be fatal flaws. It is the aim of these pages to present and then to discuss some of these more weighty criticisms.

The first and harshest view employed against Greene, and then only by implication, is that he is not a good Catholic. Passages taken out of context from his novels seem to uphold such a notion: "A priest sat rigidly on the edge of an armchair in the study, a man with a gaunt face, one of the Redemptorists, probably, who served up hell on Sundays. . . ." (*The End of the Affair*: The Viking Press). The preceding would seem to be an example of his views on the clergy, on his innate disdain and disgust for them. And in each of his other novels that we are discussing a priest is portrayed as boorish, stupid or simply bad. Thus a hasty universal conclusion is presented to the audience as being indicative of Greene's views. Many such passages, if taken on their face value, could easily be twisted to present Greene as an agnostic writer. As a result of this subtle attack it is further implied that Catholics should avoid defending him because he is a bad Catholic. Let him write, they say, his foolish and unsound thoughts—and then ignore him. But this view is taken by only his most severe critics and then in such a way that the reader alone must draw the conclusion, a conclusion which is never directly stated.

Many of the objections arising from theological criticism of Graham Greene are still being vehemently discussed. From the many presented, the following has been chosen because it is a sound objection and it may be easily understood by the non-theologian. It seeks justification in theology for Greene's making his sinners, who are often hardened in their sin, seem so close to God. Greene seems to say that the more sins they commit, the better their chance to return to God. He therefore appears to present God as being more present supernaturally when the characters are groveling in sin, whereas in reality God is supernaturally most remote. As the objection is posed Greene would be wrong in doing this.

Probably the most potent charge of all concerns his excessive use of sex. Why, his critics ask, must he constantly revert to sex as a major theme? Can a Catholic writer exploit it in this manner and yet not give scandal? In *The End of the Affair*, for example, some of the scenes are extremely sensual. Why must Greene do this? Is it for commercial reasons? Or is this

his way of appeasing non-Catholics? Such a line of questioning could go on indefinitely, but the main point is, can a Catholic validly present sex the way Greene does? Another point, not directly pertinent to the above but which can be conveniently raised here, is why is it always the Catholic who is corrupt, never the non-Catholic? This whole series of questions cannot be put off lightly and must be dealt with in detail.

The last objection that we will deal with but by no means the last of the important questions is rather general, and yet it clearly shows us what might be considered Graham Greene's plight. Greene, probably quite consciously, is trying to maintain a hazardous balance. On one hand, he must try to remain a Catholic and keep a Catholic's viewpoint when writing on questions such as he does, that is, God's Providence, His Mercy, and so on. Yet to have his novels read by non-Catholics it would be impossible for him to become an outright apologist for Catholicism. How can he please the Catholics who at times accuse him of heresies such as Manicheism and non-Catholics who at times state that he is too Catholic and therefore should not be considered an author of popular appeal or universal interest. Thus this double-pronged objection serves to show us that Greene, although in an extremely privileged position, remains in it in only a precarious way.

Now let us see in what way, if any, these objections can be answered.

The first objection, that of Greene's being a bad Catholic as witnessed in his writings, is a dangerous and short-sighted view. In posing it one is overlooking a fundamental tenet in criticism by confusing the characters of the novel with their creator, and thence making what an author writes about and the author himself synonymous. If carried to its logical conclusion, all his disparaging remarks about Catholicism are firmly held opinions of Graham Greene and not simply words used by Greene to portray a character-type. If some begin to judge the author's personal life by what he writes in his novels and equate these two separate entities—the story and the writer—many of the conclusions turn out to be quite absurd. It is true that an author may consciously or even unconsciously associate himself with a character, and in some novels these two kinds of association have been proved true. But insofar as this theory is applied to Greene it seems invalid. There is a vast difference between association and sympathy, and it is within the bounds of this distinction that one could possibly present a feasible interpretation. It seems that Greene sympathizes with Scobie's suicide and Querry's plight, yet to say that he associates himself with them

is unfounded. Therefore, it is highly inconclusive, and somewhat scandalous to intimate a lack of religion in Greene.

In *The Heart of the Matter*, in reference to the second objection, Scobie has an illicit love affair and commits a sacrilege by receiving the Holy Eucharist in the state of mortal sin. Yet it seems that God is very close to him, closer to Scobie than He had ever been before. Indeed, a valid objection may be raised on this point. How can Greene present God as being so close to this man who is in the state of mortal sin, when, supernaturally speaking, he is far removed from God? Again, in *The Power and the Glory* the same general state of affairs exists, since the whiskey-priest is living in a state of mortal sin. Yet this difficulty seems resolved when the following distinction is made. Admittedly, man is out of the state of grace and supernaturally far from God when in sin, but psychologically God could be very close indeed.* After committing sin man is well aware of its consequences in eternal life and of his own loss of God. As a result his conscience hammers away at him to repent; he is evermore aware of his severed relationship with God until he realizes all too well the paradoxical "unpresent presence" of God. And so Scobie, about to die from the self-administered poison, possibly makes an act of perfect contrition in his final words, saying, "Dear God, I love . . ." (The Viking Press). Although Scobie and the reader are well aware of God's supernatural remoteness, there is still a presence and this can be termed psychological.** This sound distinction seems to resolve the second objection.

The next objection, the one which may ultimately prove strongest, is his almost flagrant use of sex and sins of sex. This use poses a serious problem for the Catholic critic. When does Greene say too much? Fortunately, there are several norms that we can revert to in order to come to a solution about this problem. First, does the author recognize sin for what it is; second, does he subordinate the theme of sex to one of greater import; finally, does he avoid writing tempting or too vivid descriptions of certain of these sexual sins? If these questions can be answered properly, there should be no problem in clearing any writer from the objection of the over-use of sex. Of the three norms just mentioned, it is in the third that Greene has especially found himself in embroiled waters.

* Note that the psychological presence is still supernatural, although not sanctifying.

** Confer *Critic*, Dec. '59—Jan. '60, for a fuller treatment of this distinction by T. A. Wassmer, S.J.

From reading the four novels which have been used as examples of the best of Greene, the reader would probably be forced to concede that *The Power and the Glory* and *A Burnt-Out Case* can easily be vindicated within the above three norms. It is, however, in *The Heart of the Matter* that the "over-vividness" objection seems able to carry its own weight in plausibility. But for the mature reader, the difficulties are few and certainly not prominent enough to merit an obsessive consideration on our part.

The case unfortunately is a bit different for *The End of the Affair*. This book is filled with passages of startling vividness in matters of sex. As a result, the third norm does seem somewhat trespassed upon and we can only hope to distinguish the book from difficulty by a consideration of audience. Simply, it is the difference between the reader who has no trouble with temptations in reading certain vivid passages and those who would find the same passages a source of temptation. The novel, *The End of the Affair*, over all the others, seems at times to rest on the none too strong foundation of unrestraint. However, to say categorically that the book should not be read by Catholics can be, in its turn, denied.

As in many modern movies and other sources of entertainment, the whole is not condemned because of a faulty part. So also in Greene's case none of the above four novels can be condemned *in toto*. While it is true that he may have an objectionable part in some of his books, as is definitely the case in *The End of the Affair*, such objectionable matter never reaches the extent of destroying the value of the whole book. There is however a reservation to be added to the approval just stated. Greene is the possessor of a vivid, imaginative style, and the force of some of his paragraphs is markedly intense. He uses this style, which has been termed "photographic" in all areas, even in areas where sensuality is portrayed. Thus the sharp images which his pen creates can at times be quite dangerous. Is not this difficulty an even greater concern for non-Catholics who live without the protection of the sacraments? But what should Greene do about this? It seems that one step that he could take is that of lessening the descriptions of certain happenings and only mention their occurrence. No writer is exempt from modesty. Such a change would not affect the essence of his stories and certainly would safeguard Greene against being responsible for scandal that could otherwise be given.

As to the objection that he always seems to choose the Catholic as the one who, as the major character, is in the most sinful of circumstances, two points can be made. First, why are they always Catholic? A possible answer could be that on Greene's part the implication is that Catholics are

the only ones with a sense of sin. This implication, whether true or not, might be his strong indictment against the non-Catholic. Second, and this is a point to be noted well, Greene has a romantic concept of God and His dealings with the sinner. At times he appears to be the modern day Francis Thompson, or his stories the prose variants of "The Hound of Heaven." Greene seems to be preoccupied with the stray sheep of the gospel in order to bring about a state of rejoicing in the other ninety-nine at the stray sheep's return. This is the beauty of *The End of the Affair*. Is it correct to say that he is glorifying sin as a stepping stone to God? It does not seem to be so, for it is obvious that the one sheep Greene has singled out is the exception rather than the rule for God's chosen. Greene says, rather, that a certain character, while leading a life of sin, was plucked from that life by the unfathomable ways of God and brought onto the road of sanctity.

In reference to the objection of his writing about sex in order to sell or appease non-Catholics, it can be seen that such is not the case. Of his four major novels the most dangerous, potentially, regarding sex is *The End of the Affair*. Yet paradoxically, this is probably the most Catholic of his books, for it is within this book that he introduces a miracle, a factor which upset many of his non-Catholic critics. And while in the other three novels the main character's sanctity can be questioned, Sarah definitely dies in sanctity. Sex is prominent because he wished to create an extremely sensual atmosphere, not in order to appease the non-Catholic or sell his book. Although he might have over-sensualized the sensual, it certainly was not for the mundane reasons cited by his critics.

Finally, there is the objection which presents to us Graham Greene's dilemma. It is the double-pronged statement that he is too Catholic for the non-Catholic and too non-Catholic for the Catholic. How can he please both of these groups, either of which crushes him beneath the weight of adverse criticism if he writes either too Catholic a novel, or too non-Catholic a novel? The answer is that he must continue to write in the same vein in which he does, for although highly criticized for certain statements and events in each of his books, he is nevertheless proclaimed by many Catholics and non-Catholics as an excellent and profound writer. But the day he begins to write too Catholic a novel, then he will fall from popularity, not in Catholic circles, but most emphatically in non-Catholic circles, and vice versa, if he goes to the other extreme. Such a decline would be tragic because Graham Greene is the greatest Catholic novelist writing today, and he has the largest non-Catholic audience of any Catholic novelist in the

English language. His tragedy would be the loss of such a key position. For he can, as can no other Catholic writer, present the Catholic faith and the Providence of God through his books. Yet if this presentation is overdone and his books lose the quality of pleasing both sides, Greene will thereby lose his apostolate and be defeated. Although some criticisms are bitter concerning him and at times he causes trouble for even his supporters, he remains generally accepted. The Catholic, though not to an excessive degree (and this is not the case), should sympathize with Greene, regret a few of his foibles, see the greater good and realize that this man is bringing God into the minds of many who otherwise would be completely forgetful of Him.

A Catholic writer? Yes, by all means.

—Bertrand McCaffrey, O.P.

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