

Catholic direction. The defence of episcopacy within the Church of England, as being of the *esse* of the Church, lies in the hands of Anglo-Catholics, and is an indirect witness to those elements of Catholic truth with which the Church of England, through the Ecumenical Movement, is penetrating World Protestantism. It is therefore an indirect and remote means of leading men towards the fullness of truth, which the Catholic Church alone possesses. That is why Catholics, watching from a distance, may well be anxious lest, in the years ahead, the Church of England, by its official action, should do anything to diminish or nullify the force of that witness, and give rise maybe to yet another schism among the followers of Christ.

---

## THE GREENE BAIZE DOOR

IAN GREGOR

‘EVERY creative writer worth our consideration, every writer who can be called, in the wide eighteenth-century use of the term, a poet, is a victim: a man given over to an obsession. . . . The obsession is perhaps most easily detected in the symbols a writer uses.’ These words written by Graham Greene in a review of Walter De la Mare’s short stories are illuminating in a study of Mr Greene’s own work, and in this brief paper I want to use them as a central point of reference, in attempting to show what is meant by calling Mr Greene’s work ‘poetic’. In a sense, my purpose is pre-critical since its emphasis falls on description rather than appraisal. Obviously, these are simply terms of convenience, and can never be exclusive of each other, but they serve to indicate an emphasis. Where Mr Greene’s work has been concerned, critical arrows have so easily felt the gravitational pull of moral and theological forces that the intended target has remained strangely untouched. This paper, flighted with a literary observation, tries to maintain direction by continually keeping in sight the idea that Graham

Greene is a novelist and therefore the target primarily of the literary critic.<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible to read Mr Greene's novels and not be made aware of their obsessive character—obsessive in theme, imagery and presentment. No matter how varied the setting and the characterization, there exists in each novel the same ruling passion, giving to his whole body of work an extraordinary unity. A clue as to why this should be so is found in Mr Greene's remark that 'the creative writer perceives his world *once and for all* [my italics] in childhood, and adolescence and his whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share'. Such a perception, focussed sharply and finally, will always find obsessive expression. What that obsession is 'is perhaps most easily detected in the symbols a writer uses', and this essay is offered as an examination of a set of related symbols which are to be found throughout Graham Greene's work and may be said to give it its unique character.

As a child Graham Greene lived in a house which was divided from the school, where his father was headmaster, by a door so that 'if you pushed open the green baize door in a passage by my father's study you entered another passage deceptively similar, but none the less you were on alien ground. There would be a slight smell of iodine from the matron's room, of damp towels from the changing rooms: of ink everywhere. Shut the door behind you again and the world smelt differently: books and fruit and eau de cologne. One was an inhabitant of both countries.' There, caught on the border between tranquillity and horror, 'faith came . . . shapelessly, without dogma, a presence above a croquet lawn, something associated with violence, cruelty, evil across the way'. (*The Lawless Roads*.) In that autobiographical passage we seem to be very close to 'the perception seen once and for all in childhood', the perception that determines the shape of the novels to come. The pressure of more experience than one could assimilate, the vivid juxtaposition of two worlds, the sense

<sup>1</sup> It would be unjust as well as ungracious to imply that there have been no helpful considerations of Mr Greene. There are, and my reading of Mr Greene has benefited from them, but they are few enough to permit a simple list: Kenneth Allott, *The Art of Graham Greene*, 1951; Richard Hoggart, 'The Force of Caricature: Aspects of the Art of Graham Greene', *Essays in Criticism*, 1953; Donat O'Donnell, *Martia Cross*, 1954; Elizabeth Sewell, 'The Imagination of Graham Greene', *Dublin Review*, 1954. For some of the suggestions in this paper I owe a personal acknowledgment to Mr Maurice Galton.

of belonging to one and being fascinated by the other, the moment of conflict being the moment when faith came 'shapelessly', and 'the love of God' being ushered in with 'violence, cruelty, evil across the way'. The passage holds in microcosm his fictional world.

The most direct transposition of this passage into 'the fictional world' occurs in *The Ministry of Fear* (1943). Arthur Rowe, while convalescing happily in a nursing home, following a bomb explosion which has destroyed his memory, is becoming rather disquieted by occasional oddities in the behaviour of his medical attendants. Finally, he decides to explore the nursing home—'ahead of him was the green baize door he had never seen opened. He was back in his own childhood breaking out of dormitory, daring more than he wanted to dare, proving himself. He hoped the door would be bolted on the other side. . . . The door pulled easily open . . . as he passed into the passage beyond, the green baize door swung to behind him with a long sigh.' Unknowingly, he has crossed into 'the sick bay', where he sees the nursing home is simply a convenient means of destroying undesirable patients—'it was like the underside of a stone: you turned the bright, polished nursing home over and found this'. The experience shakes his memory, and the horror of his past life begins to return. The connections with the autobiographical passage are obvious—the juxtaposed worlds, the dividing door, the false happiness shattered, and the realization that it is only by becoming aware of 'the horror' that we become 'whole men' capable of loving God. Again the image of the door takes him immediately to the past—'he was back in his own childhood'—and the overall poignancy of the passage is for lost innocence.

From this extended episodic use of the door, we find many variations on the theme. In the short story *The Basement Room* (1935) we find the world of the small boy divided, appropriately enough, from the world of the servants by a green baize door. The family go on holiday, leaving the boy in the care of the servants. The dividing door remains open, the boy becomes enmeshed in the adult world of the basement room and is ruined for life. In *The Living Room* (1953) we find the eccentric shutting up of rooms in the Browne household to be the symbol of their shutting out of life, so that when 'Life' suddenly breaks in upon them their only *living* room has become the night

nursery, the present seeking to hide itself in the past. Both of these uses are illustrative of the general remark in *The Power and the Glory* (1940) that 'there is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in'. In *The Basement Room* the door opened too early; in *The Living Room* futile attempts were made to lock the door and keep the future out.

An obvious extension of this presentment of a vision of life in vividly imagined spatial terms, is the recurrent imagistic theme of geographical exploration. Both the travel books, *Journey without Maps* (1935) and *The Lawless Roads* (1939), and from which novels emerged, carry with them the double theme of exploration of self and country. The novels are studded with this kind of imagery, and one or two examples, chosen virtually at random, will have to serve as reminders. 'He felt as though he was in a strange country without maps trying to get his position by the stars' (*The Ministry of Fear*); in *Brighton Rock*, Ida Arnold is interviewing Pinkie and Rose: 'It was as if she were in a strange country . . . she hadn't even got a phrase-book. She was as far from either of them as she was from Hell—or Heaven. Good and evil lived in the same country, spoke the same language, feeling the same completion touching hands beside the iron bedstead.' In *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie after betraying Louise 'stood very still like a spy in foreign territory, indeed he was in foreign territory now'. Apart from the dramatic stance conveyed by these images, there emerges a sense of strangeness, modulating into fear, and in the last quotation into conflict. The most explicit statement of life as conflict occurs in *The Lawless Roads*. 'The world is all of a piece of course; it is engaged everywhere in the same subterranean struggle, lying like a tiny neutral state with whom no one ever observes their treaties between the two eternities of pain and—God knows the opposite pain, not us. It is a Belgium fought over by friend and enemy alike: there is no peace anywhere where is human life; but there are, I told myself, quiet and active sectors of the line.' It is a climax in a series of images which derive from a common experience—the door which divides, 'the rooms' which define the vision, 'the countries' which emphasize it further and finally the subterranean struggle between them—it is in this image cluster that the obsession, which drives Mr Greene's novels and makes them what they are, is to be found.

It is impossible to label in any systematic way the two countries which war in the novels, but they all contain a fierce antithetical conflict. In *Brighton Rock* it is between those who believe in Right and Wrong and those for whom such a belief is subsumed in Good and Evil, between Ida Arnold on one side and Pinkie and Rose on the other. In *The Power and The Glory* it is between the Priest and the Lieutenant with his vision of 'a vacant universe and a cooling world'. With *The Ministry of Fear* and *The Heart of the Matter*, the conflict is waged within the individual himself, and in Arthur Rowe and Scobie we find the classical struggle between the claims of Justice and Mercy. In *The End of the Affair* and *The Living Room* it becomes outwardly dramatized again; the former, although stylistically very different, shares with *Brighton Rock* the theme that those who belong to God, however unwillingly, cease to speak the language of those who are indifferent to him; the latter in its concern with the difference between piety and sanctity recalls much of *The Power and the Glory*. The ground plan for all these novels is the vision of the world as 'engaged everywhere in the same subterranean struggle'.

The continuity of imagery explains in great measure why we should be made so keenly aware of Graham Greene's novels, as all being part of the same pattern. This predominance of unity of imagery is unusual in the novelist, belonging more properly to the poet. Mr Greene's novels are 'poetic' in their intensity, created, partly, by his vividly dramatic vision of life whereby even the smallest action can be projected against an eternal screen, and partly, by the cinematic structure of his novels, which allows one scene to fade into another with a minimum of transitional explanation. The novels can be called 'poetic', too, in that their meaning does not reside simply in 'the tale told', but rather in the total structure of the piece. Kenneth Allott described this 'structure' as 'a movement, including the larger structural gestures made by the grouping of the characters and incidents . . . and the smaller ones made by related images and various verbal refinements'.

What then are the implications of the foregoing paragraphs — paragraphs which have simply tried to show the nature of Graham Greene's novels, and in what sense they can be called 'poetic'? Before advancing 'conclusions', it is well to keep in mind two points which constantly threaten to distort the most

judicious accounts. The first is that any writer who engages with explicitly Christian themes, *must* find himself dealing in terms of conflict and paradox. So much is inherent in the fact of the Incarnation. 'He who shall lose his life shall save it'; 'to him that hath shall be given and to him that hath not shall be taken away, even that which he hath.' I make this point advisedly, because in an extremely interesting article on Graham Greene, Dr Sewell, after analysing some of Mr Greene's 'obsessions', moved much too easily into the critical position of assuming that paradox in Graham Greene was there for a romantic *frisson*. Unlike the Romantics, with whom she bracketed him, Mr Greene's material imposes its own paradox. The second point to stress is that Graham Greene is an imaginative artist, not an essayist in illustrated apologetics, and consequently to talk of the novels as failing to give 'a balanced representation of the Church's teaching', or more generally, 'a balanced account of life' is to show an ignorance of the nature of the material one is criticizing. Mr Greene's own remark in this connection is obviously valid outside the context of his own work: "The novelist depends preponderantly on his personal experience; the philosopher on correlating the experience of others, and *the novelist's philosophy will always be a little lop-sided*". (*The Lost Childhood*.) How easily this can be forgotten and intrude on the most resolutely literary of enquiries is instanced by Dr Sewell's article in which she implies that in his later work Mr Greene is offering suicide as a passport to sanctity—'in *The Living Room* the sanctification of self slaughter could scarcely be put more plainly'—instead of seeing suicide simply as a dramatic 'device' enabling the novelist to explore certain issues in their most crucial and poignant form.

But having flown over the territory of Graham Greene's novels, and remembered the penalties attached to smuggling in extra-literary interest, doesn't there remain something rather disquieting about the strident contours of the land? We feel that, coming naturally to the kind of territory, inheriting it by disposition, he has tampered with it for stylistic effect. The idea that every human action has an eternal significance has been too readily resorted to, so that the 'conclusions', when they come, do not appear to have been sufficiently *earned*; the total impression tends to evaporate through the details. The tension of the novels seems to arise not so much from the inherently dramatic vision,

as from the style.<sup>2</sup> It is surely the style which conceals, for instance, the ambiguities attendant on the use of the word 'pity' in *The Heart of the Matter*. Constant recourse to the imagery we have noticed earlier has tended to make its use mechanical, an automatic installation of an amplifier for every incident. The result is that the obsession which governs the novels and finds insistent expression through the imagery is beginning to have the effect of a mannerism. Instead of the scope of the obsession widening, it is contracting. In the work our attention is drawn to the author, rather than the vision of life he offers; 'obsession' is becoming less the condition making for achievement, and more the occasion for indulging an idiosyncrasy. If 'the green baize door' is now becoming part of the style, it is perhaps a symptom of a state, so keenly described by another artist who also drew his vital inspiration from childhood and recorded its end with memorable sadness,

The days gone by  
Return upon me almost from the dawn  
Of Life: the hiding places of man's power  
Open; I would approach them, but they close.<sup>3</sup>

For Mr Greene and his readers the question arises whether 'the green baize door'—'a hiding place of power'—is now closing.

<sup>2</sup> The same critical point could be made, on a lower level, of the novels of Raymond Chandler. The films that have been made of Mr Greene's novels show in striking terms how curiously deflated the situations become when seen and not read, in spite of their cinematic structure.

<sup>3</sup> *The Prelude*, xii. 277, 280.