

# The Grace of Graham Greene (1904–1991):

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Despite what may be, at times, well-founded suspicions, no one really knows the interiority of another. We cannot plumb the depths of another's soul or spirituality without necessarily revealing a great deal about ourselves. Without going into the minutiae of hermeneutical theory, it can be said that any reading of anyone's biography or any reading of any text that claims our intellectual struggle is self-involving and self-revealing, and necessarily so. We do not read with empty heads, nor do we read with empty hearts. Our heads and our hearts, our lives and our experience are, quite simply, full of presuppositions, of interpretations, and of preconceived ideas. University of Chicago philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum has written a most interesting book on this subject entitled *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (1995). Without eschewing for a moment the law, scientific rationality, or other forms of public reasoning, Nussbaum considers them insufficient. Our own refusals to see what may be there to be seen must be engaged, perhaps challenging and enlarging our sense of public discourse and reason. "Our society," she writes, "is full of refusals to imagine one another with empathy and compassion, refusals from which none of us is free" (xvii).

Sometimes we come across an author who forces us into an evaluation of our presuppositions, interpretations, and preconceptions, an author who compels us to look with empathy and compassion at our refusals to imagine one another with empathy and compassion. Such an author is Graham Greene. So skilled was he at making us look carefully at our refusals of imagination that he provokes all manner of responses, some quite negative. For example, a relatively recent commentator, John Gray, claims “that many of Greene’s novels can be read as propaganda for a slightly heterodox Catholic view of things, in which even the worst human traits can have value so long as they lead somehow to salvation” (37). Immediately, however, this evaluation invites questions: What constitutes heterodoxy, or orthodoxy? The discrimination between heresy and truth certainly has to do with language and meaning, with propositions and statements, but not entirely. It is indeed possible, for example, for someone to recite the Nicene Creed with conviction about the meaning of the statements found there, but perhaps not to appreciate existentially the awful judgment scene of the Gospel of St. Matthew: “Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?’ And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me’” (25: 37–40). While orthodoxy is necessarily connected to doctrinal statements and language, it is no less necessarily connected to a radically compassionate style of human living which recognizes the Lord Jesus in the other. Again, what are the “worst human traits”? We might point to the seven deadly sins as displaying something of these traits, and rightly so. However, it seems that if not the worst of human traits, certainly a divisive human trait is to be so certain and sure about the rectitude of our positions and ideas that effectively we disconnect and are disconnected from the community of meaning in others. The late British philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin described Greene as “sinister” (in Gray 37–38). If we describe someone as sinister, an explanation of that claim will say much about ourselves, our worldview, our values, and it may be that we are missing something, that something about someone eludes our infallible grasp.

GRAHAM GREENE

Some moments of Greene's life will help us place his writing. He was born in 1904 near London. Very unhappy in Berkhamsted School where his father had become headmaster, Greene attempted suicide several times. His parents made what was then "a remarkably pioneering decision," sending him at age fifteen to see a psychoanalyst, Kenneth Richmond, a therapist who encouraged him to write and introduced him to some literary friends, including the poet Walter de la Mare (Miller 3). Richmond's influence was to endure: Greene kept a dream diary for a long time, and to some extent may be considered a psychological novelist. He moved on to Balliol College, Oxford, in 1922 where, according to himself, he spent most of his time drunk and debt-ridden. But he also gained considerable experience as a writer. Graduating in 1925, Greene got a job as subeditor with the *Nottingham Journal*, and it was while in Nottingham that he met his future wife, Vivien Dayrell-Browning. She had written to him to correct some misunderstandings about Catholicism in his work, and it was her influence that brought him to instruction with Father Trollope at the cathedral in Nottingham and so into the Catholic church in 1926.

After moving from Nottingham to London, Greene married Vivien in 1927 and worked for *The Times*. His novel writing began in earnest now but did not immediately meet with great success, and it was with some trepidation that he left the financial security of *The Times* to set out as a self-employed writer. In addition to writing novels, he became involved in screen-writing and traveling. His experience of the religious purges of 1938 in Mexico provided the foundations for his novel *The Power and the Glory* (1940), which many consider his finest novel. It won the Hawthornden Prize in 1941—but also condemnation by the Vatican. During World War II, he worked for the British Secret Service, MI6, in Sierra Leone, which became the setting for *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), and it is to this novel that I will give my attention. Financially successful and famous by the publication of this novel, Greene lived very comfortably in London, Antibes, and Capri. He had many extramarital affairs and admitted to being both a bad husband and an

unreliable lover. Though he and Vivien separated in 1948, they never divorced. Toward the end of his life, Greene lived in Vevey, Switzerland, along with his companion, Yvonne Cloetta, and he died there on April 3, 1991. His was a very complicated human journey.

Novels are important in theological reflection. American theologian Robert P. Scharlemann reflects that just as “[s]acred music can let grace be heard, even when words have become too corroded or distorted to do so, [t]his is parallel to a phenomenon widely recognized today, namely, that many people learn more of the substance of theology indirectly by way of novels than directly by way of theological treatises” (160). Whatever one thinks of the corrosion or distortion of human words—and there is plenty of direct and personal human evidence of it—people do learn a great deal of theology, consciously or unconsciously, through the reading of novels, and indeed, through their adaptation in movies. Greene was both novelist and screen-writer, and he wanted himself to be understood as a novelist who happened to be a Catholic, rather than as a Catholic novelist. Whatever this might mean, and it is debated, what cannot be denied is the “iconology of Catholicism” throughout his work (Miller 12). In his portrayals of religion (Catholicism in particular) as a central influence in the lives of his characters, the icons are everywhere.

#### THE HEART OF THE MATTER

*The Heart of the Matter* occupies several months in the life of Major Henry Scobie. Scobie is a complicated man and arguably reflects something of Graham Greene’s own complexity. After fifteen years of colonial service in Sierra Leone, Scobie is, for all practical purposes, broken by the circumstances of his life. The Second World War is on, and his posting is in a relatively insignificant British colony. At forty-nine, he is the assistant commissioner of police. His only child is dead, and he is unable to communicate with his wife, Louise, whom he no longer loves. She has become somewhat of a neurotic after the death of their child, and Scobie feels for her something akin to pity and responsibility. He overhears her referred to as “literary Louise,” because of her interest in

poetry and fiction, and is offended by the remark. An acquaintance says of the Scobies' marriage and in reference to a rumor of the major's infidelity, "Perhaps if I had a wife like that, I'd sleep with niggers too" (6). In actual fact, there is no basis for Scobie's infidelity other than some degree of openness to the natives on his part, an openness not widely shared in colonial circles. There are additional difficulties. The Scobies have been slighted: Scobie has been passed over for promotion, and Louise is not pleased. Her displeasure has been aptly summarized by David Lodge: "In the small, spitefully intimate colonial society, Louise feels the slight keenly, and vents her spleen on the long-suffering Scobie" (28). She would like to go to South Africa for a vacation, to escape her frustration, but there is a problem with money. Scobie approaches his local bank manager for a loan but is turned down, which leads him to dealing with a dishonest Syrian trader, Yusef. At the end of Book One, Scobie has obtained the money he needs from Yusef, and so Louise is off for her vacation.

At the beginning of Book Two, Scobie is receiving survivors from a torpedoed ship and visits the hospital where the survivors are recovering. He gives comfort to a dying child in her last moments by making the shadow of a rabbit's head on the wall with his hands. Scobie even prays for the little girl: "Father . . . give her peace. Take away my peace for ever, but give her peace." The dying child calls him, "Father," thinking Scobie to be her dead father. He remains with the child until she dies: "Yes, dear. Don't speak. I'm here" (108). He also meets in the hospital Helen Rolt, a nineteen-year-old woman now a widow after only one month of marriage—her husband had died in the open boat in which she survived. Scobie helps Helen, who becomes his friend and lover. After a quarrel with Helen, Scobie writes a letter to her affirming his love, a letter of extraordinary significance in the novel. However, this letter is intercepted by a servant of the unscrupulous Yusef and is used to blackmail Scobie into diamond smuggling. Scobie wrote, "*I love you more than myself, more than my wife. . . . I want more than anything in the world to make you happy*" (159). One critic comments on the unreceived letter as follows: "The letter to Helen is the high water mark of the novel's action. . . . It commits [Scobie] just as inexorably to Helen as

he is already to his wife by the marriage bond. . . . What began as a vague sense of responsibility is now weighted with a nuance, even a sacramental dignity. . . . The rest of the action is but an elaboration of this one tragic decision" (Kurismmootil 116-17).

Book Three contains the catastrophe. When Louise returns from her South African vacation, she is resigned to Scobie's failure to achieve promotion but now sees it as her mission in life to be the custodian of his religious duties and observance. She wants him to receive Holy Communion with her, although Scobie, as a Catholic, should not take the Sacrament without first receiving forgiveness in confession and doing penance for his adultery. His confessor, Father Rank, refuses absolution because there is no firm purpose of amendment on the part of Scobie, who refuses to give up Helen. Albeit a faithful adulterer, he needs, for his own sake, to keep up appearances as faithful husband and thus approaches the altar:

Father Rank came down the steps from the altar bearing the Host. The saliva had dried in Scobie's mouth: it was as though his veins had dried. He couldn't look up; he saw only the priest's skirt like the skirt of the medieval warhorse bearing down upon him: the flapping of feet: the charge of God. If only the archers would let fly from ambush, and for a moment he dreamed that the priest's steps had indeed faltered: perhaps after all something may yet happen before he reaches me: some incredible interposition. . . . But with open mouth (the time had come) he made one last attempt at prayer: "O God, I offer up my damnation to you. Take it. Use it for them," and was aware of the pale papery taste of an eternal sentence on the tongue. (200)

In his own eyes Scobie is damning himself, but in order to defend two women he judges to be helpless without him. In a subsequent conversation with Helen, when he tells her that he has condemned himself to Hell in receiving the Eucharist unworthily, she accuses him of having done so not out of love for her but because he was afraid that Louise would find out about their affair. Scobie responds: "Love for both of

you. If it were just for her, there'd be an easy straight way.' He put his hands over his eyes, feeling hysteria beginning to mount again. He said, 'I can't bear to see suffering, and I cause it all the time. I want to get out, get out'" (206).

Other factors contribute to this nadir in Scobie's fortunes. As if to exacerbate his moral and spiritual malaise and confirm his own self-condemnation, Scobie (as he is about to deliver contraband diamonds) foolishly distrusts his loyal servant, Ali. In a drunken state he shares with Yusef his doubts about Ali's trustworthiness, doubts utterly without any foundation in fact. Yusef assures Scobie that he will take care of Ali, which he does by having the man murdered. When Scobie finds Ali's body, it reminds him of "a broken piece of the rosary . . . a couple of black beads and the image of God coiled at the end of it. Oh God, he thought, I've killed you: you've served me all these years and I've killed you at the end of them. God lay there under the petrol drums . . ." (220). At this point there is no more hope left in Scobie's sad life. For the sake of Louise he plans a suicide that will look like natural death. He pretends to have angina, stockpiles the regular doses of medicine, and prepares to overdose. Shortly before doing so, however, he learns that the job for which he had been passed over, that is, commissioner of police, will now be his. As he is being told that he is the man for the job, Scobie thinks,

so all this need not have happened. If Louise had stayed I should never have loved Helen, I would never have been blackmailed by Yusef, never have committed that act of despair. I would have been myself still . . . . But, of course, he told himself, it's only because I have done these things that success comes. I am of the devil's party. He looks after his own in this world. I shall go now from damned success to damned success, he thought with disgust. (202)

But for Scobie success comes too late, and he takes the overdose. Greene then clothes the man's final anguish in mystery: "He said aloud, 'Dear God, I love . . . ' but the effort was too great and he did

not feel his body when it struck the floor or hear the small tinkle of the medal as it span like a coin under the ice-box—the saint whose name nobody could remember” (236). Who is it Scobie loves? We can make a case for Louise, for Helen, for Ali. We can make a case for God. Personally, I think a case can be made for loving the Love that God is and for others through and with and in that God, not outside God. It may be objected that I am reading Scobie’s last words through my own experience, but is there some other, more authentic way?

Louise finally goes to see Father Rank. She is hurt and wounded, and in need of deep healing. She needs to speak to him about her husband, his suicide, and his adultery. She tells Rank that Scobie was “a bad Catholic.” The priest responds: “That’s the silliest phrase in common use” (241). She affirms that there is no point whatsoever in praying for her suicide husband, because suicide puts one beyond the pale of God’s mercy and love, that such prayer is an absolute waste of time. Rank replies: “For goodness’ sake, Mrs. Scobie, don’t imagine you—or I—know a thing about God’s mercy.” “The Church says . . . ,” she interrupts. “I know the Church says,” Rank responds. “The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn’t know what goes on in a single human heart” (241–42).

#### THE GRACE OF GRAHAM GREENE

David Lodge, a Catholic novelist as well as Greene scholar, makes the following insightful statement about the role of Catholicism in Greene’s work: “Belonging by language and nationality to a tradition in the novel based essentially on the values of secularized Protestantism, Greene has adopted the alien dogmatic system of Roman Catholicism, and put it at the very center of his mature work” (4). Lodge is undoubtedly correct, but, when it comes to *The Heart of the Matter* and to the person of Scobie, there has emerged among the critics no real consensus about the meaning of the novel’s Catholicism (Kurismmootil 122). To demonstrate this, consider two recent commentaries, both published in 2002: one by Lisa Crumley Bierman, a literary critic, and the other by Paul J. Wadell, a theologian.

Bierman sees Scobie as having “tailored and customized his adopted religion to fit into his own generally skewed view of the world,” as having his own “invented version of Catholicism” (65).<sup>1</sup> The meaning of the verbs “tailor,” “customize,” and “invent” is curious. Can anyone be entirely free of these actions? As each of us attempts to be faithful to Christ, we incarnate in the precious and fleeting moments of our own lives those aspects of the Christ-vision we judge to be most important. We necessarily tailor, customize, and, to some degree, invent. This attempted, ongoing, daily incarnation is the best we can do. We struggle to make the Christ-vision our own, and the agony marks the entire course of our lives. Bierman sees Scobie placing himself on the same level as God, and thus removing all possibility of hope for himself, instituting a world that is devoid of compassionate love, peace, and meaning (68). While she shows real insight in the interplay of characters—Scobie, Louise, Helen—she judges that “the portrait painted of the pitying Scobie is more pathetic than sympathetic” (73). The strength of Bierman’s analysis is to emphasize our human freedom, and how we are responsible for our actions and for their consequences. But freedom is always contextualized in this person or that, is always marked by limitations, and carries the impress of a particular culture, family, and personal history. Bierman’s interpretation leaves no room for the pervasive ambiguity of human living, and is thus much too harsh.

Theologian Wadell writes of Graham Greene: “Who of us understands our own hearts? Why are we so good at self-sabotage? Why do we consistently fall short of the love and goodness for which we are made? Why do we sometimes stumble more than we soar? Why do we know more scoundrels than saints? . . . [Graham Greene is] a master at depicting the depths of human brokenness and the ease with which we stray”(41). Wadell recognizes our human freedom, and the false choices we make as moral agents. But while there is no retreat from our sinfulness in his view, there is room for ambiguity, for fragility; failure is not necessarily final. Have I set up the contrast between Bier-

<sup>1</sup>A similar reading of Greene and of Scobie may be found in theologian

man's and Wadell's readings of Scobie so as to favor Wadell over Bierman? Yes! The reading of a novel, watching a movie, engaging with a poem or play is a process in which conversation—courteous but vigorous listening and responding—is ongoing. We leave the conversation of the novel with a definite view, a view that yields what I would call *santitas*, that is sanity, health, a sense of wholeness and completeness, and yet a virtual rather than absolute sense of such wholeness and completeness. Virtual because, if we are not open to the self-correcting process of learning that is at the heart of genuine conversation, we are locked into a destructive narcissism.

The journey of Scobie is the journey of everyone. There can be no denial that the journey reveals human pettiness and sinfulness. But does this reserve the label “sinister” that Berlin uses to describe Greene? Probably not. It seems, rather, to be Christian realism and self-knowledge. According to Wadell, “All is not well with us. Contradictions flourish in our lives. We are well aware of our patterns of destructiveness, but knowing them does not stop us from embracing them . . . . Nothing in us is quite as it should be and we know this every time we hurt the ones we most want to love and every time we allow our best self to be lost” (44). The other side of this coin of contradictions is that “a God who is love does not want anyone to be lost” (42). God and, therefore, grace, God's presence in our lives, is always ahead of us, more intimate to us than we are to ourselves, and Graham Greene stands for the basic conviction that we cannot eliminate the reality of this gracious God, even when we turn from the light. We may turn from the light but the light never turns from us. There is always hope. Wadell concludes: “In the end, Greene insists, everyone is saved not by her or his goodness or virtue, but by a God who never gives up on us and a God whose love refuses to let us be lost” (52).

The grace of Graham Greene lies in recognizing and struggling with the ambiguities of individual lives rather than life in general, even as we strive to remain faithful to God. The grace of Graham Greene lies in accepting our complexity, our fragility, our permeative sense of incompleteness, and in not giving up. The grace of Graham Greene lies in glimpsing, albeit occasionally and partially, that our

God is “the Love that will not let us go” (United #480).

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