

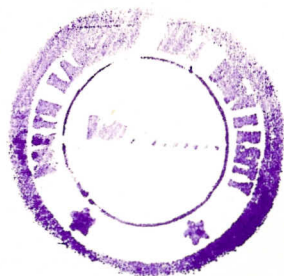
GRAHAM GREENE - THE NOVELIST

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Chapter One

BACKGROUND, CASUALLY

England at the turn of the century was a scene of complex ironies. Such thought and sensibility as she had inherited from an earlier age conflicted with her self-image, and the more recent events did not help improve her confidence. The Boer War and its bloody revelations still rankled in the memory. The wild reprisals on a scantily armed people reflected no honour to a great nation. What good was winning a war at such cost, with such loss of face? Many an Englishman saw the barbarity as a blot not only on his sense of honour, but on the civilization of which he had posed as the champion. With Queen Victoria's passing away in January 1901, England lost what had been to her for above half a century a symbol of permanence and security. The uncertainty and the loss of direction were all too palpable to be missed. Yet it was not a mere question of near events and recent traditions. The doubts struck deeper and concerned what it really meant to be a Briton.

The 'eighties and the 'nineties were a period of enhanced prosperity for England. It was an era of daring new ideas and liberal thought, of social and political reforms. But the many poor houses, the sprawling urban slums, and the lot of the deprived and "the submerged" in their thousands, of farm labourers and factory hands, painted a less flattering picture altogether. British society was not very fair to the young either. While in matters of sex and ethics puritan ideals prevailed, in practice concessions to human weakness were all too frequent. All this was indicative of a state of ambiguity, of moral confusion--an apt climate for prophecy. Poet and philosopher made common cause with the reformer to try and explore what was amiss and set aright whatever might be rectified. Particularly eloquent in their prophetic utterings were T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden and Graham Greene.

Urbanity, they now found, was a poor substitute for an authentic mode of being. Nor might science or knowledge take the place of true insight. England was still struggling to catch up with knowledge and its widening horizons. Darwin's theories appealed to many especially among the young and the intellectuals. Indeed, his vision of man free of superstition and taboo was something to dizzy. The advances in science promised a future of the utmost comfort: there would be no want but what the newly grown technology

could attend to. This was the very picture of bliss. And yet neither the Victorians nor their successors were any happier; on the contrary. The more thoughtful among them were stuck with a new dilemma. They had to redeem the truth of faith from the clutches of science. For science posed a challenge to religion, and it had to be met honourably. It resulted in much heart-probing concerning life, its meaning and ultimate ends. There was uncertainty and a sense of angst, which not even the most brilliant could quite cope with. Tennyson, Hardy and Matthew Arnold had all been victims of this strange consequence. Anxiety fogged the mind: left unchecked, it would clog up the very sources of human vitality. Tennyson spoke for his own generation and the next when he questioned the "forward countenance" of knowledge that "leaps into the future chance":

Half-grown as yet, a child, and vain--
She cannot fight the fear of death.
What is she, cut from love and faith,
But some wild Pallas from the brain
Of demons?¹

To that poser no answer was adequate. It was not that there was no beauty in knowledge. Nor did anyone deny the commendable role science played in bettering man's condition. Still, the need for restraint was widely felt. Lest "cut from love and faith" science should transform itself into a demonic force, there was a call to redefine faith and its proper rights in the light of the new knowledge.

1. Alfred Lord Tennyson, In Memoriam.

R.A.Scott-James has described the early decades of the present century as an "age of unease and restlessness."² "Here anarchy is loosed upon the world," said Yeats of the twenties.³ Stephen Spender complained of forced vigils:⁴

We cannot sleep. At night we watch
A speaking clearness through cloudy paranoia.

The whole nation shared the angoisse; and for being shared, it was the more difficult to define. Fear was writ large on every human face one met in the subway and on the street. No individual escaped it: no fact of life was immune to it. Yet all this was only symptomatic of that slide down to catastrophe of which the World War was the culmination.

To the English, and to the West generally, the First World War was like a suicide note: it presaged an even worse fate. It challenged western man; and his culture, with its so-called achievements, its manifold pretensions, was shown up as an empty word. It held a mirror up to him, and the face it reflected was gory, the image of a mangled self.

Or perhaps⁵

2. R.A. Scott-James, Fifty Years of English Literature: 1900-1950. 2nd ed. (London, Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., 1960) p.47.

3. W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," in Norman Jefferes, ed., W.B. Yeats: Selected Poetry (London, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1962), p.99.

4. Stephen Spender, cited in R.A.Scott-James, op. cit., pp.212-13

5. T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," in Selected Poems (London, Faber and Faber Ltd., 1961). P. 51.

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket
no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

The familiarly Arthurian landscape was humbling to one's pride. One saw vast stretches of untilled land, parched and blown with dust. It appeared as though the fog of some divine curse brooded overhead. There hid a menace in every sound and motion. One even sensed fear "in a handful of dust."⁶ But anxiety is also a great stimulant. It urged the modern knights out on the weary trail, questing for the Holy Grail of truth and vitality.

They set out in every direction. D.H. Lawrence, among the loudest of modern prophets, stopped by, a short way from the start, to harken to the siren song of the libido. He thought that in sex were immured the seeds of vitality; but disillusion awaited him round the corner, and in the evening of his life he would admit to having failed. Auden and Stephen Spender, among others, took a different route. Not psychology, it was Marx and the economics of social change that intrigued them. In the 'twenties many were in fact dazzled by the Russian experiment. Many more marvelled at the changes socialism claimed to have brought about. The Russians, it appeared, had blazed a path: couldn't the rest of the world at least follow the lead? The suggestion had an appeal, parti-

6. T.S. Eliot, ibid.

cularly for the idealist. Subsequent events would however prove that reports from Russia were less fact than propaganda.

Among the knights there were some who sought the Grail at the portals of religion: Chesterton, Ronald Knox, T.S. Eliot, Belloc and Evelyn Waugh. Eliot became an Anglican; but the rest embraced the Catholic faith. Of a wintry afternoon in January 1926 there knelt in a deserted corner of a dark little church a young man of great promise. Graham Greene had come for his baptism--an event which was to have such startling consequences not solely for himself but for several decades of English fiction.

When Greene had his first book brought out in 1929, he was barely 25. The novel, titled The Man Within, was quite a success, enough to make him want to take up fiction as a career. The Human Factor (1978), was his twenty-second novel. His books include collections of poems and short stories, travelogues, plays, reviews and essays in criticism; he has also to his credit two volumes of autobiography. They would add up to-date to some fifty volumes ranging the whole gamut of literary experience. The diversity and magnitude of it all is somewhat staggering. Insatiable in his creative effort, he has a sense of vocation, an adventurous straining over fresh vistas, over worlds yet unconquered. Perhaps it was the sheer challenge of the

new genre that drew him to the stage and then on to the cinema. The screen he found particularly congenial, just the right medium for his effects. Besides writing some remarkably good screenplays, he has had the rare satisfaction of seeing most of his novels, and several short stories, made into films.

Greene has said that "the creative writer perceives his world once and for all in his childhood and adolescence." His entire career, then on "is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share."⁷ And there was about Greene's own childhood a certain painful ambiguity. Born in 1904, he spent much of his childhood about the school-yard, his father then being a senior master in a Berkhamstead public school. The elder Greene, no doubt, was a cultivated, tolerant man--in A Sort of Life Greene recalls his poetry recitals with great affection--yet, the young Graham's early memories are crammed with the unpleasant. His very earliest recollections are of violent incidents:⁸

The first thing I can remember at all was a dead dog at the bottom of my pram; it had been run over at a country cross-roads... and the nurse put it at the bottom of the pram and pushed me home.

7. Of Martin Shuttleworth and Simon Raven, "The Art of Fiction: Graham Greene," Samuel Hynes (ed.), Graham Greene, p. 2154.

8. Graham Greene, Journey Without Maps (London, Heinemann, 1950), p.31.

"There was no emotion attached to the sight," he reports. "It was just a fact." Even in those early days he had the gift of "an admirable objectivity."

At about this time Greene also witnessed an attempted suicide. The man had rushed out of his cottage in a mad rage. "He looked angry about something: he was going to cut his throat with a knife if he could get away from his neighbours, 'having no hope and without God in the world.'"⁹ Here were the first outlines of his dark landscape which later years would fill in: the suburban youth with hair smarmed and scented scouting around the dusky lanes for parlourmaids, the retired colonel with turned up whiskers leering at boys of a certain age. He read reports in the papers of an adolescent couple (the girl pregnant) found headless on a railway line. Experience would enlarge on the design, but the primary sketch was there--or was it the melody?--etched on the magnetic tape of childhood memory. The scenes he did not create through phantasy; they belonged to the world of common sense and proper behaviour, the adult world.

It is a dictum of psychiatry that a "man's fate, his nobility and all his degradation"¹⁰ is moulded by

9. Graham Greene, The Lawless Roads (Penguin, 1971), p.15

10. Eric Berne, What Do You Say After You Say "Hello"? (Bantam Books, 1973), p.53

decisions he would have made by the age of five. Experience only elaborates on a script settled already in childhood. In the words of Eric Berne, a psychiatrist of international fame:¹¹

The child has a picture of the world which is quite different from the way it appears to his parents. It is a fairy-tale world, full of monsters and magic, and it persists all through his life and forms the archaic background to his script.

Perceptions become experience only when put into a proper frame. The child gathers his awareness of the great outside into a frame of the simplest dimensions: and its value for him is for the most part emotive. Life on this level of fantasy is lived with the utmost intensity. The child is particularly alert to the violent and the destructive, he is thrilled by them; they conform to the primary categories of his experience. He has trained himself to live dangerously. He is not surprised by the clash of steel or the roar of cannons. And he has always known how the battle lines are drawn: that in a struggle between Good and Evil, between Caliban and Ariel, it is always the wicked Caliban who must triumph in the end. He has seen the sights, heard the bugle cry; he can discount a good deal of the adult claims for goodness: he has known better. For, having wandered through to the other side of day, he was met by no angel

11. Ibid., pp.172-73.

choir whispering greetings to his weary heart. They were crafty hands that watched the night. Monstrous shapes lay waiting for the unwary. The very darkness snarled at the innocent intruder. Not angels but Sykes and Fagins ruled the dark.

His adolescence confirmed Greene's early perceptions. In The Lawless Roads he tells of the sort of anxieties that kept plaguing him. The "school chatter and the disciplinary bell" only added to the tension. "The great Victorian buildings"¹² were a constant reminder to him of cruelty, hate and boredom. Thinly divided from the school by a green baize door was home, and by the home the mournful solitude of the croquet lawn, "the small countryside" into which Greene risked an occasional foray. But there was no lasting peace in it either. For he could never forget that danger crouched across the door. The baize door was his symbol of the 'borderland' which would be his proper mental territory. The door stood for divided loyalties, for emotional vacillation, and a tortured mind. The "Victorian buildings of garish brick" represented a world-view, even a philosophy: they spoke for the diseased prosperity of a technologized society. For Greene, both the skyscraper and the slum were equally symbols of evil. He recognized in them a

12. Graham Greene, The Lawless Roads, pp. 13-14.

great danger to man's humanity: they constrained the spirit, and stifled the creative urge. The "chromium world,"¹³ built on the debris of a nature violated and defiled, was a cage and not a home to live in.

On the other side of the door, in "the small countryside where the fruit trees grew and the rabbits munched,"¹⁴ nature was quiescent, fertile and in harmony, and one could rest with a measure of freedom.¹⁵

One escaped surreptitiously for an hour at a time [to hear] the rabbit restlessly cropping near the croquet hoops. It was an hour of release--and also an hour of prayer. One became aware of God with an intensity--time hung suspended--music lay on the air; anything might happen before it became necessary to join the crowd across the border.

We already have here the strains of melodrama which Greene would work into his narrative scheme. "Across the border" meant

the pitchpine partitions of dormitories where everybody was never quiet at the same time, lavatories without locks,... walks in pairs up the suburban roads; no solitude, at any time.

The constraint was just too much for his taste, and young Graham fled it.

13. Graham Greene, Journey Without Maps, passim

14. Graham Greene, The Lawless Roads, pp.13-14.

15. Ibid.

Greene could not have realized at this time that the lack of solitude was as much a private mental condition as it was objective. After all in every age there have been men who have triumphed over every sort of violence, on the body and on the spirit. Greene's first thought was of flight. On being successfully prevented in his several attempts to run away from home, he took to playing risky games with his life. At the age of 16, he was playing Russian roulette, a somewhat dangerous game, although he stood a five to one chance in favour of life. It is unlikely that death charmed him: but the thrill of the ultimate risk surely appealed to his imagination. Eventually he was discovered in his mad venture and that landed him with a psychoanalyst.

Fortunately for Greene, the analyst was a man of keen perceptions and of deep human sympathies. His six months of analysis Greene recalls as being of the happiest in his life. They would have far-reaching consequences not only for his life, but also for his career as a novelist. The analysis trained him in habits of introspection. He was taught how to get in touch with his own emotions, how to enter in and stay with them. Henceforward he may be comfortable with the desires and motivations that stir trembling in the dark recesses of the soul. He learnt to direct his feelings in a manner that was consonant with the rhythms of his total being.

He saw that boredom was not always to be fled, that it may be but one of the shifting moods of the soul, a primary emotion:¹⁶

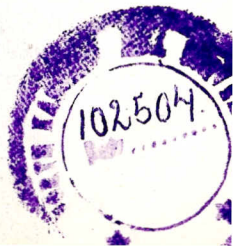
that agonizing (sense) of 'apartness' which comes before one had learnt the fatal trick of transferring emotion, of flashing back enchantingly all day long one's own image, a period when other people were...distinct from oneself....

Surely childhood boredom was authentic, much as ecstasy. It was an elemental experience to counterpoint the pure joy of infancy; and one had best come to terms with it. Besides, flight could never be final. Release came with acceptance through a deeper awareness: and not by ignoring what appeared painful. The analysis made him want to "relearn the way to live without transference, with a lost objectivity."¹⁷

The analysis calmed his nerves but could not erase those early impressions he had of life. Indeed, he had perceived his "world once and for all in his childhood and adolescence," and no amount of analysing could reverse or wipe off those primeval memories. Nothing he might learn or do in future may cancel their influence on his life. The certain restlessness would remain, ingrained as it were in his personality. Neither change nor novelty, not the vast continental spaces--between

16. Graham Greene, Journey Without Maps, p.193

17. Ibid.



Liberia and Tabasco, Congo, Haiti and Vietnam--would cure him of that. He could now appreciate his need for something more lasting to guide and sooth his way. He had need of a Polaris to steer by, particularly when the seas were rough. And only a faith could answer this need.

Greene has recorded that belief came to him even as a boy, but "shapelessly, without a dogma, a presence above a croquet lawn."¹⁸ It was more of an ache, a dream, by which he tried to withstand the pressures of life. It was too much like the self-projections of a tortured soul. One needed "to believe in heaven because one believed in hell, but for a long while it was only hell one could picture with a certain intimacy."¹⁹ In the Anglican church was no solace, because it "could not supply the same intimate symbols for heaven" as it did for the fires of hell. Heaven was somewhere vague, sketched faintly by "a brass eagle, an organ voluntary, 'Lord, Dismiss Us With Thy Blessing,' the quiet croquet lawn where one had no business, the rabbit, and the distant music."²⁰ It was but an echo, the weak rumblings

18. Graham Greene, The Lawless Roads, p. 14.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

of a desire, too inadequate to complete the fierce polarities of primary experience. And so what Greene sought in the Catholic Church, perhaps, was other symbols, ardent and more archetypal, and absolute enough to rely one's life on.

His literary career divides roughly into three periods. The first begins with Stamboul Train and includes such important volumes as It's a Battlefield, England Made Me, and A Gun for Sale. There is acute social awareness in these books: even a Marxist inclination is discernible now and again. The dominant motifs are: boredom, a sense of betrayal, and an almost hopeless bid for a just ordering of society. There is a note of earnest pleading, and the tone is of desperate urgency. At a later stage Greene would return to these themes, though on a lower key. The Quiet American may be thought to inaugurate this latter phase. The Comedians, The Honorary Consul and The Human Factor are other significant works belonging to the third period. The tone grows steadily mellow with each number until, in the last mentioned, there is nothing shrill, not even a note of criticism. There is a deep acceptance of life, and a tolerance of those maladies that cannot be overcome. These are the fruits of ripe age which, knowing all, forgives all.

Greene's signal achievement, however, are the novels of the middle phase. He was a young man of thirty-four when the first of these, Brighton Rock, came out. The fourth, and the last in the series, The End of the Affair, was brought out in 1951, his fortyseventh year. Other works of this second phase, and among Greene's best, are The Power and the Glory and The Heart of the Matter. Each of them deals with matters of great moment and are important artistic creations. After a ten-year lapse, A Burnt-Out Case added as it were^a postscript to this most important period. All five books are discussed in detail further on. Introducing The Confidential Agent the author had confessed to "a certain vague ambition to create something legendary out of a contemporary thriller." How successfully his novels have realized his ambition is for us to assess. But before we embark on our task of analysis and evaluation, it is well to trace briefly the stages of Greene's artistic growth.