Catholicism

*Graham Greene’s Pattern in the Carpet*

There does exist a pattern in my carpet constituted by Catholicism, but one has to stand back in order to make it out.

—Graham Greene

In a book-length interview with Marie-Françoise Allain published late in Graham Greene’s life, Greene described the imaginative role that Catholicism played in his long writing career by making the allusion cited above to his literary hero, Henry James. It is a fitting metaphor for the manner in which Catholicism’s *difference* is often inscribed in many of Greene’s characters, plots, and themes. From his publication of poems in 1925 to his posthumously published dream diary in 1992, Greene’s 67 years of writing included over 25 novels, 2 collections of short stories, 2 travel books, 7 plays, 2 biographies, 2 autobiographies, film scripts and film criticism, and countless literary and journalistic essays. If Catholicism is not the very fabric of many of these texts, it is always a thread that helps to bind his literary preoccupations into a recognizable pattern.

Much has been written about Greene’s relationship to his Catholic faith and its privileged place within his texts, especially in the criticism prevalent during the heyday of the Catholic literary revival of the first half of the twentieth century. Greene’s cycle of novels, beginning with *Brighton Rock* in 1938 and concluding with *The End of the Affair* in 1951, stands as the gold standard of what is often referred to as the “Catholic novel” in English literature. The common
ary surrounding these novels exemplifies a high level of interdisciplinary engagement between both religious and literary scholars. Part of the fascination of both readers and critics alike is the way in which Greene’s religious imagination challenged the narrow or straightforward assessment of any orthodox Catholic metaphysical or hermeneutical claim embodied in his texts. Greene’s unorthodox treatment of orthodox ideas raised ambiguities and made it difficult to definitively clarify his attitude. Because of this critical fixation with religious un/orthodoxy in so much criticism of Greene, he has been labeled at various times a Manichean, Jansenist, Pelagian, Quietist, and existentialist. As much as Greene denied this in himself, the extreme situations of his characters and plots lend weight to such accusations of heresy being imposed upon him and upon his characters. In truth, Greene’s paradoxical literary expression of Catholic faith is never offered as a comforting way out of the disorienting realities of modernity. Rather, Catholicism serves to raise the standards, heighten the awareness of the fallen sense of the world, and challenge characters to respond to extreme situations in full knowledge of what is at stake. Religion—and Catholicism in particular—inevitably becomes part of Greene’s dark and seedy terrain, an imaginative ground from which Greene’s creativity draws inspiration. Yet determining just how important that religious terrain is, and how “Catholic” it is, has been a source of contention throughout the development of Greene criticism.

This chapter thus attempts two separate but related investigations: first, a summary assessment and critique of the “Catholic” genre in twentieth-century literature and Greene’s place in this literary heritage; and second, an appraisal of Greene’s own relationship to Catholicism as it is expressed in interviews, essays, and biographical details. The first part of this investigation will help expand the historically conservative context that presently defines the Catholic novel. By reformulating the relationship of theology and literature in broader terms, a more nuanced understanding of Graham Greene’s Catholic imagination arises, one that is historically situated in the tumult of the Catholic Church’s own development after the Second Vatican Council. The second part of this investigation gives evidence to Greene’s ongoing dialogue with and immersion in the theological development of Catholicism throughout his life, challenging any reduction of the imaginative role that religion plays in the creation of his texts, especially in static and fixed notions of Christian and, specifically, Catholic orthodoxy. Both of these investigations offer evidence for a central premise of the overall argument of this book: that Catholicism is more textured and complicated than the usual schematic framework often exhibited both in studies of the Catholic novel and in Greene studies in particular. If such is the case, then it is possible to explore a Catholic imagination that engages Greene throughout his long writing career.

The “Religion in Literature” Debate

After the death of Henry James a disaster overtook the English novel . . . for with [his] death the religious sense was lost to the English novel, and with the religious sense went the sense of importance of the human act. It was as if the world of fiction had lost a dimension: the characters of such distinguished writers as Mrs. Virginia Woolf and Mr. E. M. Forster wandered like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper thin.4

Any discussion of Graham Greene forces the critic to come to terms with the role that the religious imagination plays in his literary creation. In countless literary articles and interviews of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, he bemoaned the loss of the “religious sense” in the English novel; for Greene, that sense became intimately tied to Catholicism, a faith tradition that could still evoke a metaphysical understanding of good and evil in the world and within an individual. His articles on writers of the period highlight this point. In his Collected Essays (1969), Greene writes that Conrad “had retained of Catholicism [an] ironic sense of an omniscience and of the final unimportance of life under the watching eyes . . . in scattered phrases you get the memories of a creed working like poetry through the agnostic prose” (140). On Somerset Maugham, he notes that “[Maugham] cannot believe in a God who punishes and he cannot therefore believe in the importance of a human action . . . Rob human beings of their heavenly and their infernal importance, and you rob your characters of their individuality” (154). He notes that in Dickens, “evil appears only as an economic factor, nothing more. Christianity is a woman serving soup to the poor.” Only in James does Greene see an appreciation of the supernatural quality of evil; it is thus helpful to delineate the genealogy of this condition within the English novel in order to understand how both reviewers and literary critics have often classified Greene as the malgré lui of “Catholic” novelist.

It was not until the early nineteenth century that British literary and philosophical writers began to reflect critically on the relationship between literature and religious belief. This dialogue within the English Protestant heritage found its literary expression in such writers as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, George Eliot, and Matthew Arnold, to name just a few. Their
ork describes the historical trajectory of literature in terms of a Deus Abscon-
tus, of religion evermore eclipsed by Enlightenment rationalism, science, and
philosophical idealism. What is left of the "religious sense" in nineteen-
century literature is expressed in either the moral allegories of George Eliot
and Charles Dickens or in the poetic-philosophical displacement of religious
feeling in many of the English romantic poets. The impression that religion
had lost its power within British culture gained force in the Victorian elegies
that mourned the loss of meaning in bourgeois culture and the implicit loss
of religious belief. Eliot's The Waste Land, published in 1922, became the leit-
nomotif of the early twentieth century, expressing the disillusionment, confusion,
and seeming chaos that afflicted the generation of artists still reeling from
World War I. Some writers persisted in offering substitutions for the traditional
role that religion played in literary creativity: H. G. Wells placed his faith in
science and the machine; G. B. Shaw in an optimistic secular humanism; D. H.
Lawrence in the primal instinct of a lost sexual vitality; W. H. Auden, C. Day-
lew, and Stephen Spender in their flirtation with an English socialism that
would counteract the negative effects of an impersonal modern state. Many
intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s turned to orthodox religious belief in the
Anglican Church, most notably T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, and,
later, Auden. Surprisingly, after World War I organized religion had regained
some cultural prestige, a fashionable alternative for many British intellectuals
looking for a cultural edifice that could stand up against the chaos, violence,
and meaninglessness around them. Thus in the early part of the twentieth
century, Christianity, along with its rivals Marxism and psychoanalysis, found
a place at the cultural table of intellectual debate.

The Protestant perspective of these English literary figures matched the
philosophical and theological investigations of such influential Protestant
thinkers as David Friedrich Strauss, Søren Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, and Nor-
drop Frye. These authors, like their literary relations, begin with an initial
supposition: the world of Western civilization is in religious decline. Much of
the impetus of their writing was to "shore up the fragments" of religious
thought against "the ruin" of modernity in order to accomplish the difficult
task of correlating the importance of religion to human existence. This valuable
critical heritage is still a dominant model today for studying the relationship
of literature and religion, effectively placing theology at the service of explicating
literature and assessing the concerns of literary criticism.7 At the risk of
simplification, this model follows the path of Paul Tillich's famous dictum on
the critical correlation of cultural question to theological answer: "Religion is
the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion."8 If religion is to
find a home in contemporary literature, the logic goes, it can no longer be
understood in terms of orthodox systems of belief, religious markers, or theo-
logical nomenclature; rather, religion must be reframed in existential or psy-
chological terms, so that literature has religious value because, at its heart, it
expresses ultimate concern, mystery, or the infinite in human life. It assumes,
in effect, that good literature, as a human artifact, has a latent, unconscious
theological character that manifests itself in the uncertain, the tragic, or what
Tillich called the "demonic" aspect of contemporary life. Though Tillich's on-
totheological perspective is correlated to his conception of existentialism in the
mid-twentieth century, his approach is felt in much of contemporary criticism
that still marks the "religious" attribute in literary works in terms of disruptions,
ruptures, or Derridean notions of difference and absence. The historical
impact of endeavoring to read texts from such a "religious" perspective has
meant that rarely if ever do the imaginative contours of Christian theology
support or impinge upon literary interpretation. Theological questions, when
acknowledged at all, are made to serve as a second-order philosophical lan-
guage for literary studies. Indeed, theological interpretation of literary texts has
been mostly displaced today by various strains of postmodern theory and sec-
ular ideology, making a "theological reading" of someone like Graham Greene
a mere historical footnote in the history of Greene criticism.

The "Catholic" Novel as Literary Genre

Situated within any discussion of the religious dimension in literature is the
rise of the "Catholic novel" in the early twentieth century. The Catholic novel
in Europe originated in the neoromantic and decadent forms of French liter-
ature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a reaction against the
dominant discourse of Enlightenment philosophy and the antireligious doc-
trines of the French Revolution.9 Such writers as Joris-Karl Huysmans, León
Bloy, Charles Péguy, Georges Bernanos, François Mauriac, and Paul Claudel
made the Catholic novel into an accomplished literary form that opposed pos-
itivistic thought and defended the spiritual reality of human life in terms of a
distinctively Catholic ontology and epistemology. These authors drew their poetic
and thematic material from their common Catholic experience and beliefs,
framing and structuring their artistic vision through the lens of Catholic
dogma, symbolism, and religious conversion.10 Thus, the Church's sacra-
mental life; its complex rituals, doctrines, and mystical tradition; and its emphasis
on the primacy of theological aesthetics over rational modes of theological
discourse served to address and critique the reigning ideology of bourgeois,
materialist French society. Catholicism was both a reactionary critique of the
state of religious decline in modernity and also a powerful theological, philosophical, and artistic alternative to this seeming decline.

In terms of theme and plot, the French Catholic novel contained many classic ingredients. David Lodge, in the introduction to François Mauriac’s *The Viper’s Tangle*, succinctly describes these key attributes in the following manner: “the idea of the sinner ‘being at the heart of Christianity’ (Péguy’s phrase), the idea of ‘mystical substitution,’ the implied criticism of materialism, [and] the tireless pursuit of the erring soul by God, the ‘Hound of Heaven’ in Francis Thompson’s famous metaphor.”10 Another basic ingredient that heightened the tension of the genre’s narrative and plot is the conflict between the corrupt flesh and the transcendent spirit, usually devised as sexual tension between male and female protagonists, ascending to a spiritual suffering that finds its reference in Christ’s crucifixion. What is remarkable about these French Catholic authors who typify this genre is the accessibility of their writing to those who do not share a Catholic sensibility.

Paralleling the Catholic revival of France was the very different experience of English Catholicism, a minority tradition in predominantly Protestant England. It was not until the 1840s that Catholicism gained some legitimate status in England. Following from this legal victory and aided by John Henry Newman—a convert from Anglicanism’s own religious revival, the Oxford Movement—a small but effective Catholic revival flourished in England for over one hundred years. From the beginning it was dominated by English converts who shared a vision of the world as fallen, or in Newman’s words, “implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity.” English Catholicism, and especially for those who converted to the faith in the early twentieth century, involved a decidedly intellectual constituency: writers, poets, artists, theologians, and clergy who had found the Anglican dispensation either intellectually untenable or too compromised by political collusion with the state.11 This era’s diversity of Catholic converts and their works—the political and social articles of G. K. Chesterton, the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Edith Sitwell, and the exegetical texts of the priest-scholar Ronald Knox, to name just a few—allowed Catholicism a distinct voice in the intellectual life of England at the time.12

With the novels of Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, the Catholic genre found a popular preeminence in England in the 1930s and 1940s. Waugh’s conversion was anchored in his belief that the essential truths of Catholicism had been dissipated by an English society uprooted from its Catholic birthright. His early satires humorously exposed modern society as a vacuous spectacle adrift from its roots. Beginning with the novel *Brideshead Revisited*, published in 1944, he attempted to use Catholicism not only to frame the issues and crises of modern society but also to offer Catholicism’s vision and doctrine as an antidote to the present crisis in Western, and specifically English, civilization. Waugh’s later books, true to the author’s own religious conversion to Catholicism, portrayed characters searching for the certainty and the triumph of a creedal faith that had been obscured or eclipsed by the mores and values of modern European society. Waugh’s political and social conservatism fit nicely into Protestant categories of what an “English” expression of the Catholic novelist might look like.

Graham Greene, also a convert, shares with Waugh much of the same Catholic concerns and issues in his writing, but in many ways he comes closer than Waugh to dramatizing the themes of the Catholic novel as embodied by his French contemporaries. The classic ingredients elucidated by David Lodge concerning François Mauriac’s Catholic vision—the sinner at the heart of Christianity, mystical substitution, a critique of materialism, and God as the Hound of Heaven—can be found in many of Greene’s most celebrated works. These novels—*Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1947), and *The End of the Affair* (1951)—illustrate Greene’s own absorption in the French Catholic literary revival, of which more will be said in the following chapter. Greene takes Péguy’s famous text “Le pêcheur est au cœur même de chrétienté” as the epigraph of *The Heart of the Matter*, but it could be the epigraph and the theological lens for all of his novels from this period: the spiritual life of the sinner has the privileged status of experiencing “the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.”13 Greene’s novels of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, like those of Waugh, Mauriac, and Bernanos, were constantly discussed in terms of how well or how ambiguous was the correlation of character and plot to the Catholic theological categories of scholastic thought. The dialectical nature of counter-Reformation Catholicism, attempting to stand against both Protestant religious discourse and the materialism and secular ideologies of the modern age, found its literary expression in these Catholic writers of the early part of the century.

Yet there has been a growing consensus by critics in the 1970s and 1980s that the Catholic novel as genre, with its formulaic themes and theological certitudes, has disappeared as Roman Catholicism shed its opposition to serious engagement with the modern world.14 Gene Kellogg notes that the genre “began when the isolation of the world’s Roman Catholic communities started to break down in the nineteenth century, and which tapered off—perhaps ended—when Roman Catholics ‘joined the modern world’ after the Second Vatican Council.”15 More derisively, Albert Sonnenfeld eulogizes the Catholic novel’s demise by maintaining that “Vatican II marked the legitimization and consecration of a host of modernist longings that were both a reflection and a cause of the ‘decline and fall’ of that possibly perverse and reactionary nostalgia.
which made the Catholic Novel possible." The effect of Vatican II, these scholars note, is that Catholic difference, which had such clear and defined contours in opposition to Protestant hegemonies in politics, philosophy, and theology, lost its ability to engage the creative imagination of Catholic writers. These critics interpret the net effect of the Second Vatican Council as the Church's assimilation into modernity, an intellectual appropriation of Catholicism to the philosophical and theological concerns of Enlightenment discourse. The dialectical stance of the Church toward the outside world was so diminished or buried under an ambivalent Christian humanism that the explicit markers of a Catholic culture and orthodox creed were no longer visible.

If Greene was an astute student of the Catholic literary revival of France and a major contributor to its success as a viable genre in England, labeling him in such a constrictive manner proves difficult, for Greene's artistic concerns and his vision of reality transgressed the theological boundary, as well as the historical era, of the Catholic novel. As much as Greene's texts evade such a simple designation, there is a redundancy and uniformity in the criticism from this period, especially in terms of assessing Greene's position in the literary canon. Many Catholic critics of the time championed Greene's work for manifesting their faith in such a popular medium, even as they became obsessed about whether the author and his characters were Pelegran, Manichean, or Gnostic heretics. Even those critics who concurred that Greene's religious themes are paramount in interpreting his novels argued that his creativity as a writer came from a very limited and biased point of view. David Pryce-Jones's 1963 study, which looks almost exclusively at the religious aspect of Greene's texts, reproaches his use of Catholicism as merely a clever tactic on the author's part to superimpose paradoxical situations into his melodramas.\(^{18}\) Still others of the period lamented that so much attention had been given to the Catholic dimension in these novels. John Atkins complains in his 1957 comprehensive study that the constant attention paid to Catholicism and theology obscures the more important literary themes and issues, noting that "Greene's work is valuable as social commentary and much more as individual (including personal) revelation ... the theology is on the surface, planted there rather weightily but it is a surface growth."\(^{19}\) Thus, from the beginning Greene criticism has been polarized by what one makes of the religious sense, a quality that Greene claimed was of utmost importance to the modern novel. The argument continued even after Greene rejected the formal elements of the Catholic novel genre in his works following his famous Catholic cycle. Consequently, the critical community—those both sympathetic and unsympathetic to a religious reading of the novel—by and large assigns to his most famous works the rubric of the Catholic novel, whereas his later works are often classified in political and psychological terms because secular concerns seem to predominate in his themes and plots. Even in the most recent study of Greene's fiction, Cates Baldridge perpetuates this schematization: "His novels of the fifties and beyond are in an undeniable sense 'post-Catholic' and even 'post-Christian'—at least when contrasted with those of the forties."\(^{20}\) This inherent dichotomy exists in much criticism of Greene: his "Catholic" versus his "post-Catholic" novels or the early "religious" versus the later "political" or "secular" ones.\(^{21}\) Trying to place Greene in either camp exposes the problem of the prescriptive understanding of the Catholic novel, which reached its zenith before the Second Vatican Council. And yet an attempt to understand Greene's vision and artistic expression of a Catholic sensibility begs for a different model in which to engage the relationship of literature and theology, one that is not wedded to a conservative and scholastic Catholic context of the Catholic literary revival but a broader, historical context that can still be discerned as Catholic.

Are there ways, then, in which the dialogue between theology and literature might continue so that a more fruitful approach to the developing religious imagination of Greene's work might be perceived?

Theology and Literature: An Imaginative Alternative

A reformulation of the interdisciplinary conversation between theology and literature has taken place, thanks in part to the postmodern concerns of both theology and literary criticism. The theological trajectory can be found in the thought of the theologian David Tracy, who attempts to reinvestigate the correlational and hermeneutical heritage by proposing a "reading" of texts deemed classic—those that have founded or formed a particular culture and/or continually disclose an excess and permanence of meaning. A keen reader in the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur and thus sensitive to the postmodern epistemological dilemma, Tracy holds that all classics, especially religious ones, express both "a radical stability become permanence and radical instability become excess of meaning through ever-changing receptions."\(^{22}\) Any conversation on the reception of such works requires one to explore the text so that the theological "answers" of religion are critically assessed in light of modernity's "questions," at the same time that the cultural "questions" of literature are situated in the light of critically held truth claims of a theological tradition. Furthermore, Tracy claims that the religious dimension in art, especially in literary texts, is not something externally brought to bear on the text but stands as the imaginative ground of the text, as a constructed or deconstructed "horizon" of every cultural artifact. The religious dimension
of any text is not something foreign. In this way Tracy further clarifies Tillich's insight into the relationship between cultural question and religious answer by making the correlation mutually inclusive, more dialogical, more interdependent. Theology is not merely an unchanging apparatus that literary artists can use but also an imaginative milieu that is in constant development within a culture.

Tracy offers three theological paradigms that help interpret the contemporary situation: a paradigm of transcendent manifestation (a metaphysical insight into concrete reality as exemplified in such writers as Mircea Eliade and Karl Rahner), a paradigm of prophetic proclamation (a call to heed the strangeness and otherness of religious faith as exemplified in such writers as Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr), and a paradigm of action/praxis (the political and liberation theologies of resistance and hope). These three Christian responses are imaginatively rendered in either analogical or dialectical language. Analogical language views reality in ordered relationships that express a similarity-in-difference, building on a prime analogate as reference and focus; dialectical language views reality as necessarily in need of radical theological negations, a deconstructive therapy of sorts that exposes fundamental illusions in knowledge and reality. Tracy holds that the dialogical nature of theological reflection is best when analogical and dialectical religious languages engage one another, producing a more constructive interpretation of the situation of contemporary life.23

Tracy's understanding of the analogical and dialectical imagination is most fruitful for the study of literature and theology. He traces the analogical imagination as a Catholic tendency in Christianity and the dialectical imagination as a Protestant one. The two are dialogically related, together offering fuller insight into the complex nature of religious belief and practice in the religious imagination of an artist. Building on Tracy's work, critics have tried to delineate the analogical and dialectical imagination in contemporary culture. Andrew Greeley, to take one example, has popularized Tracy's dense theological insight by offering numerous sociological studies that explicate the Catholic imagination at work through a comparison of statistical evidence about the political and cultural habits and tendencies of American denominations in the United States. Without absolutizing these tendencies, he offers insightful critiques about the "difference" expressed in Catholic artists whose works are in dialogue with a predominantly Protestant cultural heritage.24

Tracy's thesis has brought new attention to the critical work of the late William Lynch, who explored in numerous articles the philosophical and theological contours of the imagination from a distinctly Catholic perspective.25 In books such as Christ and Apollo (1960) and Images of Faith (1973), Lynch attempts to illustrate how theological traditions make a claim on the imagination and its full development. At the same time, he critiqued the imaginative constructs of the literary arts of the twentieth century, pointing out exaggerations and distortions that truncated the religious character of the imagination. Lynch's methodology grants that religious doctrine and dogma—in this case the Christian understanding of the Incarnation, the Trinity, Salvation, and the Fall—help shape the imaginative way in which the work of a cultural artifact is understood and received. Like Tracy, Lynch holds that the imagination is an interpretive act of the whole person, not relegated to a separate intellectual act of signification. Both Lynch and Tracy, then, extend the traditional approach of theological analysis in literature by claiming that literary works can be understood in terms of a theological imagination at play in the text. They allow that religious doctrines, practice, and the dramatic sweep of religious narrative can coalesce into an ideological vision manifested imaginatively in poetic, literary, and dramatic texts.26 They argue that theological considerations are not just applications to the text but also actually inform the text's literary expression.

If theology has reassessed its relationship with literature over the last quarter century, so too has literary criticism placed renewed emphasis on the role of religious and theological concerns in the creation of literary texts. Ironically, the critical assumptions of materialist, postmodernist conversation have begun to investigate the relationship between theological texts and literature. Rejecting the monologic preeminence of Enlightenment reason and the focus on the self as subject of knowledge, many postmodernist thinkers argue that these notions are artificial constructs with little foundation in reality. The Enlightenment and the modernist metanarrative of reason are nothing but the arbitrary connection between words in a text, and the self as subject is nothing but one's social location in a complex and shifting world. Reality is only a network of fluid, amorphous, affective, ambiguous relationships, fusing together notions of subject and object. There is thus a postmodern preoccupation with ambiguity, affectivity, indeterminacy, irrationality, and otherness. Because theology and religious practice have been marginalized by the metanarrative of Enlightenment ideology, some postmodern critics have found this very marginality a worthy study because it serves to indicate a continual irritation of otherness and strangeness into culture and society.27

Paul Giles, whose analysis of American Catholic writers and filmmakers builds on Michel Foucault's interpretation of language as ideological discourse, notes that religion is one among many discursive strategies available to the maker of cultural texts. Giles has fruitfully noted how the Catholic imaginations of artists offer different readings of culture. As a minority position in both England and America, Catholicism becomes an ideological engagement
with Protestantism, mapping out alternative visions and fictions. Religion, it seems, and especially the Catholic aesthetic and the historical heritage of Catholic theology, has its own textuality, its own status as a work of art, full of ruptures and tainted with fluctuating signifiers. As the critic Ellis Hanson aptly puts it: “Catholicism is itself an elaborate paradox. . . . The Church is at once modern and yet medieval, ascetic and yet sumptuous, spiritual and yet sensual, chaste and yet erotic, homophobic and yet homoerotic, suspicious of aestheticism and yet an elaborate work of art.” Thus, at the end of the twentieth century, there is a paradoxical inversion of the Protestant and Catholic positions: whereas historically the dialectical tendency of Protestant ideologies had acted to deconstruct a premodern, pre-Reformation Catholic decadence in culture and society, Catholic ideologies are now being engaged to critique what has devolved into a form of decadent secularism, formed out of the Protestant ideologies that dominate British and American society. Within contemporary circles, both public and academic, there is a critical revival of Catholic discourses—a revival of Thomistic-Aristotelian “virtue ethics” in philosophy, a developed theological aesthetics in theology, a recovery of the importance of liturgy in ritual studies, and a renewed look at Catholic spiritual traditions—that help to expose the assumptions of post-Enlightenment, post-Reformation modernity and offer a Catholic alternative discourse of engagement.

Of course, much of the postmodern option toward the play of ambiguity, irrationality, and rupture assumes the very dichotomy of Enlightenment thinking, between intellect and affect, rational certainty and subjective feeling. Religion and theology are consigned to being one among many artificial, historical constructs, and the truth claims of theology (its practice and doctrines) are upended by the nihilistic nature of much poststructuralist thought. And yet this postmodern “moment” does allow for a reconsideration of religious narrative, symbol, and ritual that helps chart an inherently logical system of thought and belief evidenced in works of literature. This renewed interest in the language of theology and religious doctrine in terms of religious paradox—and not merely as rationalistic contradiction or repressive ideology—places in high relief the role that an analogical imagination plays in holding such beliefs and systems together. Thus, David Tracy’s notion of the analogical/dialectical imagination and the postmodern stresses on religion as “discourse” both widen and renegotiates the relationship between literature and theology, suggesting, implicating, and critiquing possible syntheses that refuse to separate the religious imagination from the literary, which refuse, in effect, to throw out the philosophical and aesthetic heritage of Christianity (and in this case, Catholicism) from the discourse of modern thought. The dialogue implies a perspective in which the tension between the analogical and dialectical lan-


guages of the religious imagination does not work to negate the other and, at the same time, critiques any secular ideology in which intersubjectivity is either exiled into the discipline of theology or reduced to some materialist construct in the discipline of literature.

In terms of the Catholic novel—a categorization of many of Graham Greene’s works—the theoretical assumptions of writers such as Tracy and Lynch encourage critics to understand its historical terrain in a way that extends beyond the boundaries of a too narrowly defined genre. Rather than seeing the Catholic novel as merely a historical phenomenon in which Catholic themes remain a constant, structured, and “orthodox” religious reality in a text, they advocate a more fluid and open-ended designation beyond adherence to any religious catechism or explicitly “Catholic” plots. This more permeable assignment of the Catholic novel into terms that stress the imaginative contours of writing allows critical space in which to see the way in which religious rituals and theological doctrines inform the world of a text. It articulates predispositions in the Catholic imagination, such as the obsession with the effects of the doctrine of the Incarnation on human life, the philosophical and scholastic understanding of personhood and the place of community, the sacramental reality that stresses divine immanence in concrete reality, and the biases and prejudices of gender that pervade the Catholic tradition. Taken together, these tendencies exhibit a way of seeing and valuing reality that is often embodied in the characters, plots, and thematic material of authors who engage Catholicism as both a faith experience and a historical tradition. Catholic difference is maintained but in less antagonist terms.

Furthermore, this emphasis broadens the notion of the Catholic novel by situating its development in relationship to the historical developments in Catholic theology over the last half of the twentieth century. As the Second Vatican Council began to give privilege to and accentuate new paradigms in the Catholic Church’s self-understanding and in its relationship to the modern world, so too there is a marked transformation of the religious imagination of writers engaged in that faith tradition. Graham Greene is just such a writer who profits from broadening the vantage point, for he illustrates the problems and the preoccupations that have formed both the consciousness and the religious imagination of the twentieth century.

The “Novelist Who Happens to Be a Catholic”

Graham Greene was born in 1904 into a prominent English family whose religious affiliation was nominal at best. He both lived and was educated at the
Berkhamsted School, where Greene's father was headmaster, and he finished his education at Balliol College at Oxford in 1925. Having fallen in love with Vivien Dayrell-Browning, a recent convert to Catholicism, Greene, only 22 years of age, converted in order to marry her. As he often admitted in countless interviews, his true loyalty was to Vivien first and only secondly to the Church. But what began as an intellectual conversion for personal reasons became, after his experience of the persecution of Catholics in Mexico, an emotional conversion too. Though Greene was to become estranged and separated from Vivien in 1948, he remained married to her throughout his life as he also remained in faith a Catholic, however tentative that affiliation became in later years.

Greene's first eight novels, the most successful of which were The Man Within (1929) and Stamboul Train (1932), explored the divided loyalties between the public and private realms of life, framed within the genre of the political, psychological thriller (what Greene early on called his "entertainments," only later to drop the distinction altogether). This balance of loyalty is a key theme throughout Greene's novels and finds historical reference in his experience of the double loyalties at public school. His anxiety over whether to be loyal to his father, the headmaster, or to his classmates caused him such stress that he underwent psychoanalysis when he was 16. It was also his experience with a class bully named Carter that helped form his awareness of evil and the consequences of betrayal in human interactions, all of which later shaped his works of fiction. In the article "The Lost Childhood" (1951) Greene remarks:

When—perhaps I was fourteen at the time—I took Miss Marjorie Bowen's The Viper of Milan from the library shelf, the future for better or worse really struck. From that moment I began to write . . .

Why? On the surface The Viper of Milan is only the story of a war between Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan, and Mastino della Scala, Duke of Verona, told with zest and cunning and an amazing pictorial sense. Why did it creep and color and explain the terrible living world of the stone stairs and the never quiet dormitory? . . . As for Visconti, with his beauty, his patience and his genius for evil, I had watched him pass by many a time in his black Sunday suit smelling of mothballs. His name was Carter. He exercised terror from a distance like a snowcloud over the young fields. Goodness has only once found a perfect incarnation in a human body and never will again, but evil can always find a home there. Human nature is not black and white but black and grey."

Loyalty and betrayal was never a clear-cut thing for Greene. It could be subverted, and its opposite could become a virtue, for no side was always right. It was this sense of the psychologically divided mind and the clouded sympathies within the political and sexual realms that characterized the dark plots and anguished, alienated characters of his novels.

The experience of Greene the schoolboy provided Greene the convert with a reference point in understanding the black and gray of human life. Greene often quoted from A. E. Russell's poem "Gernival" in demonstrating the intersection of childhood betrayals and the religious imagination: "In the lost boyhood of Judas, Christ was betrayed." This intersection between the psychological and the religious becomes creatively rendered in Greene's work beginning with Brighton Rock (1938), the book that launched Greene into the category of Catholic novelist. Greene turned to Catholic characters because he wanted "to examine more closely the effect of faith on action." Greene believed that for writing to have any depth, it had to be based on a view of the human person as a supernatural being, brought to that moment when God confronts the person and grace encounters free will. In a 1978 interview, Greene noted, "The religious sense does emphasize the importance of the human act. It's not Catholicism, it's simply a faith in the possibility that we have eternal importance. A religious sense makes the individual more important and therefore it helps to put the character on the page." His characters often have this heroic status, endowed with a religious sense of good and evil that preempts a bourgeois morality based merely on what is socially or legally right or wrong. It is this borderland of conflict—social, political, and spiritual—that becomes for Greene his primary interest. In "Letter to a West German Friend," Greene merges his sense of religious and political borders:

Nearly forty years ago I stepped across such a frontier when I became a Catholic, but the frontier did not cease to exist for me because I had crossed it. Often I have returned and looked over it with nostalgia, like the little groups on either side of the Brandenburg Gate who on holidays stare across at each other trying to recognize a friend."

Greene's novels portray characters that come to stand at the border of acceptance or rejection of personal salvation. As Georg Gaston notes, what connects all of Greene's novels to some degree is eschatology and the theme of possible redemption, whether explicit or muted in the text. Thus, beginning with Brighton Rock and continuing through Monsignor Quixote (1982), Greene carries on something like a four-year dialogue with God, subverting and transgressing the orthodox comforts of Catholic religious feeling so that extreme situa-
ions of faith, belief, doubt, and commitment may take center stage in his novels. If Greene admitted to creating Catholic themes in only “four or five books,” the Greene reader senses the imprint of his religious consciousness throughout his entire oeuvre.

Yet Greene disliked being called a Catholic novelist and preferred instead “a novelist who happens to be a Catholic.” He argued for this distinction by accepting John Henry Newman’s position in The Idea of a University: “If literature is to be made a study of human nature, you cannot have a Christian literature. It is a contradiction in terms to attempt the sinless Literature of sinful man.” Greene elaborated his debt to Newman’s perspective in his conversations with Allain:

My books only reflect faith or lack of faith, with every possible human in between. Cardinal Newman, whose books influenced me a great deal after my conversion, denied the existence of a ‘Catholic’ literature. He recognized only the possibility of a religious dimension superior to the literary dimension, and he wrote that books ought to deal first with what he called in the vocabulary of the day, ‘the tragic destiny of man in his fallen state.’ I agree with him. It is the ‘human factor’ that interests me, not apologetics. And yet it was Greene’s Catholicism that gave him a specific point of view throughout his literary career and brought a consistency to his art; without Catholicism he would not have developed the distinctive voice and style on which both his artistry and popularity flourished. From the beginning, Catholicism for Greene was never a system of laws and dogmas or a body of belief demanding assent or dissent but rather a system of concepts, a reservoir of attitudes and values, and a source of situations with which he could order and dramatize his intuitions about human experience.

Greene Criticism: Catholic and/or Post-Catholic?

With the success of Brighton Rock, Greene entered into his most productive years of writing, producing a series of novels that explored the boundaries and loyalties of religious faith as understood in the confines of the Catholic consciousness of his characters. As previously noted, critics of this period began calling him a Catholic novelist, a label that inadvertently worked to mark the restrictions of his talent. Fans of his earlier novels were amused by this supposed religious turn in a novelist who had heretofore shown mastery for melodrama and the psychological thriller. And yet the themes in Greene’s early novels, beset with criminals and conspirators, alienated protagonists and their betrayal of loyalties, actually find expression in all his great novels of this middle period: the Catholic Pinkie in Brighton Rock, who conspires to marry Rose in the fallout of a gang murder; the whiskey priest in The Power and the Glory, who betrays his celibate vows by fathering a child; the convict Scobie in The Heart of the Matter, whose double loyalties to wife and mistress cause his suicide; and the adultery of Bendrix in The End of the Affair, who plays a game of loyalty and betrayal among his mistress, her husband, and her God. In each case, Greene’s use of Catholicism extends the psychological and moral crisis of characters beyond their own deception and treachery and places it in confrontation with the objective reality of God. In the end, Greene illustrates that one’s faith and belief in God is as treacherous a place as that of the world of politics and espionage.

Because of this intense confrontation with religious interiority and the clear parallels with Catholic French writers of the period, critics with a religious disposition often analyzed his texts in terms of dogmatic and apologetic concerns, often accusing Greene of mixed motives and Manichean tendencies. One of the most famous of these reviews concerned Greene’s The Heart of the Matter, written by Evelyn Waugh, a close friend and fellow convert. In an otherwise praiseworthy appraisal, Waugh wonders if Greene has taken the doctrine of the Felix culpa too far: “To me the idea of willing my own damnation for the love of God is either a very loose poetical expression or a mad blasphemy, for the God who accepted that sacrifice could be neither just nor loveable.” The space between the fallen nature of Greene’s characters and the mysterious, inscrutable grace of God was feared to be too wide a theological gap for many of his religious compatriots, and Greene’s disdain for traditional expressions of Catholic faith and piety in the institutional Church proved troubling to many in the pre–Vatican II environment of the Catholic Church. These critics questioned implicitly the veracity of Greene’s Catholicism because of the way in which he crossed the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy. As Roger Sharrock notes, Greene the convert was continually compared at this time with François Mauriac, a friend and mentor of Greene, who “with the faith in his bones and a known, convincing regional background, was able to escape heresy. But did Greene’s [faith] really exist or was it not the product of a personal trauma?”

Other critics that have shown a Secularist prejudice have claimed that Greene’s Catholic novels show little originality and rely on religious dogmas as a device to heighten the melodramatic effects of his stories into a contrived seriousness. The religious struggles of his characters, it is argued, go against the grain of contemporary expressions of the psychological novel. If Catholic
Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination

...were hesitant to accept Greene’s Catholic imagination during this most Catholic period of his career, secular critics took Greene to task for obscuring his humanism with religious tensions. Indeed, since Greene’s later novels chewed the intensely religious dilemmas of his earlier Catholic characters, more contemporary criticism has been quick to divide his work into a Catholic and a post-Catholic period, with political and postcolonial concerns as the moral barometer of his later novels. Though there is some acknowledgement of the way in which religion continues to play a muted role in Greene’s later works, the criticism articulates this diminution by perpetuating an understanding of religion—and specifically Catholicism—in the narrow terms of the Catholic novel genre, of affirming or denying some religious dogma as a central theme of the text. Greene’s religious imagination apparently loses its claim to be recognizably Catholic outside the vested interests of creedal and eschatological crises that impinge on a character. The evolutionary development of Greene’s religious imagination is discussed in terms of a rejection of Catholicism for a more idiosyncratic humanism.

Robert Pendleton, for instance, argues that Greene’s Catholic novels were only a psychological and stylistic detour from his “Conradian masterplot,” a perhaps unconscious attempt by Greene to create a genre that set him apart from the overt homage his thrillers owed to Conrad’s narrative themes and protagonists. Building on Harold Bloom’s well-known study, The Anxiety of Influence (1974), Pendleton suggests that Greene’s Catholic novels operate as “deviations” and “displaced repetitions” of Conrad’s interiorized thrillers. Greene’s later novels, he argues, return to the larger influence of Conrad, where faith and belief are so marked by skepticism that they signify the loss of religious meaning for his characters. And Cates Baldridge, in an otherwise nuanced discussion of the conception of God in Greene’s novels, uses J. Hillis Miller’s The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers (1963) to argue that Greene’s obsession with divided loyalty illustrates the author’s psychological and spiritual quest for “a consummation or a reconciliation or a reintegration that [he] can never quite—or at best only fleetingly—realize.” Baldridge concludes that Greene, like William Blake, created his own peculiar and powerful religious system that, seen over the span of his novels, divested itself of any orthodox form of Catholicism; rather, he argues that Greene’s deity is imagined as one in the midst of cosmic entropy, emphasizing a God who is only worthy of the pity of failure, never a God who might triumph in the world, much less in the human person.

What is interesting about both Pendleton’s and Baldridge’s argument is how it returns to the Protestant English tradition that stresses in literature the absence of God, or at least God’s virtual impotence and demise in the modern world. Also missing in much of the discussion that divides Greene’s novels into Catholic and post-Catholic is any appreciation by such critics of the theological centrality of Catholic mediations, specifically in the human face of God in Christ and in the sacramental system of the Church. And nowhere does the literary criticism question the relevance to Greene’s artistic imagination of developments in Roman Catholicism that resulted from the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, the evidence to do so is seen in the countless interviews and articles in which Greene continues to engage the social teachings of Catholicism and post-Vatican II theological texts, as well as in the subjects and themes of most of his late novels, The Honorary Consul (1974); The Human Factor (1978); Doctor Fisher of Geneva, or the Bomb Party (1980); and Monsignor Quixote (1982).

Charting a Late Twentieth-Century Catholic Imagination

Can there be found a larger, less rigid context in which to discuss the discursive and symbolic role that Catholicism plays in Greene’s texts that honors the corresponding development in Catholic theology of the twentieth century? Catholic theology before Vatican II was primarily a hermetic, scholastic endeavor that stressed the individual’s status before God in terms of moral precepts and ritual obligations. The revival of Thomistic thought in the early twentieth century began a conscious dialogue between the Church and the culture of modernity, arguing that the Church’s philosophical and theological synthesis had an important role to play in both the social and political aspects of society. Jacques Maritain, for example, gave Thomistic philosophy a new cachet in the intellectual discussions about art and the role of the artist, holding that the artist’s purpose was to create an “experience of life,” not a mere reflection of it or some idealized form of it. For Maritain, that meant tackling the problem of evil and its ability to wreak havoc on the human condition. Maritain held up the Christian writer as an artist who had some idea of human potential, as well as the aspects that limit such potential. Maritain’s thought contributed much to articulating the conceptual foundations of the Catholic literary revival.

With the advent of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), there arose a dramatic shift in theological emphasis that affected the practice and attitudes toward Catholic belief in a number of important ways. First, the Council emphasized a theological “perspective from below,” a methodology that stressed God’s manifestation of grace on the horizontal plane of human relationship within and without the Church. The secular concerns of society, even the most profane, became possible pathways to the sacred. This emphasis is noted in
renewed christological concerns that stressed the humanity of Christ as the
hermeneutical starting point and in the emphasis of communal justice over
personal acts of charity in the Church’s social teaching.

Second, religious anthropology before Vatican II had stressed the individ-
ual’s relationship with God in a vertical, one-to-one basis, so that individual
salvation was seen as a private affair of piety and charity. The Council docu-
ments, most particularly The Church in the Modern World, reject the individ-
ualistic verticalization of the human being’s relationship to God for a more
social, horizontal perspective. As J. C. Whitehouse points out in his study of
the human person in Catholic novelists, the Council began “a movement away
from a picture of man as an individual in a unique relationship with his Creator
through a new appreciation of existential freedom and ultimately to an image
of the human being as a nexus of social relationships.”

Third, there was a reorientation of the sacramentality of Catholicism, so
that sacraments are neither to be isolated in ritual actions stemming from an
intermediating priest nor to be confined to the functionalism inherent in the
theological concept of ex opere operato. God’s grace does not intervene solely
in the priest’s function but also in the diffusion of all the baptized members
of the church community. All forms of human interaction with the world have
the possibility of being sacramental, visible signs of God’s invisible reality.

Fourth, there was a clear rejection of the body-and-soul dualism of human
nature that was part of the legacy of Catholic thought. In an attempt at a more
holistic understanding that took seriously the doctrine of the Incarnation, the
body is not portrayed as at war with the soul; rather the body and the soul are
consubstantial, sacred coconstituents of human life. The scandal of the Incar-
nation in Catholic thought is that the divine is found in the endeavors of the
flesh, so that the spiritual life must be understood in part as the strivings of
the flesh, just as the desires of the flesh must be understood as a possible path
for the soul. This added theological emphasis on the human body grounded
the Church’s post-Vatican II social teachings on the dignity of the human
person, the sacramental nature of human work, and the call for justice to meet
the physical, as well as the spiritual, needs of people.

Fifth, there was a reorientation of the Church’s self-understanding and its
relationship to the outside world. The documents of the Council continually
stressed the “pilgrim” nature of the Church as a “people of God,” implying
that it was at the same time holy and sinful, needing to be constantly renewed.
As for the situation of the world, the documents recognized the need for a
critical reading of the “signs of the times” in which the Church might more
fully enter into the political and social struggles of peoples. In recasting the

teaching extra ecclesiam nulla salus, the Church recognized that institutional
Catholicism cannot claim to be exclusively the Church of Christ and is thus
not the sole arbiter of salvation. Indeed, the Council explicitly states that non-
Christian religions may also serve as instruments of salvation.47

It is true that after Greene’s publication of A Burnt-Case in 1961, he
extricated himself from the stylistic intensity of his character’s Catholic in-
teriority as the primary focus for formulating the crises in his novels. Whether
a character’s actions contributed to his personal salvation or damnation was
no longer the paramount issue in his novels; rather, Greene’s focus turned to
human action deriving from political relationships that allegorized the human
struggle in economic and moral terms. Most criticism has seen this as a “post-
Catholic” maneuver on Greene’s part, a turn away from the imaginative world
of Catholicism. Yet Greene’s artistic confrontation with his religious imagi-
nation parallels the developments in Catholic theology, doctrine, and liturgy
since Vatican II. When Greene returns to explicitly religious themes in his late
novels, he is not merely reworking the conflict of his previous “Catholic” cycle
but is also engaged in a dialogue with the political concerns, as well as the
religious crises, of belief that have become part of the experience of Catholicism
since the end of the Council.

I am not suggesting that Greene was writing these novels only with Cath-
olic social teachings and doctrinal controversies in mind. Indeed, his concern
for the “human factor” is not necessarily embodied in Catholicism. Greene is
not a theologian or a philosopher but a novelist. What I am suggesting is that
there is an organic growth in his religious imagination that is reflected in his
literary artistry as he lived in tension with his Catholic faith in the last half of
the twentieth century. The restrictive ingredients of the historical genre of the
Catholic novel obfuscate a consideration of the way in which his Catholic imagi-
nation continued to frame his work. Greene’s ironic stance toward the use of
theological categories in these later novels does not remove the issues of faith
and belief from them but rather transposes them into political and social con-
cerns in which justice, salvation, and even the mystery of divine grace might
be manifested. Where Catholicism was more monolithic in his earlier novels,
it now becomes part of a dialogue with the contemporary situations of his
texts. In reading Greene’s texts, we see how his religious imagination has
developed, shifting emphases in the intervening years that saw the greatest
change in the Catholic church in centuries.
The Religious Landscape of Greeland

Graham Greene’s conversion to Catholicism did not occur in a vacuum, and the simple rejoinder that Greene converted to marry Vivien belies the complex manner in which Catholicism engaged Greene’s interpretation of life throughout his long literary career. The preoccupations of his religious imagination is illustrative of the dilemmas that have formed the consciousness of much of the twentieth century, and his vision is always in dialogue with the cultural and political world in which he found himself. It is important then to begin by delineating some of these characteristics of “Greeland,” the term used to describe the existential and religious geography of Greene’s novels.

All the most important things in a writer’s life, Greene often declared in interviews, happen during the first sixteen years. It seems true of Greene, for his creativity was shaped by the literary heritage of the Victorian and Edwardian age, a staple of his early reading. He greatly admired the novels of Henry James and Joseph Conrad, the adventure stories of Rider Haggard, the detective stories of G. K. Chesterton, and the many works of Robert Louis Stevenson, a family relation on his mother’s side. In his Collected Essays, Greene shows his appreciation of each of these writers on the formative years of his imagination. His love of the political thriller and adventure owes much to Conrad, and his focus on the interior tensions in the consciousness of his characters owes much to James. Coupled with this, Greene’s early years were marked by his discomfort at school: the divided loyalty between his father and his schoolmates, the loss of privacy, the acts of betrayal, the authoritarian strain of adolescence—all contributing to his sense of the precariousness of his life and the injustices in the world. Greene’s religious imagination is so deeply grounded in these early experiences that they thematically show up in all of his most deeply felt work.

Though Greene disparaged his youthful conversion to Catholicism as merely pragmatic, it was nevertheless an important act that had profound consequences on his friendships and his literary works. He read widely in theology and Catholic history under the influence of the Dominican scholar Bede Jarrett, a close friend of both Greene and his wife early in their marriage. In the 1930s through the 1950s Greene counted among his friends the English Jesuit theologians Martin D’Arcy and C. C. Martindale, and he often corresponded with them concerning his novels and plays. He was a close friend of Tom Burns, the publisher of The Tablet, still the leading intellectual Catholic journal of England, and served on its board of trustees until his death. By the late 1930s Greene’s literary reviews in both The Tablet and The Spectator became more focused on the religious implications in novels and writers, taking to heart Eliot’s maxim that literary criticism should be undertaken “from a definite ethical and theological standpoint.”

When Greene left England to live in France in 1966, his reading and correspondence with Catholic theologians continued unabated, most notably with the liberal theologian Hans Küng, a theological advisor and framer of many documents of Vatican II. Furthermore, Greene’s close friendship with the Spanish priest Leopoldo Duran and his friendship and support of many priests from Central America in the last decades of his life brought to full circle his engagement with Catholic culture and religious-political causes.

His conversion and immersion in the intellectual and artistic discourses of his faith had the effect of positioning him in a religious intellectual history, both enabling him to critique the comfortable liberalism of his English Protestant roots while at the same time offering support for his creative turn to the religious interiority of his characters. In effect, Greene found in Catholicism a doctrinal and imaginative discourse that was compatible with his earliest experiences and gave him some objectivity in crafting the contours of his own creative obsessions. Catholicism thus gave him a consistent point of view as essayist, journalist, and novelist in the ever-changing pluralism of twentieth-century literary fashion.

As did many British intellectuals who converted during this time, Greene found solace and support in his reading of John Henry Newman. In the epigraph to his travel book on Mexico, The Lawless Roads (1939), Greene quotes from Newman’s Apologia Pro Vita Sua, a text that documents the theologian’s own gradual conversion to Catholicism:

The defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion... inflicts upon the mind the sense of the profound mystery which is absolutely beyond the human situation... if there be a God, since there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity.

Newman’s outlook is found throughout Greene’s narrative world, for like Newman he accepts the ontological and metaphysical existence of evil as a fact of life, as the “way of the world.” If Greene denied creating a literary world in which evil existed in supernatural terms on a par with God’s goodness, he did at least affirm that within the human person evil is real.

This “aboriginal calamity” is the world of Greeland, a landscape filled with lonely, pathetic, and sometimes malevolent characters. Incidents of pursuit, acts of violence, and voluntary and involuntary betrayal populate a world
Greene’s characters live as exiles on the extreme edges of society, conscious of their failures and their betrayals of one another and, as is often the case, of their faith in God. Throughout his texts the eschatological certainties of both Christianity and Marxist ideology are always thwarted by the inevitability of human failure. Greenland is thus an uncomfortable place for bourgeois religious piety—Catholic and Protestant—as well as Marxist ideology, precisely because of the optimistic assumptions about human nature and the eschatological utopias that pervade both these positions. Indeed, Greene implies that the hopeless causes that engage his characters are worthy of allegiance, specifically because they are unlikely to be manipulated and thwarted by success. Failure, as Terry Eagleton claims, is the one legitimate form of victory in Greene’s novels, suggesting that the doctrine of the Incarnation finds its textual embodiment not so much in human creativity but in human failure— the tragic, radically fallen nature of humanity. Though Eagleton overstates the case, it is true that the primary religious insight sustained throughout Greene’s religious landscape is the Christian doctrine of the felix culpa, the happy effect of human sin as the cause of God’s grace manifested in the Incarnation to an individual and a community. The Incarnation is revealed to characters when they discover that their sins or their suffering bring them into an analogous relationship with a suffering God in Christ. Even in Greene’s least religious novels, his protagonists experience such a manifestation or Joycean “epiphany.” His reluctant and often degraded heroes are ennobled by the way in which they come to understand and face their own failure and/or worthlessness before God or before those to whom they have committed themselves. There is thus always a dialectical strain in Greene’s religious imagination, a critical response to what Greene considered the major flaw of his Protestant heritage: the denial of this aboriginal calamity that compromises all of the noblest of human aspirations.

Greene’s religious imagination is also fixed on the tension between belief and unbelief, mirroring throughout his novels the epistemological and existential dilemmas of his century. In this way he is a product of the Enlightenment and liberal establishment, choosing doubt as the premier virtue of humanity, claiming that “doubt like the conscience is inherent in human nature . . . perhaps they are the same thing.” Orthodoxy, or “right belief,” is always open to doubt because there is never only one perspective in which to understand truth, and it is inevitably open to mystery. Of course, Greene subversively puts this ostensibly secular virtue at the service of a Catholic sensibility. He often highlights the virtue of doubt in the concluding remarks of many of his novels, wherein a priest comments on the possibility of redemption for the hero/antihero. This remark is usually at the expense of the complacency of Catholic certitudes given by the institutional Church, so that doubt negotiates a wider space for divine presence and mercy. Thus, in the final pages of The Heart of the Matter (1948), the widow Louise worries that Scobie’s suicide sends him to hell, to which Father Rank, the parish priest answers, “The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn’t know what goes on in a single human heart” (272). And in as late a novel as Monsignor Quixote (1952), the priest-hero has a disturbing dream in which he watches Christ get off the cross before his persecutors, making the whole world know with certainty that he is the Son of God. As the priest awakens, he feels “the chill of despair felt by a man who realized suddenly that he has taken up a profession which is of use to no one . . . who must live without doubt or faith, where everyone is certain that the same belief is true” (70). Doubt is thus a two-edged sword for Greene’s characters: it can allow for the ineffable and mysterious workings of faith to be recognized and honored, or it can lead to a rationalistic and ultimately skeptical stance toward the “human factor.”

Greene claimed in a late interview that he understood faith and belief as two different realms: “What I distinguish is between faith and belief. One may have less belief as one grows older but one’s faith can say, ‘Yes, but you are wrong.’ Belief is rational, faith is irrational and one can still continue to have an irrational faith when one’s belief weakens.” Greene locates faith in trust and hope in God’s love and mercy, whereas belief is found in human rationalization and institutionalization of God through theology and the Church. Doubt, whether in religious or political systems, is at the heart of the human enterprise because it checks any overt triumph of ideological excess. It suggests Greene’s affinity to the dialectical power of Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith,” where trembling self-doubt, placed in extreme situations and on the precipice of despair, is honored above any religious plarism or political party line, even if it means relinquishing the power or comfort that comes from such institutionalized structures.

Thus, arguing that Greene has a discernible Catholic imagination cannot mean that Catholic difference is always in reference to the Protestant intellectual and religious heritage from which he came, that his conversion to Catholicism and his imaginative use of it was a rejection of his English cultural heritage. Rather, Greene’s religious imagination finds in Catholicism a perspective, a place to stand, and in doing so, a place to reflect on and critique the world, including the world of Catholicism. David Tracy’s theological nomenclature can help to map out the landscape of Greenland. As a convert imbued with a modern, Protestant ethos, Greene’s well-developed dialectical imagination is constantly challenging the more analogical tendencies of his professed faith. If the analogical imagination produces a religious discourse that is prone to
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analyzes Greene's own appropriation of the Catholic revival of the first half of the twentieth century, discussing two of his works from this period, The Power and the Glory and The End of the Affair. Chapter 3 discusses the theological contexts and developments of Vatican II, specifically in terms of how it transforms many of the classic features of the Catholic novel. Chapters 4 and 5 offer close readings of Greene's late novels that imaginatively render Catholicism and religious thinking in the context of post-Vatican II concerns. Finally, chapter 6 offers some concluding remarks on Greene as an exemplar of the Catholic imagination at work in a post-Vatican II, postmodern world.