Graham Greene: Catholicism in Fiction

Inevitably, in dealing with the work of a Catholic novelist, the critic, whether he likes it or not, is compelled to touch upon the theological issue, for the simple reason that it plays as a rule so prominent a role in the work of the author he is discussing. Perhaps in the end the critic’s labor of analysis serves a salutary purpose in that it throws some light on the vexed problem of the relationship that obtains, or should obtain, between the novel and the religious outlook. Today this problem is viewed of necessity from a radically changed perspective. Harvey Eagleson, writing on “The Beginning of Modern Literature,” declares: “God died on November 24th, 1859, and every day since, the mound of earth above His grave has been piled higher.” In short, after the publication of The Origin of Species, the attitude of the writer toward the supernatural was transformed; he lost his old instinctive sureness of faith in the absolute. Henceforth man could no longer be regarded as a special creation, made in the image of God, but as a part of nature, red in tooth and claw, subject to the reign of unalterable law. However, despite the subsidence of faith in Christianity, the Christian outlook is still a dynamic part of Western civilization.

Yet how can the modern writer, even if he is a believer, subscribe to Christianity on the old terms? Can he believe without falling into heresy? Can the creative imagination accommodate itself to the orthodoxies of the Christian faith? Independent, and therefore heretical, in its vision of life, the creative mind abhors dogma. If the writer is to derive any nourishment from the Christian mythos, he can find it only in the endless struggle with sin and the temptation to challenge orthodox religious doctrine. That is, in effect, the solution Graham Greene seems to have accepted. In his contribution to the book Why Do I Write? he declares that the practicing novelist, whatever his credal

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commitment, identifies himself with all mankind, the guilty as well as the innocent, though Greene is by temperament drawn more closely to the portrayal of sufferers in sin. But no one, and that is the point he stresses in his aesthetics of fiction, should be shut out from the all-embracing compassion of the novelist. If this plunges the novelist in the mire of heresy, that is unavoidable. It is his function, nay, his duty, to be disloyal. This is the paradoxical but courageous faith, born of despair, which animates Greene's world of fiction.

If character is destiny, then Greene's somber view of the world and of the nature of man has been shaped decisively by his temperament. The fact that as a Catholic he holds a number of religious and moral values tells us little about the specific content and quality of his work. Consider such "Catholic" writers as James Joyce, Sean O'Faolain, Francois Mauriac, and Graham Greene. These men have nothing but their religion in common, and in reality not even that, for they interpret it and react to it in strikingly different ways. If James Joyce is the blasphemer, Graham Greene is one of the neo-Pascalsians of our time. In the imaginative world that Greene projects, man is helpless to save himself. Grace comes to him, if it comes at all, gratuitously and capriciously. Man is no longer free to choose. His will is bound. Weakness is the fate of man—weakness and defeat. And this is so—the failure is foredoomed—because man is impotent to help himself; he must beseech the aid of God. No one can escape the universal net of sin. To live is to fall, to be human is to be sinful. Such a "theology," as Sean O'Faolain points out, ends in the liquidation of the autonomous hero, the one who can master his destiny.

Graham Greene adopts a consistently pessimistic and tragic view of life. In The Lost Childhood and Other Essays, he makes clear his conviction that failure attends all our projects and that in the end, in this world, we suffer shipwreck. This brooding pessimistic outlook is not only native to his temperament but also fits in logically with his belief in the reality of hell and damnation as well as the reality of evil. And that is his primary source of interest as a novelist, this pervasive sense of evil and its effect on the human heart. He is literally obsessed (he is convinced that every writer suffers from his own type of obsession) by the theme of betrayal: Judas betraying Christ is the paradigm of every betrayal enacted on earth. Greene knows, too, that every act commits us ineluctably; we choose our own death and are responsible for our own life.

These themes of choice, of commitment, of betrayal, enter intimately into the fabric of his fiction, for they are integral parts of his vision
of human reality. All his life long, as he tells us, he has been fascinated by the problem of evil, which is an impenetrable mystery. Thus early did Greene discover his major themes: the universality of evil, the seed of failure that is implanted in the heart of success, the sense of doom that rules this earth and the miserable creatures crawling on its surface. From the perspective of the art of fiction, of course, the important thing is not that he is obsessed by these themes but what he does with them, how he embodies them dramatically in his work. He leaves us in no doubt where his sympathies lie. Disregarding the imperatives of orthodoxy, he introduces us to “heroes” who are sinners and failures. From the start, once he decided to become a writer, he worked out the pattern which would shape the religious motif in his fiction: “perfect evil walking the world where perfect good can never walk again, and only the pendulum ensures that after all in the end justice is done.”

Indeed, it is largely in terms of his religious obsessions that he not only interprets character and destiny but also evaluates literature. In his essay on “The Lesson of the Master,” Greene makes this revealing statement about Henry James: “The novel by its nature is dramatic, but it need not be melodramatic, and James’s problem was to admit violence without becoming violent.” Here Greene raises an interesting and complex problem that has considerable bearing on his own fiction, which does at times become violent. Yet how, Greene asks, can that be helped? Once the writer lost the religious sense and the human being ceased to occupy a position of central importance, the novel turned subjective, exploring the world of sensations, introspections, dreams, memory, fantasy, but the vanished feeling of human importance could not be recovered by this shift of focus. Distrusting the “pure” novel, Greene composes fiction that concerns itself with the solid, sensuous world, but he also pictures the arena of struggle between good and evil, the efforts of the soul to save itself from damnation. And in heightening the religious conflict generated by perfect evil walking the earth, Greene admits violence without, in his serious novels, descending to the use of melodrama.

Greene divides his works of fiction into those novels that are to be taken seriously as works of art and those that are designed for “entertainment.” It is purely a classification of convenience. We may safely take it for granted that, as Henry James well knew, the creative writer betrays his hand in everything he produces, even for purposes of entertainment. In The Man Within, which is a rousing melodramatic thriller filled with the stock ingredients of pursuit and revenge, Greene
somehow manages to introduce the element of "mystery," the religious quest, the contrast between the believer and the non-believer. **Brighton Rock**, originally published as an "entertainment," was later included in the canon of his serious work, and rightly so, but it again brings up the problem whether a writer like Greene, even in his calculated fictional entertainments, can entirely keep out his peculiar obsessions, his characteristic vision of the world. It is doubtful if he can.

In **Brighton Rock**, out of such melodramatic material as the feuds of gangsterdom, with its planned murders and its killings for revenge, Greene weaves a story that far transcends the plane of melodrama. The two principal characters, the Boy who is the leader of a gang, and the girl Rose who becomes involved in the action, are Catholics. Both believe in sin and hell and damnation, but only Rose hopes for the redemption of grace. It is the Boy, scarred for life by the wounds of poverty, who is filled with dim religious longings, an overwhelming sense of loneliness, a foreboding of what Life in its inscrutable malice might do to him. When he confides to Rose that he does not go to mass, she asks him imploringly whether he believes.

"Of course it's true," the Boy said. "What else could there be?" he went scornfully on. "Why," he said, "it's the only thing that fits. These atheists, they don't know nothing. Of course there's Hell. Flames and damnation," he said with his eyes on the dark shifting water and the lightning and the lamps going out above the black struts of the Palace Pier, "torments."

"And Heaven too," Rose said with anxiety, while the rain fell interminably on.

"Oh, maybe," the Boy said, "maybe."

Now this brief scene, played out against the backdrop of the sea, the lightning, and the driving rain, illustrates not only the ambiguities with which Greene frights his dialogue but also the manner in which he incorporates his religious insights into the body of fiction. The Boy, knowing himself to be a wicked, unregenerate sinner, feels that Hell is certain, but there is no guarantee of Heaven. Greene leaves us in no doubt on that score. Hell lay about this youngster in his infancy, Greene declares, and that is why he believes in flames and damnation and torments.

The tragedy in **Brighton Rock** draws to its appointed close: the Boy must die, but he is convinced, even as he is about to take the leap into eternity, that peace is not for him. "Heaven was a word; Hell
was something he could trust." Rose, with her unswerving loyalty, 
would rather be damned with the Boy than be saved—alone. All that 
deterred her from taking the final step and committing suicide was 
the fear that they might miss each other in the land of death, one 
being granted mercy which the other was denied. But this is the 
veritable sign of her grace: in refusing to be saved without the Boy she 
reveals her saintliness. The old priest to whom she goes for confession 
assures her that no soul is cut off from mercy. Then he tells her the 
message that is the theme of the novel: A Catholic, he says, "is more 
capable of evil than anyone. I think perhaps—because we believe in 
him—we are more in touch with the devil than other people." Though 
Greene is an expert craftsman in motivating the course of the action, 
the theological preoccupations of the protagonists are not effectively 
integrated within the body of the story proper. Yet, regardless of 
what these characters may feel about heaven and hell, the spirit of 
sacrifice that Rose exhibits seems to indicate that saintliness consists, 
after all, in human fidelity. Whatever may happen beyond the grave, 
on this side we must keep faith and, however sinful our life may be, 
love is the only freely offered means, available to all, of saving us. 
In *The Power and the Glory* (first published as *The Labyrinthine 
Ways*), Greene shows what he can do in composing a fascinating novel 
of suspense about a Catholic priest who struggles against tempta-
tion and who is destined to suffer martyrdom. Held throughout by the 
compelling power of the narrative, the reader not only beholds how 
the essence of the faith, despite all the vicissitudes of persecution, is 
vindicated but also gains insight into the contradictory nature of the 
believer who, besieged by the secular hosts of evil, is forced to deny 
his God. Yet Greene, in this novel, is not guilty of the charge of 
composing religious propaganda. *The Power and the Glory* performs 
its ministry as an imaginative work of art. 

It is not enough to say of Greene's principal characters that they 
are Catholics; they are religious with a defiant and often disconcerting 
difference. Though they remain true to the religious spirit, they are 
in many respects wretched heretics, grievous offenders against the 
express commandments of the Church. In *The Power and the Glory*, 
the priest who carries out in secret the sacred duties enjoined upon 
him by God and the Church, though all religious observances are 
strictly forbidden in this province of Mexico, is far from being an 
admirable character. A whisky priest who gets drunk at times, he has 
been guilty of fornication and has begotten an illegitimate daughter, 
but he is miserably aware of his transgressions and serves God as
faithfully as he can in the face of cruel persecution, knowing what the penalty will be if he is caught and quietly accepting this fate.

What adds density and the dramatic force of complexity to Greene's story is his steadfast awareness of the power of evil at work in the world and in the soul of man. The faith is dialectically affirmed through a series of heresies and denials, trials and temptations. Uncompromisingly honest in his portrayal of life, Greene knows the worst that can be said about human beings, yet he still regards them as made in the image of God. They commit abominations, their sins rise up like a foul stench in the nostrils of God, they are vile and despicable creatures, but they are also the children of the Lord and even in their drunkenness and fornication and betrayal they bear witness to the miracle of God's grace.

Greene writes with extraordinary sensory vividness. With a few deft visual strokes he etches a scene, builds up the atmosphere of a place, suggests the heat and indolence and poverty of this Mexican region with its rank vegetation, its shabby buzzards, its swarming beetles. The enemy of the poor hunted priest who must flee in disguise is a Mexican lieutenant who is devoted fanatically to a secular religion of his own: the extirpation of ignorance among his people, the fight against the curse of poverty, the enlightenment of the masses. He has a deep horror of the Christian myth and mysteries, the sacrifices the Church demands of the credulous, benighted natives, the peasants kneeling before holy images, mortifying their flesh, hoodwinked by these lying promises of eternal bliss in the afterlife. Greene sees in him something of the priest.

It infuriated him to think that there were still people in the state who believed in a loving and merciful God. There are mystics who are said to have experienced God directly. He was a mystic, too, and what he had experienced was vacancy—a complete certainty in the existence of a dying, cooling world, of human beings who had evolved from animals for no purpose at all. He knew.

There at last we are given a dramatic projection of fundamental values in conflict. Greene obviously does not agree with this lieutenant and his dream of socialism but he understands the motives that drive him and he respects these motives even if he cannot share them. What makes Greene so singularly effective as a religious novelist is that he does not write religious novels; he writes novels that deal illuminatingly with an essential aspect of life that we call religious. He knows the
heart and hope of the unbeliever as well as the vital intuitions that support the devout Catholic, and he knows, too, the devils of doubt that at times sorely afflict the believer. This fanatic of a lieutenant coolly formulates the logic of the situation: if heaven was real, then no torments of the flesh should have prevented the Catholic priests in Mexico from becoming martyrs of the faith. What is the crusading ideal in behalf of which the lieutenant is prepared to massacre the clergy? He would remove all vestiges of superstition from the mind of the younger generation and fill them with the saving light of truth, the knowledge of “a vacant universe and a cooling world, the right to be happy in any way they chose.”

In his flight, the priest, though aware of his inadequacies, keeps on doing what has to be done. Why had God chosen him, an unworthy vessel, to put God into the mouths of men? To the very last he retains the sense of the wonder of life, a feeling of reverence for the unique privilege of being alive. He has the opportunity to escape from the trap and begin life all over again in blessed freedom, but if he left these people then God would cease to exist for them. Unlike the lieutenant, he knows how limited man is, how restricted in his repertory of vices. Was it not for such people that Christ had died? For what is God? How picture Him to the intelligence of simple folk? No matter what explanation he might give his parishioners, he himself felt at the heart of his faith the presence of this mystery—that man was made in the image of God. “God was the parent, but He was also the policeman, the criminal, the priest, the maniac, and the judge. Something resembling God dangled from the gibbet or went into odd attitudes before the bullets in the prison yard or contorted itself like a camel in the attitude of sex.” Hence the need not only for infinite understanding but also infinite compassion.

The most moving scene in the novel takes place in a crowded cell, in which all types of men—the criminal, the young and the old, the pious and the bestial—are thrown together. Feeling a tremendous love for these inmates of the prison, even the worst of them, the priest discloses his identity. Even in this desperate situation, he maintains the integrity of his faith and resolves to do God’s bidding. Everything that lives is holy, and understanding drives out hatred. And the prisoners do not betray him. When he is finally caught, he realizes that death ends all, but he knows too that his trespasses matter but little; he is an instrument of God, who remains a mystery.

Graham Greene’s work illustrates the fact that there is no such thing as a “religious” (or for that matter a “political”) novel. The
subject matter of fiction does not matter in the least. What counts is what the novelist does with it. Proust is a "political" novelist, though he does not concern himself overtly with politics. D. H. Lawrence, for example, is one of our truly religious novelists, even though he does not deal with religion in the orthodox sense of the term. Fiction inevitably portrays the existential conflicts of human beings, the crises of destiny they must face, the struggles they pass through and the suffering they endure, the image of perfection they pursue. If the novelist happens to be a Catholic, that will naturally color his interpretation of character and his vision of life, but the religious atmosphere that pervades his work is only that—atmosphere and background. The religious synthesis cannot dictate the outcome except in one respect: if the leading characters are Catholics, we thereby gain some insight into their probable reactions in various crucial situations, though even there the resolution of the central conflict must remain in doubt to the very end. That is to say, if the novel is to retain its underlying dramatic power, if it is to give a faithful and dynamic portrait of the dilemmas of the human situation, it must focus attention on the contradictions of human nature, its irrational impulses, the effort of people to live up to their faith, their difficulties in carrying out the commandments of God. Otherwise the novel turns into a religious tract in which the dogma is theologically sound but artistically useless.

If the novelist chooses—he is free to write about the kind of life he knows best—to analyze the conflicts of Catholics, then in one sense his fictional pattern has already been chosen for him. The characters in his novels must be punished—they must punish themselves—for their transgressions. Hence the Catholic novel (if such a term is permissible) presents basically a drama of sin and redemption, a plot that revolves around the twin poles of guilt and atonement. Such is the perversity of human nature, however, that readers of fiction are generally more interested in the commission of sin than in the process of redemption. Hence the novelist must build up the structure of sin in such an imaginatively convincing manner that we can identify ourselves with the suffering sinner even as we anticipate the price he must pay for his enormities, the accounting he must give for his transgressions before his conscience and before God.

This narrative action must not be too schematized if the novel is not to sacrifice psychological complexity in the interests of orthodoxy. Human beings, especially men and women in love, cannot be fitted into the Procrustean frame of dogma. Graham Greene, a gifted novelist and conscientious artist, highlights these perversities of the human soul.
For him, as we have seen, it is the sinner who best exemplifies the cardinal Christian virtues and comes closest to being a saint. In The Heart of the Matter, Greene describes with extraordinary insight the diabolical rationalizations of which the mind is capable and the despair that often overtakes human relationships. The action takes place in a forsaken spot of West Africa where the English officials, leading dreary and monotonous lives, are sick of their work with Negroes. Brilliantly Greene paints the background, the vultures, the dirt, the heat, the gossip that spreads with insidious swiftness, the meanness and moral rottenness of the community. Scobie, the hero of this tale, who has been in this region for fifteen years, is a man of scrupulous integrity, incapable of lying to himself.

In the course of his duties as a deputy commissioner, he has discovered that guilt and innocence are relative, not absolute. Scobie has gone beyond the relief of tears, beyond the reach of illusion, beyond tragedy. Sternly he lives with his own exacting conscience, bearing his lot with stoical fortitude. All he craves is the blessing of peace, but that is not to be bought. He has disciplined himself not to let emotion get the better of him, for in this climate it is dangerous to yield to love or hate. Greene balances the portrait by showing that even though men may sink to the level of beasts, perjure themselves, accept brides, yield to corruption, some refuse to sell their souls, and Scobie is such a man, prepared in advance to accept the consequences of his wrong actions, knowing he will have to pay in full for his defiance of God’s mandate against self-slaughter. He is the sinner of whom saints are made.

It is for the sake of his wife, whom he no longer loves but for whom he feels boundless pity, that he finally strikes a bargain which proves his undoing. The seed of corruption enters into him. He entertains no illusions about life, which is much too long, an eternity of torment. Though bottled up within himself, disinclined to reveal his most intimate feelings, he cannot endure to live in deception and darkness when the truth glared at him unmistakably; but unfortunately the truth is more than human beings can bear; more important than truth is the act of kindness implicit in the lie. Out of pity for his poor wife, Scobie is prepared to traffic with evil. He realizes that the despair he carries within him is the unforgivable sin, but it is one which the evil man never practices. “Only the man of good will carries always in his heart this capacity for damnation.”

The conflict in the novel comes to a head after Scobie’s wife leaves and Scobie falls in love with Helen. As a Catholic he tries to pray
but it is only a formality, for he does not consider that his life is sufficiently important for him to importune God with his prayers. Greene makes the religious element psychologically and dramatically convincing by indicating that there were times when Scobie found it difficult to explain the mystery of God's action, to reconcile the seeming cruelties of God with His divine love. There were no happy people in this world—a constantly recurring theme in Greene's fiction. It was absurd to expect happiness as one's portion in life. What then was the truth? Scobie wonders: "If one knew . . . the facts, would he have to feel pity even for the planets? if one reached what they call the heart of the matter?" That is indeed the heart of the matter, the question of questions, the enigma that can plague the mind of a naturalist like Thomas Hardy as well as a Catholic novelist like Greene. All Scobie is certain of is this: the inevitability of suffering. He has tried to love God, but "I'm not sure that I even believe." The priest to whom he confesses this is not at all put out. But the absolution affords Scobie no sense of relief. God seemed somehow too inaccessible.

The situation is complicated by the fact that the woman he loves unlawfully does not believe in God. When the affair reaches its culmination, he recklessly sends her the note of love which compromises him—the note in which he blasphemously declares that he loves her more than he loves God. By this one act he has abandoned God. Now, though he still yearns hungrily for peace, he finds he cannot pray. His wife is on her way back and he must choose. Believing as he does in the reality of everlasting damnation, in hell as "a permanent sense of loss," he chooses. Logical in her reasoning, the woman he loves forces him to face the contradictions in his behavior: if he believes in hell, why does he continue this illicit relationship? What is his answer? Despite the categorical teaching of the Church, he feels that love does deserve some show of mercy. One pays for the sin love, but not for all eternity. Nevertheless, he is aware that human love is transient, destined to lapse into indifference or death.

There is the conflict he must face: should he confess and save himself and consign his beloved one to her fate? He refuses either to fool himself or to cheat God. Incapable of promising the priest that he will not return to this woman, he denies himself forever the blessing of peace, and as a responsible man he accepts his doom. He has worked out a way of dying that no one will ever suspect. Everything has failed him—love, work, trust. Perhaps "even God is a failure." Now that he had made up his mind to die, what was the good
of praying? As a Catholic he realizes that no prayer is effective when one is in a state of mortal sin. He cannot even trust God, the God who made him, for it was this same God who had saddled him with responsibility, and he is not one to shift the burden of blame. Justice must be done. "We are all of us resigned to death: it's life we aren't resigned to." And so, convinced that by ending his life he would also spare God further pain, he commits suicide.

In Greene's case, the spiritual struggle counts most, the fight against evil, the search for absolute peace, the quest, never certain and never completed, for union with God. In *The End of the Affair*, structurally his weakest "religious" novel, Greene achieves intensity and complexity by having as a protagonist a novelist, a man who is sensitive and trained to observe his own emotions as well as those of others. The story opens when his affair with a married woman, Sarah, has ended. Immediately we are alerted to the nature of the theme: man's need to believe in a God who contradicts all principles of logic and all the premises of empirical inquiry. Since the novel begins with the end of the affair, the novelist in the story is compelled to go back in time, to bring back to life the aching and precious memories of the past.

He remembers the bomb which pinned him beneath a door. Sarah thinks him dead and begs God for a miracle to bring him back to life. Later we learn from Sarah's diary what her motives were for leaving her lover and what caused her to become religious. At first she does not believe in God and is not even aware that there are arguments to prove His existence. Thus, when the man she loves is, as she thinks, lying dead, she kneels on the floor and prays. But why? If there is no afterlife, then what is the use of such petitions to God? As she kneels, she wishes she could believe, wishes God would make her believe. At this moment she makes a kind of compact with God that if her lover is restored to life, she will believe and will give him up forever.

Greene introduces the character of a fanatical rationalist whose sole "religion" in life is to strip people of their religious illusions, but all he succeeds in doing is to drive Sarah more securely into the arms of the Church. But even there she encounters complications. The Catholic Church promises the resurrection of the body, whereas her consuming aim is to escape the bondage of the flesh. The last letter Sarah wrote her lover reveals the conflict in her nature. Like most people she wanted both eternity and the specious, glittering present, both God and human love. When the Catholic priest will not permit
her to annul her marriage so that she can marry her lover, she revolts at first against such intolerance. God should be more understanding and more merciful because He is all-seeing, and yet His mercy sometimes seemed like punishment. In spite of everything, however, she is prepared to believe, to accept every miracle as authentic in the face of all the scientific evidence that miracles are impossible. She writes: "I've caught belief like a disease. I've fallen into belief like I fell into love." And her lover, the novelist, now that Sarah is dead, broods curiously about the beginning and end of things, and reflects: "When we get to the end of human beings we have to delude ourselves into a belief in God. . . ."

Though The Quiet American is not a religious novel in the formal sense, the pattern of preoccupation remains substantially the same: the author is concerned fundamentally with the loneliness of the human situation, the inevitability of death, the paradox of human love. If there is any lesson we are supposed to derive from this politicized tale, it is that the missionary zeal of the Americans in Vietnam is bound to do more harm than good. Fowler, an English journalist through whose disenchanted eyes the story is viewed, has tried to remain aloof from these conflicts, these purely political passions. He longed for permanence even though he did not believe in it. Happiness was ephemeral. Nothing lasted. "Death was the only absolute value in my world. . . . I envied those who could believe in a God, and I distrusted them. I felt they were keeping their courage up with a fable of the changeless and the permanent." Death, however final, at least reprieved one from the nightmare of loss.

Though God is generally present in Greene's fiction, even in his "entertainments," He is not the protagonist of the tale nor does He ever function as a deus ex machina. He is a strangely hidden, infinitely patient, and mysterious God. Wisely Greene does not attempt to explain or justify the ways of God, which are in any event inscrutable, but concerns himself with the search of troubled and sinful men to find the peace that passeth understanding. They do not find it, of course, though they may achieve it after they die. Who knows? The issue is left in doubt. But what makes for extreme dramatic tension in Greene's religious novels is that the search for God remains paradoxical, enigmatic, unattainable. Furthermore, what reinforces the psychological complexity of the effect is that Greene never fails to bring in the counterpointing element of doubt, temptation, evil, sacrilege, heresy, and even blasphemy. Man, easily tempted to fall, measures out his days in this desperate oscillation between sin and the hunger
for redemption. Always there looms before him, like a light shining in darkness, the hope of salvation, only he must reach out for it.

Thus it is not God but man, afflicted, terrified by the imminence and finality of death, torn between good and evil, feverishly seeking to make his peace—it is man who is the central character in Greene's fictional tragedies. Marie-Beatrice Mesnet, in her essay "Graham Greene and the Heart of the Matter," declares: "When all is said, God is the principal character in Greene's tragedies, the 'third man' we unconsciously seek." This is a mistaken view of the matter. If God were the principal character in Greene's tragedies, then they would cease to be tragedies. No, in each of Greene's religious novels the emphasis is on the agony of the search, the evil that dwells in the heart of man, the impotence of human beings when they depend on their own finite powers, their longing for the absolute. God remains unknowable, and the only certainty is, as in *Brighton Rock*, that of damnation. But if God is not the principal character, He is always present in the background. Greene's most poignant scenes occur when man, trapped in the midst of life, strives to commune directly with God and seems to hear God say that failure is not what it seems, that life is not all evil or a thing of sound and fury. The experience lasts but a moment, and when it is over the one who has beheld this vision can never be certain that he has received a genuine message.

The truly religious insight of Greene emerges not in any echo of theological teaching but in his faith that God made man in His image and that this image can never be obliterated completely. Man can never destroy the potentialities of the divine in the depths of the self, even though as a fallen creature he fights against God. Greene is aware, of course, of the thorny contradictions to be found in his interpretation of God and his conception of grace. Faith works paradoxically and incomprehensibly. The agony is part of the search, the price of gaining the vision of God. If the sinner is to escape from his torment, if the earth-bound self is to gain the peace that it longs for, then this can only come to pass in death, in the presence of God. In this sense, Greene's vision of escape is indeed eschatological. But if Greene is possessed by this faith, he is too sensitive and conscientious an artist to omit the evidence that contradicts his faith. Respecting the limits of his art, he tries to describe the lacerating conflicts of conscience, the sense of loss, the experience of evil, the anguish of doubt and disbelief. Particularly in the throes of sinning—that is the religious dialectic Greene employs most effectively—does the religious feeling of his main characters reach great intensity. Miserable, tainted, tortured,
it is through suffering that they come closer to God and gain a deeper, luminous insight into spiritual reality. When they are most abandoned, when they feel utterly lost, it is then they turn in despair to God. That is how Greene imaginatively reiterates one of his dominant obsessions, namely, that it is the sinner who unwittingly achieves sainthood, though the issue forever hangs in doubt. The tragedy remains, evil is not vanquished, the quest for God must go on.

It is this concentration on the compulsion of sin, this uncertainty as to the will of God and the disposition of the soul beyond the grave, this haunting awareness of the evils of the flesh and the corruptibility of the heart—it is this which lends dramatic power to Greene's novels so that they can be read with absorption by non-believers as well as believers. For though these characters as Catholics pose the problem in theological terms of damnation and original sin, what they are basically concerned with is human destiny, the need for wholeness, the urge toward transcendence. Indeed, this is the ruling motif in Greene's novels. He does not gloss over the ugly and bitter truth of life. He is not composing religious tracts for the times but is endeavoring to shadow forth the human essence in all its refractory and numinous mysteriousness. If he exalts the blessedness of achieved faith, he is also cognizant, no modern novelist more so, of the horror that infects life.

It is interesting to note that Sean O'Faolain, himself a Catholic, objects strongly to Greene's conception of man as no longer free to choose. Thus O'Faolain contends, in The Vanishing Hero, that Greene, working with such a conception of human nature, tends to degrade man. His characters are introduced in order to embody a theological doctrine, a symbolic obsession. "Faith, for him, is not a gift, it is won from Despair. . . . His hope of heaven depends on the reality of hell. He believes in God because he believes in Satan." O'Faolain suspects that Greene is really writing not fiction but modern miracle plays. Concentrating as he does on the universality of evil, Greene finally winds up with the paradoxical thesis that evil leads not only to repentance but to God—a God who has a special affection for the wicked.

This doctrinal argument scarcely bothers the untheological reader. What some readers may find hard to understand is Greene's obsession with original sin, his fixation on absolute evil. What does absolute evil consist of? Drunkenness? Indulgence in sensuality? Discussing Greene's work in The Emperor's Clothes, Kathleen Nott says: "You can write a human book about a Catholic if you do not at the same time write a book about Catholic theories of human nature." The
answer to that, of course, is that Greene is a novelist who is not concerned with theories or doctrines but with the difficult task of composing a work of art. He is a Catholic novelist who is not writing about Catholicism but about men and women who are Catholics and who fall into sin and who suffer for their sins. He is not demonstrating the inexorable working out of Catholic dogma but illustrating the intrusion of mystery in the unfolding pattern of human fate. He is using the material of the Christian mythos to exhibit the tragic struggle in which the soul of man is involved. In short, in composing his tragic novels, he rises above the pull of theological considerations. It is these qualities in his fiction which we have analyzed—his tendency to identify himself with all of mankind, the guilty as well as the innocent, his uncompromising revelation of the power of evil, his psychological interest in the sinful and the suffering, his all-embracing compassion for the torments men endure as they finally face the certain knowledge of doom—it is these qualities that make him a tragic rather than a specifically Catholic novelist.