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GRAHAM GREENE: THE BURNT-OUT CATHOLIC

WILHELM HORTMANN

Critical investigation of the nature of Graham Greene's Catholicism has become rewarding since the publication of The End of the Affair in 1951. Mr. John Atkins in his penetrating if virulent study, mentions the review in Time as one of the typical reactions to this novel. The article was headed "Shocker," and the caption ran "Adultery can lead to Sainthood." Saturday Review was equally outspoken in its comment: "the slut who becomes a saint"; and The Times Literary Supplement, in its review entitled "Painful Sanctity," expressed the feelings of many readers when it said,

The common-sense point of view is surely that, whatever the inward marks of sanctity, the overruling outward one is that in some way the candidate's life should be more than ordinarily edifying. Is a married woman who gives up her lover for the love of God a saint? . . . "Thousands have done so."

It is not difficult to see why The End of the Affair should have roused a certain section of Mr. Greene's camp-followers to an indignant outcry. Sarah Miles' adulterous love of the writer Maurice Bendrix, with its hard core of undorned sexuality, did not shock Greene readers since they had long learned not to be squeamish about such matters. But Sarah's pact with God when she found her lover apparently lifeless after a bomb explosion during the Blitz, the renunciation of her love and her slow and initially reluctant surrender to a God who was to reward her abstention from felicity with miracles, struck many readers as a deplorable aberration from Mr. Greene's previous attitude to his religion.

It is indicative that Greene's convert colleague Evelyn Waugh, who had found The Heart of the Matter a "mad blasphemy," should hail the new book as "singularly beautiful and moving." (The Month, Sept. 1951.) A comparison with Waugh's Brideshead Revisited is illuminating. The deathbed repentance of a stubborn old roué and the miracle worked at his end are analogies to Sarah's assumption among the saved under even more miraculous circumstances. Both Waugh and Greene expend a great deal of ingenuity to prove miracles possible but they fortify the bastions of the Church at a point where no sensible person would dream of attacking it. The probability or improbability of miracles is no longer a living issue. The possibilities of this controversy were exhausted in the 19th century when historical and scientific Bible exegesis resulted in the fierce and protracted rearguard action fought by conservative Catholics and Protestants alike. Since then, the discussion of miracles has taken on a strangely academic flavour. The reason for this phenomenon is clear: why should one strain at the gnat when one has swallowed the camel? The basic tenets of the Christian faith, the divinity of Christ, the resurrection, and the transubstantiation in the Eucharist, constitute deeper mysteries and are
more difficult to believe than an occasional miraculous divine intervention in the physical world.

The defense of miracles, though occasionally necessary as a reminder that established verities are not to be forgotten, would thus appear as a doctrinally very safe undertaking. It has the blessing of scripture and Christian, especially Catholic, tradition and is pleasing in the sight of Catholic ultras. Yet it is equally clear that nothing is gained for the intellectual progress of the Catholic Church by a restatement of settled issues. Why then should Graham Greene have found it necessary to play safe after he had gained a reputation as a dauntless advocate of controversial Catholic issues? Or is The End of the Affair only an isolated departure from Greene’s well-documented Catholic progressivism? The later investigation of his plays The Living Room and The Potting Shed will show that this is not the case.

Evelyn Waugh’s stricture of The Heart of the Matter as a “mad blasphemy” might easily be extended to cover also the other two novels of the “Catholic trilogy,” viz. The Power and the Glory and Brighton Rock. The frank discussion in these novels of thorny religious problems, Greene’s warmhearted defense of the despairing sinner, his scorn of pious bigots and his claim that the Church may know all the rules, but “it doesn’t know what goes on in a single human heart” are naturally dear to the liberal Catholic’s heart. They are also calculated to allay Protestant suspicions of allegedly inexorable Catholic dogmatism, the more so, since such liberal opinions are frequently expressed by the priests, not by the sinners. Yet the universally appealing picture of a humane and all-understanding Catholic Church, which Greene presents in his trilogy, has tended to conceal the fact that he is frequently dangerously close to heresy, if not altogether heretical.

The question upon which Greene is at variance with the teaching of the Church in all three novels is the Catholic doctrine of damnation and the Church’s view of divine mercy. Strictly speaking, anybody dying in the state of mortal sin is regarded as damned. Yet it has long been felt that such a purely technical qualification for Hell leaves no room either for last minute repentance in the form of an act of contrition or for the intercession of divine mercy. The uncompromising rigour of the original doctrine has therefore been relaxed to encompass a modification to this extent that eternal damnation will only overtake unrepentant or despairing sinners who consciously reject God or the means of grace offered through the Church. Yet even in this modified form, the doctrine of damnation is held to be unacceptable by Greene, and the Catholic trilogy sets out to devise borderline cases where this view does not—or cannot possibly (in Greene’s opinion)—apply.

Pinkie, the youthful gangster in Brighton Rock, is a Catholic. So is his young wife, Rose. They both view the world from the religious aspects of good and evil, whereas Ida Arnold, the representative of a type of morality based on social values, distinguishes between actions according to the social and legalistic categories of right and wrong. John Atkins, in his chapter on Brighton Rock entitled “Ida Arnold And The Protestant Way,” has drawn attention to the partisan manner in which Greene has stacked the evidence against Ida Arnold’s conception of morality. His view, briefly,
is that Graham Greene has so far allowed himself to be seduced into blatant pro-Catholic propaganda, that the Protestant Ida Arnold's normal ideas of human decency and "Right and Wrong" are presented as an inferior type of conscience to the criminal but Catholic Pinkie's knowledge of his own murderous nature. Greene, according to Atkins, is not ashamed to insinuate that it is better to sin outrageously—as long as one is aware of the spiritual significance of this—than to be good without relating this goodness to a divine source.

There is no need to quarrel with this interpretation. The textual evidence for this view can be found, and the use to which one wants to put it depends entirely on one's attitude to Greene's intentions. Yet one point is clear enough: Pinkie and Rose—although bewildered children in any other context—know perfectly well the religious significance of their actions. Pinkie is no longer a practising Catholic but still the Catholic religion is to him "the only thing that fits" and, quite as a matter of course, "there's Hell, Flames and damnation" (p. 66). They frequently discuss their chances of salvation which they both agree are infinitesimal unless they are granted time for repentance before death. Pinkie knows of this chance for he quotes "Between the stirrup and the ground, he something sought and something found" and Rose catches the allusion and completes it by saying "Mercy" (p. 119). Yet he knows instinctively that he will not seek mercy when the time should come. He remembers it in the fear of death after the slashing by opposing race-track gangsters. "You could be saved between the stirrup and the ground, but you couldn't be saved if you didn't repent" (p. 141). He returns to this thought immediately afterwards. "Between the stirrup and the ground there wasn't time: you couldn't break in a moment the habit of thought: habit held you closely while you died" (p. 143). He is fully aware that he will not break his habit of unrepentant hatred. "The stirrup and the ground. That doesn't work," he tells Rose later on (p. 150), thus knowingly acquiescing in his damnation. In answer to this, Rose for the first time touches upon a theme that will recur again and again throughout the trilogy: she says "I don't care... I'd rather burn with you than be like Her" (referring to Ida Arnold) (p. 151). The world has often been well lost for love, but some of Greene's characters—and the best among them, Rose, Scobie and the whisky priest—are prepared to lose Heaven for love as well.

This conscious choice of damnation in all three novels is first and foremost the anguished outcry of the soul torn between love of God and the love of fellow-beings, and indeed Greene goes to considerable trouble to show that his characters do not come to their decision lightly. Yet in spite of all the emotional pressure behind this outcry, it is never presented as a momentary crack-up, when the overtaxed soul briefly relaxed its hold on spiritual reasoning. This conscious choice of damnation is never a decision upon which the characters would wish to go back. It represents rather a well-premeditated standpoint, the ultimate end of the spiritual road which each of his characters has measured out in its entirety. It is a deliberate attempt to force God's hand, if that is possible, to compel Him to intercede for the beloved person or persons or otherwise commit the divine injustice of damning what is...
presented by Greene as an obviously innocent victim. This is most crassly expounded in the case of Rose, thinking about the suicide pact with Pinkie to which she finds herself committed. "He was going to damn himself, but she was going to show Them that They couldn't damn him without damning her too" (p. 307). And later, in her confession, after she has had time to reflect, she repeats "I don't want absolution. I want to be like him—damned" (p. 330). The priest in The Power and the Glory is equally sure of his wish to share damnation:

"Listen," the priest said earnestly, leaning forward in the dark, pressing on a cramped foot, "I'm not as dishonest as you think I am. Why do you think I tell people out of the pulpit that they're in danger of damnation if death catches them unawares? I'm not telling them fairy stories I don't believe myself. I don't know a thing about the mercy of God: I don't know how awful the human heart looks to Him. But I do know this—that if there's ever been a single man in this state damned, then I'll be damned too." He said slowly, "I would not want it to be any different. I just want justice, that's all" (p. 259).

Such sentiments are nothing less than heroic and Graham Greene can be sure of enlisting his readers' sympathies for them, but the implication seems to be that either God or the Church is at fault in envisaging the possibility of hell for almost anyone at all. When the priest wants justice he is primarily thinking of himself and that he does not want to be treated differently from anyone else. But this desire for justice could equally well be taken to mean that he wants divine justice and that the reflection of this justice in the Catholic doctrine of damnation is not justice at all. The reference to the "human heart" and what it looks like in the sight of God shares this ambiguity. Here it is coupled with the idea of mercy and the implication is: We do not know anything about mercy and it is possible that our sinful hearts are so awful before God that mercy can hardly operate: we sinners are unworthy of mercy. On the other hand the meaning of the whole passage seems to preclude such religious rigour: if the limited and sinful priest recognizes how pitiful human beings are, how much more must God in His all-encompassing understanding of human nature find them objects of pity and forgiveness.

This view is even more forcibly expressed at the end of The Heart of the Matter where Father Rank says to the recently widowed Mrs. Scobie: "For goodness' sake, Mrs. Scobie, don't imagine you—or I—know a thing about God's mercy." "The Church says . . ." "I know the Church says. The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart." We may safely add "But God does and that is why He will have mercy."

In the same novel Scobie counters the dogmatic Father Clay, who decries Pemberton's suicide because it has cut off his chance of salvation, by saying "Even the Church can't teach me that God doesn't pity the young . . ." (p. 99). Again Greene voices a humane sentiment but he is obviously at variance with the explicit teaching of the Church concerning suicide. The suggestion in all three novels is that the Church is limited in its understanding of and provision for human failure, that we cannot expect true justice from it and that an all-understanding and all-merciful God will decide differently. Greene is so sure of this that he makes Rose,
the whisky-priest and Scobie stake their salvation on this conviction. The authority on which he does so is certainly not a dogmatical but a purely emotional one. It need not be stressed that such flagrant disregard for the authority of Catholic dogma will sap the foundations of Catholicism as an established and divinely founded religion. Where else—according to Catholic teaching—does God manifest Himself on earth than in the Church Militant? To whom has the binding power been given—to the established Church or to any individual with his tutored or untutored intellect and emotions? The answer is unmistakably clear: Graham Greene in proposing to set the individual above established authority is definitely outside the pale of the Church and guilty of heresy.

It is true of course that Greene had no conscious intention of propagating heresy and subverting the authority of the Church. The religious ardour in the novels would appear to be evidence of the contrary, for is not the whisky priest turned into a saint and Scobie into a man who takes his religion seriously to the point of a deadly and damning paradox? But that does not make their views any the less heretical. Heretics never suffered from lack of concern for religion.

It is impossible that Greene should have been unaware of the significance of the consequences of his views. Nevertheless he has not been afraid to step into heresy, and his reasons for doing so must be accounted as among the basic compulsions of his personal and religious nature. We get a glimpse of them through Scobie’s silent dialogue with God shortly before his suicide. The voice of God urges Scobie to confess and repent or—if that is impossible—to sin and bear the burden of his sin in this life, because:

“If you live you will come back to me sooner or later. One of them will suffer, but can’t you trust me to see that the suffering isn’t too great?”

The voice was silent in the cave and his own voice replied hopelessly: “No, I don’t trust you. I love you, but I’ve never trusted you. If you made me, you made this feeling of responsibility that I’ve always carried about like a sack of bricks. I’m not a policeman for nothing—responsible for order, for seeing justice is done” (p. 316 f.).

This then, would seem to be the basic failing in Greene’s faith: “I love you, but I’ve never trusted you,” an inner conviction that under the prevailing conception of God in the Catholic religion justice is only imperfectly realized. This feeling, most clearly formulated in The Heart of the Matter, is frequently voiced in one form or another in the other two novels also. It underlies all the religious discussions in the Catholic trilogy. At the risk of heresy Greene reiterates his view that the Church needs a broader basis of compassionate humanism, a deeper understanding of failures and misfits and that this can only be accomplished by relaxing the dogmatic rigour of Catholic notions about damnation. His equally strong obsession with and insight into the neurotic compulsions of the social misfit (Pinkie) and the individual failure (Scobie and the whisky priest) on the one hand and the Catholic religion on the other, has led him to weigh such maladjusted characters in the Catholic scales. The result of this operation is that the scales are found to be wrong. With the Catholic teaching about sin and its eternal consequences in one scale and human failures analysed as to their metaphysical helplessness in the other, the scales register

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damnation (for the characters) and heresy (for Greene, the analyst). This must be so, since mercy, the balance without which such spiritual weighing is nonsense, is shrouded in mystery. Shrouded in mystery, Greene would contend, for the Church as much as for himself. And if the Church nevertheless regards itself as the keeper of the Treasure of Grace and takes the liberty of making binding pronouncements on the matter, then it fails in its duty of compassion for the sinner and of humility towards an overawing mystery which surpasses human understanding. This is the logical conclusion to Greene’s views and the heretical pattern of doctrine upon which the three great Catholic novels are conceived.

Over the period of ten years, from Brighton Rock in 1938 to The Heart of the Matter in 1948, the attempt to humanize one of the central doctrines of the Church with ideas and writings that were at least in part beyond the borderline of heresy, must have built up a spiritual tension in the author which he could not endure forever. The point would have to come at which he would have to decide where he stood in relation to the teaching authority of his Church. This is not a biographical study and therefore I shall not try to align the biographical material with possible bearing on this question, to be found interspersed in several Greene studies, notably in those by Atkins and Matthews, with the thesis of my paper. Such a synopsis — interesting and necessary as it appears — would require a full-length study. The evidence of his works alone is clear enough.

We see the tension break in the next Catholic novel, The End of the Affair of 1951. The constellation of the leading characters — the eternal triangle — would permit another attack on the rigour of dogma. Sarah Miles and Maurice Bendrix are hopelessly in love with each other. Their love is as exclusive and elemental a force as ever threw human beings together and it seems only a question of time till Sarah will have overcome her scruples about not hurting her husband Henry more than is necessary, and go to live with Maurice permanently. It would have been in keeping with the tenor of the novels of the trilogy to have made Sarah more consciously Catholic, to let her divorce her husband and marry Bendrix and follow her spiritual progress or decline from that point onwards: a daring undertaking and one worthy of Graham Greene’s fine record of doctrinal humanism. For although the teaching of the Church on Holy Matrimony is explicit and fixed, defection from the communion of saints through divorce and re-marriage happens every day, and the Catholic novel on this problem still remains to be written. Or does Graham Greene with his much-bruited reluctance to send even the greatest sinner to Hell, who was to make Father James Browne in The Living Room say “Hell is for the great, the very great. I don’t know anyone who is great enough for Hell except Satan” (p. 40), does this same author suddenly consign the thousands of Love’s pitiable victims — who are certainly not great — to the everlasting flames? Greene does not need to be defended against such a charge; each one of his books shows the author’s almost unbounded charity and understanding. Yet it remains a curious oversight — if oversight it is — that Greene in writing about marriage and a planned divorce should have overlooked the outlined conclusions as a
possible road for his new novel to take. It might naturally be argued that that was not the novel Greene chose to write. That is true, but only partly so, for in the subsequent play *The Living Room* (1953) Greene once again dealt with the idea of the marriage of a Catholic outside the Church.3

In *The End of the Affair* this subject, however, remains muted and rarely comes into the foreground. Instead, Greene describes the return to God of an unlikely recruit to the heavenly hosts, Sarah Miles, and the influence of this conversion upon her surroundings, notably Maurice and Henry and also, by way of subsequent miracles, the son of the detective Parkis and the disfigured Richard Smythe. It is not surprising that this novel should have found a discordant echo in criticism. Evelyn Waugh recognized in it a corroborator of his own thesis in *Brideshead Revisited* where both Sebastian and his father are brought back to faith by "A Twitch upon the Thread." In the section of this title Cordelia is made to explain the strange workings of God's ways to theagnostic Charles Ryder: the long dormant power of faith asserts itself towards the end of a sinful person's life and a life-long denial of God is turned into a search for religious peace. The adverse criticism—such as reviews in *Time* and *The Times Literary Supplement*—looks askance at the improbable conversion of sex-ridden Sarah into a saint. It is not only the fact of the conversion of a sinner into a saint—for which after all Catholic hagiology offers abundant precedents—which was bound to antagonize Protestant or liberal Catholic readers, but Greene's trick of referring this spiritual change in Sarah back to a Catholic baptism which Sarah's mother had had performed on the unwitting infant in order to spite her truant husband. In the words of Sarah's mother, speaking about the unconventional baptism: "I always had a wish that it would 'take.' Like vaccination" (p. 201). The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer rightly deplores in this context that "unfortunately Mr. Green has enlarged the superstitious element in faith out of all proportion." Such an attitude to a sacrament, frankly, reduces the basis of the religious pattern of the book to nothing more than "white magic." To prove the efficacy of a sacrament in this manner was designed to give offense to all those believers to whom a sacrament is not only the external ritual action plus magic, but who regard the positive, free concurrence of the recipient of the sacrament as necessary. There is nothing wrong with giving offense when there is no other way of stating an important truth. But in the case of *The End of the Affair* the truth stated is not important. It is simply a reaffirmation of what Catholics have known and believed all along: that miracles may happen even in our time, that God may make His power felt in the most unlikely circumstances and that He may lavish His grace on a most unlikely sinner and turn him into a saint. These are basic assumptions for all edifying literature. In *The Power and the Glory* Greene could still give a kindly parody of the idealistic description of the martyrdom of the unworldly picture book priest, Juan, in the story the mother reads to the boy and her two daughters, by contrasting it with the naturalism of his own novel. In *The End of the Affair* he is writing this sort of literature himself. It presupposes in the reader the same type of religious credulity
as do most of the sugary propaganda pieces of edifying Catholic fiction, the same uncritical and undoubting acceptance at their face value of Catholic beliefs in improbable divine manifestations.

It differs considerably in that Greene is a realist who endows his characters with a complicated and neurotic modern psyche, who revels in the seedy aspects of life and tries hard to avoid even the faintest suspicion of bigotry or unworldly piouness. The searing drama of frustration and hatred enacted and suffered by Maurice Bendrix, and the prospect of a slow catharsis for his tormented soul are of course elements which only a writer of Greene's stature could present with such impressiveness. Yet in spite of these differences, The End of the Affair is built on the same religious basis as the common run of edifying Catholic fiction and must—notwithstanding all artistic arguments to the contrary—be classed as such.

It is a common element of such books, that they are designed to enhance our idea of the unlimited power of God and that they glorify God's victory over his satanic or human opponents. The greater the opposition—the more spectacular will be God's victory. Literature of this kind naturally has no room for unorthodoxy. Its success is bound up with the effective display of God's omnipotence, not with the individual soul wrestling with its doubts about the dogmas of the Church. In The End of the Affair Sarah Miles struggles against a conviction that increases in strength as her life draws to its end: that her life and actions stand under God's laws and charge. The Church as an offending institution and its dogmas as stumbling blocks to faith hardly enter Sarah's consciousness. She is incapable of heresy, because she has yet to be converted to belief.

We are now in a position to assess the significance of The End of the Affair as a turning point in Greene's Catholic writings. In the trilogy he presents believers who endanger their faith by rejecting certain important teachings of Catholic doctrine. In The End of the Affair he presents a person of innate and almost magic faith who is being brought to the point of acceptance of and belief in Catholic doctrine. In the trilogy he risks heresy and possible excommunication for love of failing fellow-humans; in The End of the Affair he risks nothing at all. He has given up battling with his creed, for it was a battle against insurmountable odds: an established world religion cloaked in majesty and mystery, endowed with divine power to bind and to loose, in possession of nearly 2000 years of penetrating theological knowledge. To fight such a temporal and spiritual power single-handed and on largely emotional grounds is doomed to end in disaster or surrender. The End of the Affair is Graham Greene's capitulation as a Catholic novelist. He has stopped portraying the struggle of the individual soul against sin and doubt, he has given up the attempt to humanize the harsh doctrines of the Church so that the fulfillment of the absolute demands of the Catholic religion might be harmonized with human frailty—instead, he has turned into a Catholic apologist. His previous concern with the reformation of the Church had led him into heresy and, so one must assume, to the brink of excommunication. Such dangers are avoided in The End of the Affair where he gives evidence of a changed mind, if not a change of heart.

It is important to note that Gra-
ham Greene turns from an advocate of human weakness into an advocate of the Church as soon as he touches upon the possibility of the marriage of a Catholic outside the Church. Greene’s generous and ingenious plea for the suicide’s chances of salvation namely could quite definitely not be extended to cover the Catholic who marries outside the Church. Church authorities might easily overlook Greene’s misrepresentation of the Catholic attitude to suicide. The compulsions, more so than the motives, behind suicide are after all inscrutable and the whole question is more or less academic from the standpoint of the practical Churchman. But marriage is one of the vital interests of the Church; it intimately concerns morals and religious education, and the religious quality of a marriage has far-reaching consequences for the continued existence and strength of the Catholic Church. Any divergence from orthodoxy on this point, any relaxation from the strict and stringent Catholic attitude, would be far more detrimental than whatever liberal views may be held on suicide. Few persons indeed could be persuaded by indulgent theologians to commit the latter. Marriage, however, is one of the essentials, and even Graham Greene’s well-known propaganda value would not have saved him from the index and expulsion had he tried to tamper with the uncompromising rigidity of Catholic teaching on divorce and re-marriage.

Nevertheless Greene was fascinated by this subject, as we see in The Living Room, of 1953. Here the young girl Rose, in the stifling atmosphere of her ancient and death-fearing aunts and in the presence of her paralysed uncle, the priest Father James Browne, acts out her brief tragedy: the tragedy of the Catholic girl who finds herself in love with a married man. The latter, the psychologist Michael Denis, is willing to divorce his neurotic wife and marry Rose. At first Rose regards the religious consequences of their plan rather flippantly:

*Michael:* You don’t mind—about the Church?
*Rose:* (lightly . . .) Oh, I expect it will come all right in the end. I shall make a deathbed confession and die in the odour of sanctity (p. 30 f.).

Yet she is not allowed to remain unaware of the gravity of the envisaged action. The scheming aunt Helen manages to separate the lovers and the ensuing altercation brings out the incompatibility of Rose’s humanistic ideas with the strictly Catholic views of her aunt.

*Helen:* ...I’ve kept her in the Church, haven’t I? She can go to confession now any time she likes.
*Rose:* And do it again, and go to confession, and do it again? Do you call that better than having children, living together till we die...
*Helen:* In mortal sin.
*Rose:* God’s got more sense. And mercy (p. 44 f.).

Once again, an emotionally coloured picture of God is called upon to correct the inhuman rigour of the Church. This time, however, Greene’s sympathies are divided. His heart may bleed for Rose and her predicament, but his mind is confronted by a wall of theological intransigence against which he knows it is useless to batter his head. For once, even the priest, usually with Greene an advocate of avant-garde or at least generous theological views, knows no consolation.

*James:* I want to help you. I want to be of use . . . But when I talk my tongue is heavy with the Penny Catechism (p. 58).
This is not surprising, for Catholic teaching on a marriage outside the Church is explicit, unambiguous and fixed: it is, in fact, an ideal subject for the Penny Catechism. The Catholic writer who ventures into this field of inhuman teleological abstraction has only two ways open to him: either to vindicate the views of the Church to man, or to make God in his own image: to speak out courageously for the numerous victims who fall short of the absolute Catholic demands in this matter; to prove in fact that God has "more sense" and more mercy than the Catholic Church. That this will lead him into conflict with the Church is a natural consequence; and that, if he should refuse to recant his unorthodox views, he would have to pay the ultimate penalty of being excommunicated, also follows from prevalent Catholic practice.

This is not to say that the treatment of this subject would not be meritorious—it is in fact crying out for exploration by a bold and compassionate novelist. Not only in the sense that he should try to show how a marriage begun under such unfavourable religious auspices can break up—as indeed it may—for that would again be no more than proving that the Church was right after all and had said so beforehand—in short, the apologist's attitude. The real difficulty lies rather in the more numerous, successful marriages of Catholics outside the Church, the type of marriage Rose is looking forward to when she says: "having children, living together till we die . . . ", or "we read about God's successes. We don't read about His failures. His happy failures, who just don't care much about Him, and go on living quietly all the same" (p. 49). It is in marriages of this kind that the novelist might discover far more insidious spiritual tragedies than in the searing clash of conflicting but short-lived emotions: how wedded happiness is sustained against encroaching spiritual desiccation and how contentment is achieved at the price of having to live a religious life without any of the means of consolation and grace that issue from communal worship within the Church.

This subject could only be adequately dealt with in a novel. Graham Greene, in opting to cast the matter of The Living Room in the form of a play—with its demand for sharp conflicts to be resolved—had already made his decision for an apologia of Catholic doctrine. In so doing he had to avoid the charge of defending an inhuman institution. He does so in two ways: first, by making Rose realize the human implications of the divorce in confronting her with Michael's wronged and neurotic wife Marion, and by making her perceive the two as inseparably, if unhappily married—perhaps the most moving moment in the play. In this way, the centre of the play is shifted from the religious aspect of the proposed action to its human implication. In other words: even if she were outside the Catholic framework, Rose would no longer wish to marry Michael after she has seen them together. After this realization the blame falls less heavily on the Catholic teaching on marriage, since the personal tragedy of Rose is now seen to have other sources also. The second shift of emphasis occurs in Rose's suicide. This brings back the focus on religion, for Michael angrily attacks Father James.

Michael: ... your Church teaches she's alive all right. She teaches she's damned—damned with my wife's sleeping pills.

James: We aren't as stupid as you think.
us. Nobody claims we can know what
she thought at the end. Only God was
with her at the end.

Michael: You said yourself she almost
spat the word 'prayer.'

James: It may not have been her last
word, and even if it were, you ought to
know you can't tell love from hate some-
times (p. 65).

In matters of suicide, Graham
Greene has the answers ready. They
differ little from what is said on the
subject by the priest in Brighton Rock
and by Father Rank in The Heart of
the Matter. The author, in other
words, is back on safe ground—his
plea for charity for the suicide will
not antagonize Church authorities.
It had not done so in the past. Its
occurrence in this playrecups some
of the sympathy for the Catholic re-
ligion which had been almost com-
pletely lost over the bigotry of the
self-righteous aunt Helen and the
helplessness of the priest, bound as he
was by his Penny Catechism. At the
end Father James, in fact, is made to
appear as a pillar of strength. His
interpretation of the happenings as
unavoidable “in the world of pain”
even convinces the outraged Michael.

Nevertheless, no amount of priestly
charity towards suicides or bitter
scorn poured out over tighthearted
bigots can conceal the fact that The
Living Room continues the theolo-
gical surrender begun in The End of
the Affair. The choice of the subject
matter, an issue in which Greene's
deep understanding of human weak-
ness and insufficiency is liable to clash
with Catholic doctrine, is worthy of
the author of the trilogy. Its treat-
ment, however, with its double shift
of emphasis away from the expected
conclusion, is evidence of the new de-
sire to escape dangerous theological
complications. It would be presumpt-
uous to blame Greene for not taking
the last step into open heresy and
courting excommunication. Yet hav-
ing to compromise his human religi-
ous conscience for the sake of theo-
logical conformism was bound to have
artistic repercussions. If it did not
limit him in the choice of subject
matter, it limited him in the roads
along which he was allowed to explore
it and, above all, it prescribed the per-
missible conclusions. The younger
man, who could say in Journey With-
out Maps (1936) “I had not been
converted to a religious faith. I had
been convinced by specific arguments
in the probability of its creed” (p.
200, Pan Books edition) is heard cry-
ing out in The Living Room: “I can’t
believe in a God who doesn’t pity
weakness” (p. 64). It appears that
in the meantime he had also found
some arguments against the probabili-
ty of his creed. But by that time it
was too late. He had been caught up
in the machinery of Catholic publicity
as one of the chief exponents of 20th
century Catholic literature. This
turned out to be a cramping position
as soon as he attempted to pity a type
of weakness which the Church does
not want to be pitied. The unortho-
dox humanizer of doctrinal rigour
was forced into the rôle of a Cath-
olic apologist when he flirted with the
possibility of humanizing a doctrine
on which the Church does not care
to relax its rigour.

The consequences of this deadlock
are clearly demonstrated in Greene's
latest Catholic work The Potting Shed,
of 1957. In this play Graham Greene
as the daring reformer has ceased to
exist. Instead, we find the author
now as a staunch defender of the
Church against external enemies. We
are invited to laugh at the aspirations
of the once famous H. C. Callifer,
who is now dying, a rationalist phi-
osopher in the wake of Darwin. In the very first scene we overhear his oldest friend and disciple, Dr. Baston, preparing his funeral oration:

"Callifer's greatest book was of course 'The Cosmic Fallacy,' but those who were closest to him know what store he set by that charming pathetic study of Jesus Christ, the Palestinian religious leader, 'He Was a Man.'" (p. 147)

The divinity of Christ is denied in the first sentences, Christ is reduced to a deluded but well-meaning fanatic about whom a rationalist philosopher may condescend to write a pathetic study. Callifer, Dr. Baston wishes his hearers to believe, has refuted Christianity forever:

"Now that the immense spaces of the empty universe, of uninhabited planets and cooling stellar systems have taken the place of the Christian God, we have Callifer to thank for a human life worthy of courageous Man. To the Christian superstition of eternal life, he bravely countered with the truth, Eternal Death." (p. 15).

How far Greene wishes us to take such opposition to Christianity seriously is an open question. Even Callifer's granddaughter, aged 13, mocks at such an unspiritual universe when she tells Baston that she has taken a vow "To the inevitability of evolution and the sacredness of man" (p. 16), a phrase taken from an essay of her grandfather's entitled "The Credo of an Atheist."

Luckily Greene does not consider it worth his while to waste much time shadow-boxing against such old-fashioned adversaries of religion. The play is rather an ingeniously contrived unravelling of a forgotten or repressed suicide, committed by Callifer's son James. At the age of 14, James, it appears, had come under the influence of his uncle William, a convert and a priest, who introduced the responsive boy to the elements of Catholicism, thus counteracting the irreligious influence of his family. The rationalist father, however, was not going to be outdone by a simple priest. His plausible arguments against the priest's unproven assumptions so confused the boy that he hanged himself. When he was cut down, he was found to be lifeless. Artificial respiration applied by the gardener was of no success. At that moment the priest out of love for the boy, whom he regarded in a spiritual way as his son, entered into a bargain with God:

"Take away what I love most. Take away my faith but let him live" (p. 94).

God heard his prayer and resurrected the boy, at the same time condemning the priest to 30 years of faithless service at His altar.

The unravelling of this miracle, which had been repressed and concealed by the Callifer family because it shook the foundations of their beliefs, is a fascinating piece of psychological detective work. The resultant conclusion, namely a proof of the existence of God, follows with the inevitability of a natural law:

"Something happened to me, that's all. Like a street accident. I don't want God. I don't love God, but He's there—it's no good pretending; He's in my lungs like air" (p. 115).

The undoubted dramatic qualities of The Potting Shed and the cogency of its religious argument should not lead the observer to the assumption that Graham Greene in this play has regained his former vigour as a reformer of the Church. He is here even less concerned with the Church and its need for reform than in the
previous two Catholic works. The enemy to be vanquished in *The Potting Shed* is not the uncharitableness of certain doctrines, but the supercilious atheism of high-brow rationalists who refuse to believe the evidence of proof even when it is pushed under their noses. The exploration of the lost childhood of James Callifer with its resultant discovery of the Christian God as a living force, may be a necessary and salutary undertaking in view of the prevalent agnosticism of large sections of the present-day public; but for the author of the Catholic trilogy this means no more than sniping from an unimperilled stronghold. Proving the existence of God by recourse to a miracle is a singularly modest aim for an early admirer of the worker-priests, for a dauntless tackler of dangerous theological issues, for a frank advocate of all those pitiable failures who stray from the straight and stony road of Catholic doctrine. The compromise of his conscience, of his own and individual contribution to the reformation of Catholicism, for the sake of theological conformism—a compromise begun with *The End of the Affair*—had taken its toll. As a Catholic writer Graham Greene has ceased to flaunt the rebel colours which made his reputation as one of the front-rank Catholic authors. The new uniform of the obedient Catholic apologist is an ill-fitting suit of clothes for the "lost leader," which barely hides his shame at having deserted the former objects of his compassion and the prizes of his fighting years as a Catholic writer. Little wonder then, that in recent years he has foregone Catholic issues altogether and has instead slipped into his well-worn suit of casual clothes as an author of topical, semi-documentary novels. They reflect his travels to the political trouble spots of the world, thus resuscitating a Graham Greene that had never been dormant, not even during the two decades of his Catholic interlude.

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1 The term is taken from R. W. B. Lewis, *The Picarete Saint*, 1959, p. 241, where he devotes a special chapter to the "Catholic trilogy." Although Greene did not conceive these novels as a sequence, they show a remarkable family likeness due to the author's unchanged attitude towards certain doctrines in all three works.

2 Quotations are taken from The Library Edition of the Works of Graham Greene, Heinemann.

3 That these ideas must have been on his mind is indicated also by an open letter Greene wrote to Monseigneur Feltin, Cardinal Archbishop of Paris, on the occasion of Colette's death in 1954. Colette, who had been twice divorced, had been refused Catholic burial. Graham Greene asks the Cardinal in Le Figaro Littéraire, "Are two civil marriages so unpardonable? The lives of some of our saints offer even worse examples. True, they repented. But..." and goes on to suggest that the Catholic Church is trying to punish misdemeanours beyond the grave. (Quoted after J. Atkins, p. 211.)

4 Similar attempts to barter one's salvation for divine help to be accorded to a person one loves or pities occur in *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*. When the whisky priest realizes the innate corruption of his daughter Brigitte, he prays, "O God, give me any kind of death—without contrition, in a state of sin—only save this child" (p. 103). And when Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* watches the child from the torpedoed boat die, he expresses a similar attitude in his prayer, "Father, . . ., give her peace. Take away my peace for ever, but give her peace" (p. 143).