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have grown almost titanic in their struggle are suddenly seen again as mere boys, some just tots, dirty-nosed and bedraggled. And then a retrospective irony results, since the boys deserve to be thought of as titanic: if they have been fighting our battle, we realize—with both hope and dismay—that mankind is still in something of a pre-puberty stage. Thus *Lord of the Flies* ends as no act of hope or charity or even contrition. It is an act of recognition. The tone is peculiarly calm: Golding keeps his distance from his materials; he does not interfere or preach; and the material is made to speak for itself through a simplicity of prose style and a naturalistic-allegorical form. The vision of Golding is through both ends of the telescope.

**The Quality of Graham Greene’s Mercy**

**ROBERT A. WICHERT**

In 1954 Graham Greene wrote an open letter to Cardinal Feltin, the archbishop of Paris, protesting the Church’s refusal of Catholic burial to Colette. The act itself was, I suppose, newsworthy, but to anyone who had followed Greene’s writings at all closely the thought behind it should have come as no surprise. Colette was simply the most recent of a longish list of sinners—including the central figures of many of Greene’s works—who have experienced the quality of his mercy, the gentle rain of his compassion.

The fact is that Greene, like God, likes to concern himself with sinners, and often sinners of a certain type: sinners who may be saints. There is the adulterous Sarah, in *The End of the Affair*, whom he most unambiguously raises to sainthood. There is the adulterous, ambiguous Rose, in *The Living Room*. There is the equally adulterous and ambiguous Major Scobie, in *The Heart of the Matter*, a novel to which Greene attached this quotation from Charles Péguy: “The sinner is at the very heart of Christianity... No one

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spring of 1938, of the Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas, states that had achieved notoriety as a result of their campaign against Catholicism. Greene came to these states frankly interested in the religious question. He was armed with letters from important Catholics elsewhere, and he had access to the important Catholics there. From these contacts and from personal observation he gathered a good deal of information about the persecution. This he set forth in *The Lawless Roads*, which became thus a travel book of a rather special sort: one which emphasizes the religious at the expense of the more conventional material of such books.

The second, and more important, fruit of this Mexican journey was *The Power and the Glory*, a novel heavily indebted to *The Lawless Roads*. *The Lawless Roads* is, in fact, almost the formless record of experience and *The Power and the Glory* the artistic ordering of it. What Greene does with the record shows that he is in essential agreement with Péguy.

In Mexico, Greene had heard—the travel book makes this clear—many accounts of priests who in one way or another experienced and fought the persecution. He even met some of them. But above all he must have had dinned into his ears the story of one called Father Miguel Pro, a twentieth-century Mexican Campion who for over a year, during the height of the persecution, secretly and effectively carried out his priestly office and who, when at last caught, died heroically crying out, "Viva el Christo Rey!" That his story impressed Greene is evident from Greene's giving to it, in *The Lawless Roads*, more space than he gives to that of any other martyr. That it did not strongly attract him, however, may be evident from his handling of Father Pro in *The Power and the Glory*. Significantly, Father Pro is not the central figure of the novel, or even an important one; he is simply a foil. He appears in the novel, in fact, only indirectly, as the hero of a sentimentalized martyr's life that a pious woman surreptitiously reads to her children, alternately thrilling and boring them. This hero has led a dedicated life from his earliest years; he seeks martyrdom, and on his last day faces his executioners calmly, happily, bravely—praying for them and dying calling out, "Viva el Christo Rey!"

Very different is the priest of *The Power and the Glory*. He has, superficially, some resemblance to Father Pro: the disguises of badly cut clothes, the secret Masses, the police hunts, the evasions, the exposure to vicissitudes of weather, the ultimate martyrdom; but he lacks the apparently flawless nature of Father Pro and his patent and certain heroism. He is, in reality, the obscure and nameless little priest who appears in *The Lawless Roads* only in the following two passages:

Every priest was hunted down or shot, except one who existed for ten years in the forests and the swamps, venturing out only at night; his few letters, I was told, recorded an awful sense of impotence—to live in constant danger and yet to be able to do so little, it hardly seemed worth the horror.

I asked about the priest in Chiapas who had fled. "Oh," he [Greene's host] said, "he was just what we call a whiskey priest." He had taken one of his sons to be baptized, but the priest was drunk and would insist on naming him Brigitta. He was little loss, poor man... but who can judge what terror and hardship and isolation may have excused him in the eyes of God?

From the hints contained here there emerges in the novel a priest always alone (except when administering sacraments), with no comforting church, no comfortable rectory, no steadying hierarchy, no fellow priest even to whom to confess; always fleeing in terror of
capture and death, yet half wishing them; often ill; often dubious of the wisdom and effectiveness of his actions; knowing that he has only to cross the frontier to find again redemption and repose and respect, yet never really crossing it; falling, through terror, loneliness, and a false sense of unworthiness, into irregularity, sin, and—at times—despair. His life is full of doubts, questionings, and fears; and his last moments are heroic only through his agony of inadequacy, but they achieve through it a high heroism.

When he woke up it was dawn. He woke with a huge feeling of hope which suddenly and completely left him at the first sight of the prison yard. It was the morning of his death. He crouched on the floor with the empty brandy-flask in his hand trying to remember an Act of Contrition. "O God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins . . . crucified ... worthy of thy dreadful punishments." He was confused, his mind was on other things: it was not the good death for which one always prayed. He caught sight of his own shadow on the cell wall: it had a look of surprise and grotesque unimportance. What a fool he had been to think that he was strong enough to stay when others fled. What an impossible fellow I am, he thought, and how useless. I have done nothing for anybody. I might just as well have never lived. His parents were dead—soon he wouldn’t even be a memory—perhaps after all he wasn’t really Hell-worthy. Tears poured down his face; he was not at the moment afraid of damnation—even the fear of pain was in the background. He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint.

His final moments are, again, heroic only in this strange, self-effacing, self-deprecatory, very human way.

A small man came out of a side door: he was held up by two policemen, but you could tell that he was doing his best—it was only that his legs were not fully under his control. They padded him across to the opposite wall; an officer tied a handkerchief around his eyes. . . . Everything went very quickly like a routine. The officer stepped aside, the rifles went up, and the little man suddenly made jerky movements with his arms. He was trying to say something: what was the phrase they were always supposed to use? That was routine too, but perhaps his mouth was too dry, because nothing came out except a word that sounded more like “Excuse.”

Here the crash of rifles stops the priest’s mouth, just as, in The Heart of the Matter, the mounting effect of the dose of Evipan puts a period to Scobie’s “Dear God, I love. . . .”

In thus reaching over the obvious figure of Father Pro and in preferring to him the nameless and not sinless priest, Greene is doing what he once described Péguys as doing: “challenging God in the cause of the damned.” Major Scobie does it too. And even the Mexican priest:

There was a time when he had approached the Canon of the Mass with actual physical dread—the first time he had consumed the body and blood of God in a state of mortal sin: but then life bred its excuses—it hadn’t after a while seemed to matter very much, whether he was damned or not, so long as these others . . .

Péguys, indeed, spent almost a lifetime doing it, and Greene has his example ever before him. At the end of Brighton Rock he has an old priest saying, in obvious reference to Péguys:

There was a man, a Frenchman, you wouldn’t know about him, my child, who had the same idea as you. He was
a good man, a holy man, and he lived in sin all through his life, because he couldn't bear the idea that any soul could suffer damnation. . . . This man decided that if any soul was going to be damned, he would be damned too. He never took the sacraments, he never married his wife in church. I don't know, my child, but some people think he was—well, a saint. I think he died in what we are told is mortal sin—I'm not sure: it was in the war: perhaps . . . You can't conceive, my child, nor can I or anyone—the . . . appalling . . . strangeness of the mercy of God.

The tired priest of The Heart of the Matter utters, at the end of that book, very similar words: "For goodness sake, Mrs. Scobie, don't imagine you—or I—know a thing about God's mercy." Scobie himself had said, earlier, "We'd forgive most things if we knew the facts." The crippled priest of The Living Room says of the self-slaughtered Rose: "You don't know and I don't know the amount of love and pity He's spending on her now." And Greene, we have already noticed, said of the priest of The Lawless Roads: "Who can judge what terror and hardship and isolation may have excused him in the eyes of God?"

Here is the crux—and the irony. In each case we are dealing with a highly perceptive, a highly informed, a highly intelligent individual. There is the priest of The Power and the Glory: he knows the laws of the Church as only a priest can; he is very much at home in matters of conscience. There is Scobie: he is by profession a police official and a judge; he has much skill and practice in determining rights and wrongs. There is Pégy: a thinker and a poet: subtle and sensitive. There is, finally, Greene. They are all what they are: intelligent men of good will. They all agree upon the presence of sin—monstrous, heinous sin. Three of them appear to have died in that sin. Yet—paradoxically, per-versely—they make it impossible for us to damn them. And, if we can't, we are forced to ask, can God?

The answer, at least for Greene, has already been partly suggested. In his last hours the priest of The Power and the Glory reflected, you remember, "it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage." Pégy goes even farther: "When a man does not sin, cannot sin . . . he is not a Christian." Conversely: "Literally he who is a sinner, he who commits a sin is already a Christian, is in that very fact Christian. One could almost say a good Christian." Easy, says the priest, to be a saint; easy, we know too well, to be a sinner; hard to the extremity of hardness, imply Pégy and Greene, to be both. Easy for Father Pro never to doubt, never to fear, never to falter. But infinitely hard for the nameless priest not to. His every act (and even thoughts are acts) every day costs him more effort, more anguish, than martyrdom itself costs Father Pro. So also with Scobie. This is not to undervalue saints like Father Pro: remember that the nameless priest knows at the end that only one thing counts—to be a saint. The danger may lie in undervaluing sinners like Scobie and Pégy—and, perhaps Greene would say, even Colette. They know "from experience," the Mexican priest says, "how much beauty Satan carried down with him when he fell. Nobody ever said the fallen angels were the ugly ones." They know also, as Léon Bloy says, that the service of God is hard and that what is hardest for the soul is to suffer, not for others, but in others. Such was the suffering of Christ; such the suffering of the priest, of Scobie, and of Pégy. If at times the suffering is such that they despair, we must remember—both The Power and the Glory and The Heart of the Matter point this out—that it is precisely the possession of a
soul and, what is more, a soul of good will that enables a man to despair. An animal never knows despair; neither does an evil man. "He always has hope," says Greene. "He never reaches the freezing-point of knowing absolute failure. Only the man of good will carries in his heart this capacity for damnation."

But only a capacity. If, like Scobie, he carries something else in his heart, he may still be saved; and that is love of God. Loving God, says the martyr priest, is "wanting to protect Him from yourself." Scobie so loves God, in this sense, that he kills himself rather than go on offending him day after day by sinning. He cannot cease sinning, because in doing so he would hurt one or the other of two women whom at the same time he loves and pities. He cannot continue sinning, because in doing so he would hurt the One whom, above all others, he loves—and pities—most. The women must suffer, or God must suffer, or—finally—he, Scobie, must suffer—damnation if need be. The worst suffering is suffering in others: against that his own, though it be eternal, is nothing. So he tells God:

You'll be better off if you lose me once and for all. I know what I'm doing. I'm not pleading for mercy. I am going to damn myself, whatever that means. I've longed for peace and I'm never going to know peace again. But you'll be at peace when I am out of your reach. It will be no use then sweeping the floor to find me or searching for me over the mountains. You'll be able to forget me, God, for eternity.

Scobie's father confessor was right, then, when he said, at the end of the novel, "It may seem an odd thing to say—when a man's as wrong as he was—but I think, from what I saw of him, that he really loved God." That is the heart of the matter—loving God. Without it, perhaps nothing avails; against it, perhaps nothing prevails—not even sin, sacrilege, despair, suicide.

Greene has done here what he says is the right and duty of the novelist to do: he presents a personal morality, even one perhaps of disloyalty. His morality, in this case, is also that of Mauriac: "It is not our deserts that matter but our love." And of Péguy: "The sinner extends his hand to the saint, gives his hand to the saint, since the saint gives his hand to the sinner. And both together, the one through the other, the one drawing the other, they mount to Jesus, they make a chain which mounts to Jesus."

In forging this chain Péguy and Greene are trying, it might be argued, not to make the best of both worlds, but to make both worlds best—to bring God's mercy towards man right down almost into the depths of Hell and to lift man's love for God right up into the topmost circle of Heaven. Whether the process entails dangers for sinful man; whether pity, like power, corrupts; whether Bernanos has hold of the right horn when he distinguishes between "true pity—the strong gentle pity of the saints" and a "childish shrinking from other people's pain"—it is not for me to say. Even Greene admits that pity "is so much more promiscuous than lust." But it is obvious that in the whole matter he wants God to have the last word.