SAINT CATHERINE, VON HÜGEL, AND GRAHAM GREENE'S THE END OF THE AFFAIR

In recalling the origins of The End of the Affair in the Introduction to the Collected Edition, Graham Greene revealed a hitherto unsuspected yet highly significant influence on the plot, theme, and religious background of his novel, an influence which helps explain the development of Maurice Bendrix, to account for the later revisions of the text, and to place Greene more firmly within the English Catholic tradition Greene notes

The book began to come to life in December 1948 in a bedroom of the Hotel Palma in Capri. I have always imagined it was influenced by the book I was reading at the time: a selection from Baron von Humel, in particular passages from his study of St. Catherine of Genoa.¹

Von Hugel continued to influence the novel, even after its publication, because, as Greene explains, something went wrong with the ending: 'I realised too late how I had been cheating—cheating myself, cheating the reader, cheating Baron von Hugel.'² Who, the reader may ask, was Baron von Hugel, and why should he have cast such a long shadow over this 'the most Catholic of Greene's novels'?³

Far from being the obscure biographer of an even more obscure saint, the Tuscan-born, Austrian national, but English resident, Baron Friedrich von Hugel (1852-1925) has been 'frequently bracketed with Lord Acton and Cardinal Newman as the giants of British Catholic scholarship.'⁴ Bishop Gore called him 'the most learned man living.'⁵ Dean Inge styled him 'the ablest apologist for Christianity in our time.'⁶ and as early as 1894, Richard Holt Hutton wrote that von Hugel was 'one of the most learned and subtle of the

⁴ Letters from Baron Friedrich von Hugel to a Niece, ed. Gwendolen Greene with a Preface by John B. Sheerin (Chicago: Henry Regency Company, 1955), p 1
⁵ Quoted in Letters, p 1
⁶ Quoted in Letters, p 6
critics of Biblical literature in the Roman Catholic Church either in this or any other country, and to most of us, at least, not the less impressive because he is a layman who has been brought to the study of the Scriptures not by professional duty, but by the natural attractions of the subject itself. Linked by marriage with the Herberths of Wilton House, by friendship with the Howards of Arundel Castle, and by common interests with leading academics and churchmen on the Continent, von Hugel was for over forty years at the center of English Catholic intellectual thought. He early championed biblical criticism, defended Alfred Firmin Loisy and George Tyrrel, even after their excommunications, and attempted to avert the reassertion of ultramontane scholasticism in the Church. To some, he was the leading apologist and exponent of the 'Modernist' movement. In J. J. Heaney's view, he was 'the leader of a crusade for untrammeled rights of the exegete.'

The Modernist movement dominated intellectual ferment within the Church from early in the 1870s until approximately 1910. Pope Leo XIII checked the movement with his encyclical Providentissimus Deus in 1893, and Pope Pius X effectively crushed it with the 1907 encyclical Pascendi Dominici Gregis which condemned 'theory or dogma and Biblical criticism, which had an agnostic, immanentist-evolutionary and anti-intellectual basis.' Never more than loosely organized as a movement, Modernism sought to emancipate science from dogma, to welcome the findings of textual scholars, particularly concerning the Pentateuch and the Synoptic Gospels, and to adjust the Church to present social conditions and demands. Some Modernists denied the supernatural as an object of certain knowledge, and Loisy's L'Evangile et l'église (1903) which culminated his troubles with officials, insisted that 'the adaptation of the Gospel to the changing conditions of humanity is to-day a more pressing need than ever.'

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7 Quoted in Lawrence F Barmann, Baron Friedrich von Hugel and the Modernist Crisis in England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p 46, n 3
9 Heaney, p 994. Heaney defines Modernism as 'an ideological orientation, tendency, or movement within the Catholic Church, clearly emerging during the waning years of the 19th Century and rapidly dying out around 1910 after official condemnation. Only loosely and sporadically organized, it was characterized by a true antagonism to all ecclesiastical authority, and by a belief in an adaptation of the Church to what was considered sound in modern thought even at the expense of radically changing the Church's essence. At its roots, grounded beyond liberal Catholic positions on Biblical criticism and theology, lay a triple thesis: (1) a denial of the supernatural as an object of certain knowledge (in the totally symbolic nonobjective approach to the context of dogma, which is also related to a type of agnosticism in natural theology), (2) an exclusive immanence of the Divine and of revelation ("vital immanence") reducing the Church to a simple social civilizing phenomenon, (3) a total emancipation of scientific research from Church dogma, which would allow the continued assertion of faith in dogma with its contradiction on the historical level' (pp 994-5)
The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends, von Hugel’s major work and the one which influenced Greene, has been called ‘the weightiest book thrown into the scales of Modernism’, but few scholars accept this view, seeing few traces of Modernist thought in it. Begun in 1898 as a 3,000 word article for the Hampstead Annual, the book grew until its publication in 1908 into a 450,000 word, two-volume elaboration of ‘3 fundamental convictions: the special gift and position of Christianity, and institutional Cath-Christianity, all religion in so far as sincere and experienced ‘revealed’, and no hard nucleus’. The work was well received, although a second edition was not called for until 1923. John B. Sheerin has suggested both its appeal and its difficulty ‘It was a superb achievement but so profound as to render it unavailable to the ordinary reader the reasoning was so involved, the sentences so long and ponderous that few dared to wrestle with it.’ William Temple, in a Guardian review, called it the most important theological work written in the English language during the last half-century. It is a masterpiece of detailed critical study, the most striking section of it — the introduction — has so deeply permeated the thought of our times that its leading conception has become a commonplace among many who have never read the book, or even who have never heard of it. This leading conception is, of course, the necessity of three elements in any religion which is to be both full and living: the mystical, the intellectual, the institutional.

It is not surprising that Greene read the book or that he marked at least one passage, the memory of which would in part convince him that he had ‘cheated’ in The End of the Affair; however, Greene probably encountered von Hugel not in the original two-volume form but rather in Readings from Friedrich von Hugel, an anthology selected by Algar Thorold.

The passage Greene marked appears near the end of the second volume in a section titled ‘The Scientific Habit and Mysticism’. It reads:

If we examine into what constitutes the religious plausibility and power of this view, we shall find, I think, that it proceeds, above all, from the fact that, only too often, the second, the Theistic view and practice, leaves almost or quite out of sight the purification and slow constitution of the Individual into a Person, by means of the Thing-element, the apparently blind Determinism of Natural Law and Natural Happenings. Yet nothing can be more certain than that we must admit and place this undeniable, increasingly obtrusive, element and power ‘somewhere’ in our lives if we will not own it as a means, it will grip us as our end. The unpurified, all but merely natural, animal, lustful and selfish individual man, is far too like to the brutes and plants, indeed even to inorganic

11 Bishop Söderblom quoted in Michael de la Bedoyère, The Life of Baron Von Hugel (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), p 227
12 See Barmann, p 143
13 Letter to C C J Webb, 27 November 1908, quoted in Bedoyère, p 222
14 Letters, p 3
15 Quoted in Bedoyère, p 223
16 Readings from Friedrich von Hugel, ed Algar Thorold (London 1928) The passage marked by Greene appears on p 58

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substances that so palpably surround him, for it not to be a fantastic thought to such thinkers as Spinoza, (and indeed it would be an excessive effort to himself) to believe that he is likely, taken simply in this condition, to outlast and is capable of dominating, the huge framework of the visible world, into which his whole bodily and physical mechanism is placed, and to which it is bound by a thousand ties and closest similarities his little selfish thinkings cannot but seem mere bubbles on a boundless expanse of mere matter, all creation cannot, surely, originate in, depend from, and move up to, a Mind and Spirit in any way like unto this trivial ingenuity 17

This, I take it, is a highly abstract version of the plot that ‘began to come to life’ in 1948 Greene comments in his Introduction

Nothing could have been further from von Hugel’s meaning than the story which now began to itch at my mind — of a man who was to be driven and overwhelmed by the accumulation of natural coincidences, until he feared that, with one more, the excuse of coincidence would break. Alas! it was an intention I betrayed 18

The story of Maurice Bendrix is one of ‘the purification and slow constitution of the Individual into a Person’. Bendrix strives throughout the novel to remain a pure materialist, the ‘merely animal, lustful and selfish man’ of von Hugel’s passage, who denies there is anything beyond the material world. He thinks, of Sarah’s love for God and himself ‘if there is to be a conflict between an image and a man, I know who will win. I could put my hand on her thigh or my mouth on her breast he was imprisoned behind the altar and couldn’t move to plead his cause’. 19 After Sarah’s death, Bendrix’s materialism asserts itself in the form of a challenge to God ‘I wanted her burnt up, I wanted to be able to say, Resurrect that body if you can’. 20 And in that most uncomfortable dinner scene, where Greene so ably plays off various shades of belief and disbelief, Bendrix taunts Father Crompton over prayer, superstition, and visions, only to be told ‘‘I’m not against a bit of superstition. It gives people the idea that this world’s not everything. And isn’t it more sensible to believe that anything may happen than?” 21

At the heart of Bendrix’s materialism, however, is a trap, a trap von Hugel called ‘the Thing-element, the apparently blind Determinism of Natural Law and Natural Happenings’. Bendrix finds himself caught between contingent materialism and a potentially providential world. Of the events occurring in his life, he asserts ‘It was only a coincidence’, ‘It’s just a coincidence — a horrible coincidence’, ‘A coincidence, that’s all’, and ‘I’ll never lose my faith in coincidence’. Yet it was these very coincidences which

17 The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in St Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends (London: Dent, 1908), 2 375-6. I have quoted the entire paragraph and italicized the passage Greene marked. Greene quotes the italicized passage in his Introduction, pp. viii-ix
18 EA, p ix. The sentence, contrary to a very literal reading, does not mean that Greene’s plot had nothing to do with von Hugel’s study. Rather, it means that Greene’s fictional approach is far from von Hugel’s abstract theorizing.
19 EA, p 137
20 EA, p 148
21 EA, p 192

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were to and eventually do drive him into doubt of his materialism. He has his choice of ‘that foolish newspaper word that was the alternative to “coincidence”’ or keeping his faith in designless contingency.

Again, von Hugel’s essay is relevant. In contrasting the Historical-Institutional, the Mystical-Volitional, and the Critical-Speculative approaches (his terms) to understanding man and his world, von Hugel posited as his first consideration ‘Science and Religion. Each autonomous at its own level, and, thus, each helpful to the other.’ Science, in his view ‘required [a conception of Nature] to be profoundly de-humanized, de-sentimentalized, a rigorous mathematical Determinism and soulless Mechanism the right and necessary ideal of Physical Science.’ This led von Hugel to the conclusion that

But let grace wake up, in such an individual, the sense of the specific characteristics of Spirituality and the thirst to become a full and ever fuller Person, and this in contact and conflict with, as well as in recollective abstraction from, the apparently chance contingencies of History and Criticism, and the seemingly fatalistic mechanisms of Physics and Mathematics and you will be able, by humility generosity, and an ever-renewed alteration of such outgoing, dispersive efforts and of such incoming recollection and affective prayer, gradually to push out and to fill in the outlines of your better nature, and to reorganize it all according to the Spirit and to Grace, becoming thus a deep man, a true personality.

There are a number of incidents in the novel which can be called either ‘miracles’ or ‘coincidences’ which belong either in a deterministic or a contingent order. In particular, there are the revival of Bendrix following the V-1 explosion, the appearance of Mrs. Bertram at just the necessary moment to rescue Bendrix from the girl, the healing of Lancelot Parkis, and the disappearance of Richard Smythe’s birthmark. In addition, one could perhaps add Sarah’s baptism, its delayed effects, and the ‘openings’ of Sarah’s diary. These ‘miracles’ have pleased few of Greene’s critics. Harvey Curtis Webster has blamed them for causing ‘most readers to refuse to acknowledge the book’s excellence.’ Herbert R. Haber suggests that they show Greene has ‘truly fallen prey to didacticism,’ and Frances Kunkel has archly noted ‘As soon as Greene introduces God as a character and solves human problems by miracles he dooms his achievement as pure literature for the machinery from which the rescuing God emerges is less the novelist’s

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22 EA, pp. 76, 180, 196, 206, 207
23 Mystical Element, 2 368
24 Mystical Element, 2 379
25 Mystical Element, 2 384
26 For a study of such openings and the general theory of divination through use of books, see my ‘Sortes Biblicae in Adam Bede,’ Papers on Language and Literature 9 (1973), 396-405
28 ‘The End of the Catholic Cycle,’ in Evans, p. 148. Haber’s essay discusses the God novelist analogy with extreme perception

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than the theologian’s.” With his usual critical precision, Morton Dauwen Zabel has argued that the miracles involve ‘an unprepared shift from realism to didacticism, an arbitrary change of moral (and consequently of dramatic) premises which has the effect of detaching the characters from their established logic as personalities and forcing them to serve a function outside themselves’. Greene himself has admitted that the miracles created a problem.

I realised too late how I had been cheating — cheating myself, cheating the reader, cheating Baron von Hugel. The incident of the strawberry mark should have had no place in the book, every so-called miracle, like the curing of Parkis’s boy, ought to have had a completely natural explanation. The coincidences should have continued over the years, battering the mind of Bendrix, forcing on him a reluctant doubt of his own atheism.

The problem seems not to involve questions of ‘pure literature’ or of ‘unprepared shifts’ but rather a simple miscalculation on Greene’s part in the first editions of the novel. Each of the ‘miracles’ has a natural explanation: save one — the disappearance of Smythe’s indelible birthmark. Its disappearance closes off doubt with a certainty. There can be no ‘completely natural’ explanation for the disappearance of ‘the purple crumpled strawberry mark stretching from above the cheekbone down to the point of the chin almost like a mark of distinction’. In other words, Greene ‘cheated’ with the birthmark just as Charlotte Bronte ‘cheated’ by having Bertha Mason Rochester die. Von Hugel sketched a world where it was — as Father Crompton suggested — ‘more sensible to believe that anything may happen’ than to believe in a world where everything that happens belongs to contingency or determinism.

In the Collected Edition, twenty-nine of Greene’s fifty-three revisions are concerned with Smythe’s birthmark. Indeed, Greene expended more than a little ingenuity in emending ‘strawberry mark’ to ‘raw spots’ (C84), ‘spots’ (C86, 88, 100, 110, 127, 155), ‘one cheek’ (C87), ‘the horrible spots’ (C101), ‘those awful spots’ (C126), ‘one insignificant spot’ (C202), and ‘a rash’ (C210) as the disfiguring birthmark becomes urticaria, a skin rash akin to hives and nervous in origin. That ‘raw strawberry flush’ (B96) pales to ‘the ugly florid cheek’ (C85), the ‘crinkled scarlet cheek’ (B146) becomes a ‘bad cheek’ (C129), and Henry who originally wondered if skin had been grafted (B234) now asks ‘“Electric treatment?”’ (C208). These revisions underline Greene’s intention to make all the results following Sarah’s death become valid.

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20 Craft and Character (New York: Viking, 1957), pp. 293-4
21 E.A., pp. ix-x. Von Hugel’s remarks on miracles further support Greene’s feelings.
22 The End of the Affair, (London: Heinemann, 1951), p. 84, hereafter abbreviated B
far more problematical. The disappearance of the birthmark belongs to a
totally different physical and metaphysical order than the mere curing of
hives. Bendrix is now in the ‘bet situation’ of Pascal, he could still view
the incidents as coincidences, but doubt has been planted and from it will
grow a Person.

Greene and Greene’s readers owe a two-fold debt to von Hugel, first
because he contributed to the making of *The End of the Affair* and then
because he later contributed to the improvement of the novel. Because so
much has been made of Greene’s ties with French Catholicism in light of his
essays on Mauriac, comments on Péguy, and use of Bloy, it is particularly
important that he acknowledged his debt to Baron von Hugel. It clarifies
his intentions in the novel. It locates the intellectual background of his
critique of materialism and rationalism. Moreover, it enables us to place
Greene within the shadows of English Catholicism and its rich traditions.

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33 For a history of the text and a full discussion of the authorial revisions, see my
"Betrayed Intentions" Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair,* *The Library*
34 (1979), 71-8

34 See Philip Stratford’s *Fate and Fiction: Creative Process in Greene and Mauriac* (Notre Dame University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), for a sensible consideration
of the relationship and possible influences.
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