

Closing Time in the Gardens

higher plotter for higher ends. The central image is of the great baroque house Brideshead, with its small chapel. Waugh by now plainly thought that what was already there in England was better than anything that reform or revolution could bring to it, and the book is suffused with historical nostalgia. But Brideshead is an image not solely of English aristocratic life but Arcadia itself, the paradisaical, innocent world of beatific vision, which does not however yield grace. The house and its meanings end up, as most meanings in Waugh do, in another, chaotic, wartime world, as an army camp with a lunatic asylum at its gates, "quite remote from anything the builders had intended," but still an indirect, ambiguous symbol of an essence. If *A Handful of Dust* is Waugh's finest, most completed novel of the period, *Brideshead Revisited* is the great social recapitulation, clearing the ground for Waugh's embittered encounter with the post-war world to follow.

8.

If Waugh seemed to spring fully-fledged as a writer with a style, Graham Greene seemed to spring fully-fledged as a writer with a subject, a vision, a world of his own so distinctive that it came to be called Greeneland ("that last-chance waterfront where the vultures clatter down like thunder from heaven on the tin roof beneath which a drunken doctor and corrupt police chief exchange brown concubines and confidences about losing their faith at preparatory school," one critic calls it). Greene, who was born in 1904, the son of the headmaster of Berkhamsted School, always believed that writerly imagination, like misery and faithlessness, started in childhood; and his own certainly did. The imprint of young unhappiness and a youthful attempt at suicide laid a version of life over his fiction – the fiction of an ever distinctive world of "misery's graduates," spies and adulterers, betrayers and sinners, where temporal disorder is universal, civilization never on offer, redemption ambiguous and death certain, which, shifting from one form to another, he would

Greenland
Greene
Greene

always write. One striking thing about Greene in retrospect (he died in 1991) is the sheer scale of his production: over twenty-five novels, over fifty books, several plays and important film scripts, like *The Third Man* (1950), with its famous chase through the sewers of life, which would change directions in modern cinema. Greene was influenced by several strands of Modernism, and possessed particular admiration for Conrad and Ford, though also for much more popular writers like John Buchan, Marjorie Bowen and Eric Ambler, who opened up many of the landscapes of his work. But he was essentially a writer formed in the Thirties, and his writing gradually rejects Modernist mannerism for a vividly metaphoric realism, drawing on journalism, travel writing and popular forms. His work, with its spyings and treacheries, seedy landscapes and dangerous frontiers, its wastes of moral and political confusion and its high metaphysical anxieties, its European and internationalist texture, always remained born out of that decade, even though more than any other novelist he would carry forward the vision through the era of the Cold War and the superpower age and right into the New World Order. Some of his best books belong there, though also some of his worst. His first novel *The Man Within* (1929), written when he was a recent Catholic convert, is a historical novel which opens out some of his essential themes – betrayal, pursuit, the manhunt, the inner burden of guilt and anxiety – but remains slight; his next two novels were failures and were later withheld from the Collected Edition. But over the Thirties his fiction realized the forms it needed for itself, and the sequence of novels he produced just before, around and immediately after the war – *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Confidential Agent* (1939), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) and *The End of the Affair* (1951) – surely form the recognizable centre of his fiction.

Greene's first successful novels – artistically as well as commercially – were in fact his “entertainments,” borrowings from the popular and sensational forms from the crime novel to the psychological thriller which, in the Thirties, suddenly

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acquired a moral, political and metaphysical relevance. He called his first really successful novel *Stamboul Train* (1932) an entertainment (it was written for money); the book borrowed from Agatha Christie's *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928) and elsewhere those ever more familiar themes of crossing risky frontiers and the borders of civilization, of espionage and sudden arrests, seduction and meetings with strange emissaries of foreign powers, all born from a Europe in terrible unrest, which flavoured so much of the fiction of the Thirties, from Isherwood to Elizabeth Bowen (*The House in Paris*, 1935). *A Gun for Sale* (1936) – another “entertainment,” though now meant more seriously – is the story, set in a world fearful of war, of a hare-lipped political assassin, Raven, who says “There has always been a war for me,” and whose complex amoral mixture of loyalty and treachery gives the novel not only its dark flavour but a metaphysical theme. David Lodge has noted how in Greene's work “the properties of realism – the sharp visual images presented through cinematic devices of montage and close-up, the catalogues of significant particulars, the keen rendering of sensation, the touches of local colour laid on with so skilled a hand – seem to cluster around the nucleus of some ambiguous moral concept which is ‘the heart of the matter’ and which is represented by some word or words recurring as insistently as a drumbeat.” In *A Gun for Sale* the word is “betrayal,” in his next novel *It's a Battlefield* (1934) it is “justice,” in *The Confidential Agent* (1939), Greene's third entertainment, it is “trust,” in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) it is “pity,” in *The Human Factor* (1978) it is “gratitude.” They indicate the deepening moral and metaphysical thrust of his writing, indeed its emerging religiosity. They remind us too of Conrad, by whom he was technically and morally influenced, and *It's a Battlefield* – set around the police investigation of a political crime, in a vividly rendered, grimly desolate contemporary London which is indeed a social, political and moral battlefield, and concerned, Greene said, with the inadequacy of human justice – is Greene's most direct homage to him.

For, like Conrad, Greene was becoming a novelist of the

gloomier moral flavours, of fidelity and infidelity, trust and betrayal; after all the writer was at heart, he said, "a man given over to an obsession." Also like Conrad, he was a writer who never seemed quite at home with the familiar, and who sought out the dark places of the earth. Even when he wrote of English life – the desolate London of the political rally in *It's a Battlefield* or in parts of *England Made Me*, seedy bedsitter Nottingham in *A Gun for Sale*, the Brighton of the pre-war razor gangs in *Brighton Rock* (1938) – it appeared a foreign and distanced place, part of a larger European map, increasingly a world map, of pain and compassion, guilt and sin, betrayal and obscure redemption. It feels, increasingly, an abandoned world, a ruined place where life is damned or fallen, though there is always "someone who has betrayed one's natural distrust of human nature, someone one has loved." Bridging the gap between popular and serious writer, storyteller and experimentalist, he was progressively coming to see the novel as a narrative for telling stories of heroes or, more often, anti-heroes who, in the dark and confusing passages of modern history, faced some difficult yet eternal trial, succeeded or, more probably, failed in some existential and metaphysical quest. It was a journey without maps in a landscape where the secret agent and the private detective, the spy and the traitor, stalked through the mean streets of an ill-lit world, where kindness and compassion frequently led to self-betrayal and despair, where, it has been said, characters have discovered a sense of sin but not set their feet on the way of salvation, and where life is a gamble with a death that has its own obscure yet strangely radical theology of hell and redemption. With this comes a Conradian understanding, even a sympathy or moral identification, with those who have not managed to keep faith, or have committed treachery.

Brighton Rock is the novel where the theme of faith emerges clearly in Greene's fiction, as it does in Waugh's with *Brideshead Revisited*. It started as yet another entertainment, with the seventeen-year-old racecourse hoodlum Pinkie a villain from the same world as Raven; but by setting the book in a world in which good and evil become a common country, apart from

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conventional right and wrong, the themes of salvation and damnation are significantly released ("She was good, he'd discovered that, and he was damned; they were made for each other"). This is played against structures taken from the crime novel and the thriller movie, with an element of chase and detection; it shares with *noir* fiction like Patrick Hamilton's the notion that life is throughout a dingy world ("Why, this is Hell, nor are we out of it," says Mr Drewitt in the book). Ida, who thinks otherwise and believes in "human nature" ("Bite all the way down, you'll still read Brighton," she says, comparing life to Brighton rock, "that's human nature"), is thus not the novel's heroine, but a blowsily good-hearted figure of farce; Rose, who supports Pinkie throughout, despite his cold evil ("no more human contacts," he dreams), much as Pinkie accepts his own damnation, is the moral focus. The novel surprises, even shocks, because of the moral frame in which its action is interpreted; at times, indeed, it becomes difficult to grant the author his Greenean God on which so much depends. These are lawless roads, where the hunter is a narrower human being than the hunted, the rule of law is less than the rule of salvation and damnation, and the marked man can become the alien or demonic hero, dependent at the last on the "strangeness of the mercy of God." If, as Greene said, he had learned from Marjorie Bowen to write of a world of "perfect evil walking the world where perfect good could never walk again," here was the book to prove it. With his next, *The Confidential Agent* (1939), Greene offered another, and far less weighty, entertainment that really goes back to Conrad and *The Secret Agent*, though it draws on the Spanish Civil War for its political atmosphere and its angle of foreignness. But with *The Power and the Glory* (1940), "the only book I have ever written to a thesis," Greene's religious theme returned in all its force.

Basing the novel on his travels in revolutionary Mexico over two months in 1938, Greene here extraordinarily creates the physical, moral and religious landscape of central America in a period of cruel anti-clericalism. It is a fitting Greenean setting to the drama of his nameless whisky priest, the seedy lover and

alcoholic who fails as a man but succeeds in his office, so that at once he descends into darkness and ascends into martyrdom. He is one of the central characters of Greene's fiction, one, he said, that "had emerged from some part of me, from the depths." His failings are many, but they teach him human love; he can still fulfil his function, and in Greene's interpretation become that much more the saintly man. For increasingly Greene was turning to the paradoxes of his Catholic religion, the metaphysical ironies and enigmas of faith, the portrait of a Pascalian, absurd world from which God seemed absconded, but in which obscure acts of faith constitute something midway between a humanist and a religious - in other words an existential - salvation. There was another entertainment, *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), now most notable for its evocation of London in the Blitz; but the larger theme returned again in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), a novel set in expatriate Africa in wartime, in which the colonial policeman Scobie attempts to take on the world's evil and suffering, and finally dies by suicide. Set in a West Africa where "Heaven remained rigidly on the other side of death, and on this side flourished the injustices, the cruelties, the meanness that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up," where love is a response to human unattractiveness, where what Scobie offers up to God is his own damnation, this is one of the most complete of the "Greeneland" social, moral and metaphysical landscapes, a central work that, lacking the sensationalized crime aspects of *Brighton Rock*, or the political persecution of *The Power and the Glory*, becomes the interpretation of a psychology. With these three novels Greene had laid out his central themes, established his distinctive flavour, and turned what had begun as sensational popular fiction (his work was never entirely to lose that flavour) into the novel of existential crisis. And what had begun as a fiction written, as he said, against "the economic background of the thirties and that sense of capitalism staggering from crisis to crisis," a fiction in which the social order has been destabilized and existence is lived according to hellish rules, had become a universal theme, a bleak overall accountancy of the twentieth-

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century condition, a metaphysical setting. The fictional world has become a universe, with Greene its neo-divine creator – the maker of its plots, the deviser of its obscure governing moral and metaphysical rules, the dispenser of its strange spiritual destinies, working in collusion with a yet higher plotter still. This created some of the fictionalist ambiguities of his next novel *The End of the Affair*, a book strangely split between the human and divine author, so that the first is able to assign a miracle to the second. Greene's highly ordained, metaphysically terrible, historically seedy universe was in place, all ready to sustain him over more than thirty more years of influential and central writing.

9.

"What a decade!" wrote George Orwell in 1940, in what looked like a relieved farewell to the entire Thirties: "A riot of appalling folly that suddenly becomes a nightmare, a scenic railway ending in a torture chamber." The obituaries on the "low, dishonest decade" started almost at once. If the times had a dominant form, it was elegy; and the striking poetic elegies Auden wrote for the deaths of two of the great "Moderns," Sigmund Freud ("To us he is no more a person/ But a whole climate of opinion") and W. B. Yeats ("In the nightmare of the dark,/ All the dogs of Europe bark,/ And the living nations wait,/ Each sequestered in its hate"), just as he left for the United States appeared to sum up the prevailing mood. Dismay and the funereal note were now clearly dominant in the arts. In the pages of *Horizon*, Cyril Connolly announced that it was "closing time in the gardens of the West," and mourned the dying not just of one but of two eras of writing: the Modernist era, and the "new writing of the Thirties." There was, he noted, an intimate link between "the Twilight of the Arts and the twilight of a civilization," and, though this artistic as well as historical gloom might have seemed the personal pessimism of a legendary decadent, it was widely shared by others. In *Penguin*