

CHAPTER FOUR

Brighton Rock

Brighton Rock represents both a major achievement and a crucial turning point in Greene's work. Richly allusive, superbly paced in a quick, nervous style, with plot and imagery drawing upon the cinematic devices of cross-cutting and montage, the novel is as entertaining and suspenseful as any of the "entertainments," the category to which Greene originally assigned it. *Brighton Rock* carries on the study of a tormented criminal mind begun in *A Gun for Sale*; the novel centers around a character, Pinkie Brown, in whom Greene develops more fully, and with tragic overtones, the embittered, murderous antihero first presented in James Raven. Like Raven, Pinkie is young, vicious, alienated, unloved (until he meets Rose) and perhaps incapable of love; Pinkie similarly bears scars from a traumatic childhood, but unlike Raven's harelip his scars are internal and are given a Freudian explanation. *Brighton Rock* also continues Greene's presentation of a point of view through which the pieties and cheerful optimism of middle-class life are savagely attacked. In Greene's practice the method serves a narrative voice which projects a distinctly literary and usually soured romanticism as a dim backdrop to the often lurid melodramatic surface of contemporary life. It is a voice which will persist in later works in spite of other changes in tone and the conspicuous paring down of Greene's style, and in several second-phase books it will be identified with a narrator-protagonist. *Brighton Rock* also takes Greene into new territory as the first of the "Catholic novels" that would form the initial basis of his reputation as a major writer of his age. To do justice to the novel's complexity as well as its important position among Greene's works, I will discuss it under several headings in this chapter, with

emphasis first upon its continuities of theme, image, and allusive method with the earlier work, and second upon its literary background and its religious themes.

PINKIE AS NAPOLEONIC STRATEGIST

Greene's depiction of his tormented protagonist is rich in literary associations and analogues, including carefully plotted links between Pinkie and a number of historical and literary figures remarkable not only for their ambitious plans but also for their attempts—finally unsuccessful—to translate those ambitions into reality through military force. Indeed, the allusions to battlefields, warships, military tactics, and real or would-be conquerors are so numerous in *Brighton Rock* as to suggest strong continuity between this work and the two earlier books similarly concerned with the condition of English society: *It's a Battlefield*, in which Greene used the battlefield as metaphor for political and economic struggle in modern urban life; and *A Gun for Sale*, in which the prospect of war only threatens to make palpable to all the condition of life already experienced by many. Unlike the battlefield metaphor in the earlier work, however, the many allusions in *Brighton Rock* are frequently ironic and tinged, finally, with the mock-heroic, serving to depict not just the power and danger of Pinkie's designs but their preposterousness and inevitable failure as well.

Central to this aspect of Greene's conception of Pinkie are the figures of Napoleon I and Napoleon III. Pinkie, whose youth and diminutive stature are in this context reminiscent of Napoleon I (the "little corporal" who received his first commission at age sixteen), conceives of life as "a series of complicated tactical exercises, as complicated as the alignments at Waterloo." He laments the lack of sufficient time for quasi-military planning: "Tactics, tactics, there was never any time for strategy" (137). Consistent with this impression of Pinkie is his posture after he has been attacked by Colleoni's men at the racetrack, an image which recalls the familiar pose of Bonaparte with one hand tucked inside his coat: "Pinkie limped along the sand with his bleeding hand hidden, a young dictator..." (133). Later, at the sight of Pinkie's wounds, his

lawyer Prewitt picks up the image of combat: "Oh dear, oh dear," he says, "you've been in the wars" (143).

Ida, the nemesis who defeats this would-be Bonaparte in the end, is associated with nautical imagery and naval battles. Determined to pursue Rose relentlessly until the girl reveals the truth about Pinkie's murder of Fred Hale, Ida moves through Snow's restaurant "like a warship going into action, a warship on the right side in a war to end wars, the signal flags proclaiming that every man would do his duty" (148). Yet her attempt to persuade Rose to betray Pinkie meets "militant" resistance both literally and figuratively when Rose refuses:

The bony and determined face stared back at [Ida]: all the fight there was in the world lay there-warships cleared for action and bombing fleets took flight between the set eyes and the stubborn mouth. It was like the map of a campaign marked with flags. (248)

Ida leaves the encounter looking "a little flushed, a little haughty *sailing* down the street" (249; italics added); and later, after her defeat of Pinkie is complete, she is described as resembling "a figurehead of Victory," a comparison which not only confirms her triumph but also recalls the famous warship *Victory*, aboard which Lord Nelson led the defeat of Napoleon's naval forces at the Battle of Trafalgar. (Even Greene's choice of Nelson Place as the site of Rose's miserable home would seem to echo the Napoleonic theme. Greene has written that a real Nelson Place did exist in Brighton, but even so the choice of one such location over another may have been influenced by—or may have influenced—his use of allusions to Napoleon.)

Pinkie's "Napoleonic" ambition links him also with Louis Napoleon, or Napoleon III, the "little Napoleon" whose dream of restoring his uncle's empire led finally to humiliating defeat and capture. Largely successful as an administrator of France's internal affairs, Napoleon III attempted to expand the power and influence of the Second Empire through a militant foreign policy. Successful at first against Russia (in the Crimean War) and Italy, he failed seriously in ventures against Mexico and Austria and, in 1870, against Prussia, who defeated the French soundly at the Battle of Sedan. While Napoleon remained in captivity after Sedan, his government at home was overthrown;

consequently, upon his release in 1871 he went into exile in England, where he stayed for a time in Brighton with wife Eugénie. In the novel Greene makes him a one-time resident of the fictional Cosmopolitan Hotel, now the home of Pinkie's oily arch-rival, Colleoni. Pinkie, on his first visit there, is fascinated by the elegant arm-chairs and couches stamped with "Napoleonic crowns" and adorned with gold and silver thread. "Napoleon the Third used to have this room," Colleoni tells him, "and Eugénie." But Colleoni relishes no irony and knows little history in this case; when Pinkie asks who Eugénie was, Colleoni replies, "Oh, one of those foreign polonies" (77). Pinkie's own dim perception of a connection between himself and Napoleon III turns not upon historical knowledge but upon ambition. He wants the luxurious trappings of power and authority, and these in turn he associates with heroic conquest. The pervasive imagery of conquest extends even to the boy's attitude toward sexuality, an attitude vividly conveyed in the scene in which he contemplates with "scared lust" the prospect of a brief sexual encounter—for him, an initiation—with Spicer's girlfriend, Sylvie. For Pinkie the occasion foreshadows his forthcoming marriage to Rose:

He put his hand on her thigh with a kind of horror: Rose and he: forty-eight hours after Prewitt had arranged things: alone in God knows what apartment—what then, what then? He knew the traditional actions as a man may know the principles of gunnery in chalk on a blackboard, but to translate the knowledge to action, to the smashed village and the ravaged woman, one needed help from the nerves. (164–65)

Pinkie knows that if he joins Sylvie in the back seat of the Lancia he will compound his own prior sins of murder and betrayal with the shared evil of Sylvie's lust and infidelity; moreover, she represents the spoils of victory—of his murder of Spicer. Yet the ultimate victim of his strategy is of course Rose, and Pinkie senses, as he looks toward the secular marriage that will place both Rose and himself in mortal sin, that the power to corrupt her soul along with his own is greater and more profound than the power to murder:

He was conscious for a moment of his enormous ambitions under the shadow of the hideous and commonplace act: the suite at the Cosmopolitan, the gold cigar-lighter, chairs stamped with crowns for a foreigner called Eugene. Hale [his murder victim] dropped out of sight, like a stone thrown over a cliff; he was at the beginning of a long polished parquet walk, there were busts of great men and the sound of cheering, Mr. Colleoni bowed like a shopwalker, stepping backward, an army of razors was at his back: a conqueror. Hooves drummed along the straight and a loud-speaker announced the winner: music was playing. His breast ached with the effort to enclose the whole world. (166)

The tone of the passage approaches the mock-heroic, for the reader knows that Pinkie's ambition "to enclose the whole world" is both childish in its absurdity and tawdry in its few specific aims. Pinkie would most probably be quite content to take over the world of Napoleon III's heir-apparent in Brighton, Colleoni. Furthermore, the scene concludes ironically with Pinkie's turning away in fear and disgust from the prospect of the encounter: "Marry, he thought, hell, no; I'd rather hang" (167).

Pinkie's murder of Spicer, the loyal gang member he no longer trusts, is an act of desperation which grows out of his own earlier failure as "Napoleonic" strategist. His initial plan is to lead Spicer to the Brighton racetrack to be killed by Colleoni's men. When, on that occasion, the unsuspecting Spicer places a bet on the four o'clock race, the result reveals still more of the author's allusive technique. The winning horse, "Black Boy," is Ida's horse; her winnings will enable her to remain in Brighton long enough to pursue Pinkie to his death. The second horse, "Momento Mori," is Spicer's—unknown to him, an omen of death. The third horse, "General Burgoyne," calls to mind the failed master plan of the British general who attempted to divide and conquer the American colonies with a three-pronged attack on Albany, N.Y. His object was to separate New England from the other colonies, and his initial success at Fort Ticonderoga made him confident of victory. The other "prongs" failed to materialize according to plan, however;

Burgoyne was consequently defeated at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, and his entire campaign was lost.

The story of still another figure of enormous ambition and scheming is recalled, indirectly and humorously, in *Brighton Rock* through the presence of Ida's friend Clarence, the "old ghost" who once seduced her by pretending to be fatally ill. Clarence appears only twice in the novel—once before Ida learns of Hale's death, and once at the end after she has carried out her scheme of vengeance. On both occasions she addresses him as "ghost," and both times he sits in Heneky's next to a wine barrel—a humorous allusion to the Duke of Clarence, victim of the murderous schemes of Shakespeare's Richard III and best known for his legendary death by drowning in a butt of Malmsey wine. The ghost of Clarence appears to Richard shortly before the latter's death on Bosworth Field: "To-morrow in battle think on me," says the ghost, "And fall thy edgeless sword: despair and die" (V. iii. 134–45). Richard III is another figure whose careful strategies lead to temporary victory and then ultimate defeat, specifically a military defeat. Greene's protagonist shares with him his scheming, his lack of conscience regarding the act of murder, and notably his hypocritical wooing of a young woman (Anne in the play, Rose in the novel) he does not love but plans to murder.

Greene's use of the ironic allusions to the Napoleons and General Burgoyne, together with his wryly humorous placing of the "ghost" Clarence by the wine barrel early and late in *Brighton Rock*, suggests a narrative strategy in which texture is enriched and character deepened through the ironic humor shared by the narrator and his reader but not by any character except the lawyer Prewitt, whose literary bent expresses itself through allusions, primarily to Shakespeare and Marlowe, that are lost upon Pinkie. Although Prewitt does not speak of military campaigns except in the brief instance mentioned earlier, he nevertheless contributes to the allusive pattern whereby the failure of Pinkie's strategies and ambitions is foreshadowed. Meeting Pinkie and Rose at the registry office where they will be married, Prewitt picks up a rose from the tiled floor and quotes—"promptly" and "inaccurately"—"Roses, roses all the way, and never a sprig of yew" (207). Greene's deliberateness, first in providing his character with this jumbled allusion, and second in labeling it inaccurate, speaks

for itself. The first half of Prewitt's line comes from Browning's poem "The Patriot," in which the speaker—a proud figure who, like Icarus, "leaped at the sun" and fell—recalls his lost glory as a political leader: a year earlier he had ridden down a rose-strewn pathway through cheering crowds, amid waving banners and ringing bells; today he rides to his execution. The second half of Prewitt's line, from Arnold's "Requiescat," provides a note of funereal gloom and points to the death of a lover—a fitting note for the wedding that is to follow. Significantly, this allusion appears only a few lines after Pinkie, contemplating his and Rose's "corruption" through the coming secular marriage, is "filled with awe at his own powers."

Pinkie's confidence at the moment has been fed, of course, by the ease of his earlier triumph in persuading Rose to accept his offer of marriage: it is by this strategy that he intends to protect himself from the only possible testimony that could incriminate him in the murder of Fred Hale. Yet even the moment of his successful marriage proposal is undercut by the author's technique of ironic allusion: in the brief proposal scene the narrator twice mentions a "badly foxed steel engraving of Van Tromp's Victory" (127) that hangs in Rose's room; she looks "from Van Tromp's Victory to the two looking-glasses" (128) before accepting Pinkie's offer. Greene's allusion to the Dutch Admiral Tromp could concern any of several occasions celebrated by Dutch and English painters and engravers. The context of the allusion, however, suggests that he may have had in mind Tromp's temporary victory over the English at the outset of the first Anglo-Dutch naval war in 1652. According to legend—almost certainly untrue—Tromp boasted of his victory by sailing the Channel with a broom at his masthead, thus signifying that he had swept the Channel clear of English forces. Tromp's victory was short-lived, however; he lost the next battle and, a few months afterward, was killed in the battle of Terheijde in 1653.

If indeed Greene had this occasion in mind, the connection between Tromp's temporary victory and Pinkie's seems clear enough. Pinkie believes he has saved himself by arranging a marriage that in fact will lead to his defeat and death. Greene emphasizes this ironic parallel by linking the figurative blindness of Rose—who awaits Pinkie's kiss, after his proposal, "like a blind girl," and who moves him to a rare moment of pity

at the sight of her “blind lost face” (128)—with the blind band Pinkie encounters in the streets of Brighton at the beginning of the next chapter (and on the very next page of the text). The band’s plaintive music is “like a voice prophesying sorrow at the moment of victory” (129).

There remains at least one military figure in the allusive background of *Brighton Rock* whose name is associated with neither death nor defeat. Appropriately he is Bartolomeo Colleoni, the namesake of Pinkie’s arch-rival in the Brighton underworld. The historical Colleoni was an outstandingly successful Venetian general, a master of field artillery tactics who has been called the greatest military strategist of fifteenth-century Italy. He retired, undefeated, to a prosperous life. For Greene’s Colleoni, the prospects are similarly good; he appears firmly ensconced in the luxuries of the Cosmopolitan Hotel, where his feigned respectability is no longer threatened by Pinkie or the police.

Colleoni, Tromp, Burgoyne, Richard III less directly, and the two Napoleons more directly—all of these historical and literary figures contribute to the ironic portrait of Pinkie, the Napoleonic strategist whose satanic determination to rule in the underworld rather than serve God is mocked by the novel’s allusive structure, which foreshadows his inevitable failure as it highlights the absurd disproportion between his vast ambition and the limited means and tawdry goals to which it is attached. Greene’s method in this regard could hardly be more fitting for the period of the late thirties, that troubled decade in which Europe saw the rise of a new dictator of such monstrous evil that even Pinkie quickly pales by comparison. Generations to come would compare this man with the anti-Christ, and he would persistently regard himself as a modern Napoleon.

The menacing cloud of Nazism aside, Greene’s use of the Napoleonic theme can be traced to likely sources mentioned in the diaries. Napoleon III appears in a seance in *Confessions of a Medium*, one of the books Greene read in his investigation of spiritualism, and he is a subject of “Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau,” a dramatic monologue by Browning, whose importance for Greene has already been discussed. Of more importance is Napoleon Bonaparte. In this regard Pinkie Brown’s precursor is not Raven but Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, the youthful murderer who saw Napoleon as the personification

of the superman and formed his own murderous ambitions as part of an attempt to become like Napoleon. Although neither the 1932–33 diaries nor the courtship letters mention Greene’s reading of *Crime and Punishment*, evidence exists to show that the great Russian author and the Napoleonic theme touched upon his imagination during the period. Greene saw the film *The Murder of Karamazov* in June 1932 (it was the film in which Anna Sten inspired him), and shortly afterward he read E. Carr’s *Life of Dostoevsky*. For *The Spectator* of 13 March 1936 (about six months before beginning the novel) he reviewed *Crime et Châtiment*, a French version of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, commenting that “the theme of the book” is stated in the film when the magistrate Porphyrius “suggested to Raskolnikov that by confessing he would renounce his crazy egotistic Napoleonic fetish, which had proved in the act of murder so bestial, and discover ‘the ordinary current of life’” (*Pleasure Dome* 58). One week later he reviewed an American film version of the same novel, damning it with a voice similar to that of the narrator in *Brighton Rock* when describing Ida Arnold: whereas the French film had “at least something of Dostoevsky’s religious and unhappy mind,” Greene writes, the American one “is vulgar as only the great new World can be vulgar, with the vulgarity of the completely unreligious, of sentimental idealism, of pitch-pine ethics, with the hollow optimism about human nature, of a salesman who has never failed to sell his canned beans” (61).

Pinkie’s Napoleonic ambition, his story which begins with a first, calculated murder and then mingles suspense with salvation as the forces of justice (embodied in Ida Arnold rather than the police) draw near, and his potential for redemption through the love of a Catholic girl are strongly reminiscent of Dostoevsky’s great novel.

CHARACTERS AND NAMES

Greene’s own testimony shows repeatedly how his imagination responded to current or past reading, or to a film, as well as to observation. Passages from his favorite poems provided the vocabulary through which he interpreted his own feelings and his situation and declared his love. The diaries, as we have seen, recorded memorable passages from an amazing variety of

sources, germs of ideas that were stored up for future use—often as epigraphs, as in the case of *Stamboul Train*, *England Made Me*, and *It's a Battlefield*.

In the case of *Brighton Rock*, it appears that his interest in the Napoleons—both the historical figures and the Napoleon of Raskolnikov's imagination—was also fermenting in Greene's creative mind, waiting for a local habitation and a name. The habitation presented itself to Greene through the widely publicized racetrack wars in Brighton in the mid-thirties. His interest in these matters has been extensively documented by Norman Sherry, who points out that the kidnapping of Hale was based upon an actual kidnapping that occurred in Brighton in April 1928; the victim, Ernest Friend Smith, was beaten and robbed and later died of his injuries (1:634). More important, the idea of basing a novel on the race gang feud came from the Lewes Assize cases in the early 1930s, and the scene in *Brighton Rock* in which Pinkie and Spicer are attacked at the race course by Colleoni's men was inspired by an incident, reported in the *Brighton Argus* on 29 July 1936, and in the London newspapers, in which a bookmaker and his clerk were attacked by sixteen men. As Sherry explains, this event certainly caught Greene's eye. He went to Brighton only a few days later (August 4) to see the track and related low-life haunts at first hand. The leader of the attacking gang, Spinks, would provide inspiration for the occupation of Greene's protagonist; in a fittingly ironic context, Greene would invest him with remnants of the kind of Christian tragedy familiar to readers of Dostoevsky.

Sherry's argument that Pinkie's nemesis Ida Arnold is drawn from the popular Hollywood star Mae West (1:635) is convincing yet seem incomplete. The following paragraphs will suggest, first, why this is so, and second, why a careful examination of the literary background of *Brighton Rock* aids in the understanding of its genesis and meaning and is essential to a grasp of its richness and complexity.

To establish the derivation of Ida from Mae West, Sherry points to the review of *Klondike Annie* in which Greene writes that West evokes in that film the atmosphere of smoky pubs complete with advertisements for Guinness, the beverage with which Ida is frequently associated (1:635). Compelling as this argument may be, I believe that at least part of Ida's portrait

was derived from an earlier source: Clifford Bax's *Pretty Witty Nell*, a biography of Nell Gwyn reviewed by Greene for *The Spectator* in December 1932.

Greene's review criticizes *Pretty Witty Nell* as padded and sometimes inaccurate but credits Bax with "two contributions to our knowledge of Nell Gwyn." One of these—the theory that she died from syphilis—Greene finds unsurprising and therefore negligible. The other, he writes, "is the horoscope one on which [Bax] bases her character, to the unbeliever with comic effect..." (898). What especially amused Greene was Bax's elaborate use of Nell Gwyn's horoscope (for 2 February 1650) to interpret her character as highly sexed but essentially good-hearted:

Jupiter in Scorpio (a sexual sign) and in trine to Venus and the Moon would make her ardent, loving, and richly sexed, but the position of the Moon in Cancer (the sign of the mother and the home) supports another of my earliest impressions: namely, that Nell Gwyn, though destiny made her a courtesan, was by nature maternal. (242)

As an orange-girl in the theatre, Nell was, according to Bax, "comparable to barmaids in the Victorian period" and was "not a natural wanton, but...so easy going as to be easily led." She was

a rare type which often misses marriage by giving too readily. It does so because, being fundamentally maternal, it looks upon men, not as would-be clever simpletons from whom money and marriage is to be extracted, but as wilful and lovable children who must be comforted at any cost. She might, therefore, have passed from man to man, adored and deserted by all of them and, finally, remembered by all of them with tenderness and gratitude. (43)

Amusing as it may have been to Greene, this horoscopic view of Nell seems to have lingered in his mind long enough to make its way into the portrait of Ida, whose character displays many of the qualities Bax attributes to Nell. Ida is not a Victorian, of course, but she is a barmaid, and she certainly is "easily led": she confesses to Hale that she was once seduced by a man who

pretended to be dying. Ida too has “missed marriage,” at least in the sense that her one marriage (to a man named Tom who does not appear in the novel) has failed. And she has passed “from man to man” and is remembered fondly by at least two of those men, as her conversation with Clarence in [Chapter Three](#) of Part One reveals:

“Why, I don’t even know how you live or how many husbands you’ve had.”

“Oh, there’s only been one Tom,” Ida said.

“There’s been more than Tom in *your* life.”

“You ought to know,” Ida said.

“Give me a glass of Ruby,” the sombre man said. “I was just thinking when you came in, Ida, why shouldn’t we two come together again?”

“You and Tom always want to start again,” Ida said.

“Why don’t you keep tight hold when you’ve got a girl?”
(29)

Greene does not provide a horoscope to account for the abundant sexuality that leads Ida from man to man, but he does invest in her a comparable interest in the occult: Ida believes in ghosts, consults the ouija board in pursuit of the truth about Hale’s death, and offers a palmist’s explanation of her casual sexual morality: “I’m not a Puritan, mind. I’ve done a thing or two in my time—that’s *natural*. Why,’ she said, extending towards [Rose] her plump and patronising paw, ‘it’s in my hand: the girdle of Venus” (122). One could say of Ida, as Bax does of Nell, that she “took the sexual relationship as a matter of course” (46). More important, however, is that Ida displays the “fundamentally maternal” quality which Bax sees as central to Nell Gwyn’s character (but which Greene, in his film review cited above, does not ascribe to Mae West). None of this is intended to suggest that Mae West was not an important source for the creation of Ida. To the contrary, Ida’s associations with “ribald luxury,” her appearance surrounded by men in saloon bars, and much of the humor derived from her character almost certainly owe a great deal to the Hollywood star. My point is rather that the earlier source is too important to be neglected.

BRIGHTON ROCK AS A FAUSTIAN NOVEL

When asked by Marie-Francoise Allain whether he did not consider his character Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* to be “the very incarnation of evil,” Graham Greene replied:

I tried, as a sort of intellectual exercise, to present the reader with a character whom he could accept as worthy of hell. But in the end, you remember, I introduced the possibility that he might have been saved “between the stirrup and the ground.” I wanted to instill in the reader’s mind a fundamental doubt of hell. (148)

Readers of the novel are likely to be surprised by this expression of doubt, for there is probably no work of Greene’s that suggests the reality of hell more forcefully than *Brighton Rock* does. Pinkie’s admission to Rose that he believes in hell but not in heaven establishes a kind of spiritual geography in the novel, and his defiant “Credo in unum Satanum,” together with his territorial ambitions in Brighton, aligns him with Milton’s Satan as a character who would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven. Furthermore, the Catholic characters think and talk of hell a good deal: Rose speculates that Ida “couldn’t burn if she tried,” and Pinkie thinks just before his wedding day that to marry would be worse than to be hanged. The corrosive vitriol which Pinkie carries in his pocket and which explodes in his face and causes him to leap to his death seems to prefigure the tormenting flames of hell itself; yet Pinkie’s end was always implicit in his beginning—in the ruined slum whose ironic name “Paradise Piece” evokes the condition of man in the fallen world: “Hell lay about him in his infancy.” In short, the idea of hell is so powerful and vivid in *Brighton Rock* that one might seriously question whether the novel is successful in instilling that “fundamental doubt” which Greene wanted the reader to experience.

My concern here, however, is not with the question of Greene’s personal belief but rather with what his idea of *Brighton Rock* as an “intellectual exercise” suggests about the method of its composition—specifically with Greene’s use of literary sources and allusions appropriate to his design of

presenting the reader “with a character whom he could accept as worthy of hell.”

It is widely known that Greene began *Brighton Rock* as a detective story and changed direction during the writing. Although his conversion to Catholicism had taken place ten years earlier, his earlier novels, even those with serious themes, had subordinated religious ideas to other concerns. What was it that brought about the change in direction and led Greene into the creation of an “intellectual exercise” in which the themes of salvation and damnation are memorably fused with conventions of crime melodrama? Only Greene himself could have answered the question conclusively, and he was predictably reticent about the subject. But certain influences can be enumerated as partial explanation. That the novel, like the works of so many writers of the period, was strongly affected by *The Waste Land* has been demonstrated at length by other critics such as Fred Crawford, discussed in an earlier chapter here, and Robert O. Evans. And, as Philip Stratford has pointed out, Greene had come increasingly to believe that the serious writer needed a strong spiritual dimension, a “religious sense” to give depth and meaning to his work. He had found that dimension in the novels of Henry James and in Jacobean drama, and he had found in Eliot’s critical writings a confirmation of his own belief in its necessity (127–32).

Henry James was the subject of essays Greene published in 1933 and 1936 that point rather directly toward *Brighton Rock*. Greene’s reading of James tends to be highly personal and idiosyncratic, perhaps because he found in the Old Master a world view that corresponded to his own. He said, again in the interview with Allain, that his experience of life in boarding school made him “ready to believe in the existence of evil,” and as most students of Greene are aware, he claimed to have found in Marjorie Bowen’s *The Viper of Milan* an image of evil that confirmed many of his own attitudes. But Bowen was not a great writer to be read and reread and imitated. James was, and Greene was an avid reader of James’s fiction and criticism throughout his life. In the 1936 essay on James, he argued that “the ruling fantasy which drove [James] to write” was “a sense of evil almost religious in intensity.” James’s greatness, according to Greene, lay in his determination to render even evil “the highest kind of justice”:

[I]t is in the final justice of his pity, the completeness of an analysis which enabled him to pity the most shabby, the most corrupt, of his human actors, that he ranks with the greatest of creative writers. He is as solitary in the history of the novel as Shakespeare in the history of poetry. (34)

Putting aside the question of the greatness of *Brighton Rock*, or even of Greene himself, it is clear, as Stratford has observed, that the novel is one of several in which Greene achieved that quality of pity which he attributed to James (217).

Critical interpretations of *Brighton Rock* have often linked Pinkie Brown's character with T.S.Eliot's memorable lines from the essay on Baudelaire:

It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation. The worst that can be said of most malefactors, from statesmen to thieves, is that they are not men enough to be damned.

These lines were quoted by Greene in his 1933 essay "Henry James: The Religious Aspect," where he adds that "This worst cannot be said of James's characters: both Densher and the Prince have on their faces the flush of the flames" (41).

Greene's readers probably see that flush more clearly on the face of Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* than on that of any of Greene's other characters. And there are numerous additional ways in which the essays on James seem to point toward *Brighton Rock*. The process by which the miserable experiences of slum-bred childhood led Pinkie to believe in hell but not in heaven has a curious analogue in Greene's comment, in 1933, on James's religion: "His religion was always a mirror of his experience. Experience taught him to believe in supernatural evil, but not in supernatural good" (43). Finally, readers who are disturbed by the apparent bleakness of *Brighton Rock* might keep in mind Greene's statement in 1936 that the novels of James "are only saved from the deepest cynicism by the religious sense..." (41). Greene contended that the "religious sense" disappeared from the English novel with the death of Henry James. It seems that in *Brighton Rock*—perhaps after he had already begun the novel—Greene set out to restore that loss through his own work.

If Greene's view of Henry James contributed heavily to his sense of purpose in the "intellectual exercise" of *Brighton Rock*, there remained the immediate question of the concrete means by which that purpose could be achieved. Here again he made significant use of literary sources. Greene, of course, is a wonderfully inventive storyteller, and any discussion of his use of literary sources should stress that he is never slavishly imitative but is often cleverly allusive, using quotations, echoes, images, and parallels—often ironically—to create complex meanings. *Brighton Rock* is productive territory for source hunters, and many of the important allusions to Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Browning, Arnold, Marlowe, and most importantly T.S.Eliot have been noted elsewhere.

The source which has often been mentioned but not discussed adequately is the Ford, Dekker, and Rowley play *The Witch of Edmonton* (1623), which provided the epigraph to *Brighton Rock*: "This were a fine reign, /To do ill and not hear of it again." Critics have remarked that the epigraph announces the revenge motive common to both the play and Greene's novel, and that the play involves a young man who marries a girl and then murders her, as Pinkie plans to do with Rose in *Brighton Rock*. Furthermore, the distich of *The Witch of Edmonton* could almost be taken as a brief description of the action of *Brighton Rock*: "Forc'd marriage, murder; murder blood requires, / Reproach, revenge; revenge hell's help desires." Graham Greene's familiarity with *The Witch of Edmonton* may have had a long history; certainly his biography of Rochester and his brief study *British Dramatists* (1943) demonstrate his extensive knowledge of seventeenth century English literature. Nevertheless, it seems likely that his use of *The Witch of Edmonton* as a source for *Brighton Rock*, which he was planning in the fall of 1936, may have been influenced by the revival of that play at the Old Vic in London in December 1936. Greene was in London at the time, could hardly have been unaware of the revival, and may well have seen the play. The comments of the reviewer for *The Times* suggest interesting ways in which the play has important qualities in common with that earlier-mentioned ability of Henry James to render "the highest kind of justice" and pity to shabby and corrupt characters:

It is stamped with sympathy for the outcast and suffering and is able to see always two sides of the human picture, even when the picture is of a villain or a witch...it is probably better to think of the play as a plainly melodramatic morality which here and there has given Dekker an opportunity to say that the wicked are not always as guilty as the fortunate suggest but are sometimes driven to a second wrong by the very remorse that arises from the first. (9 December 1936)

Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* is driven to a "second wrong" (second murder) by expediency, not remorse; but in all other respects the reviewer's comments could apply aptly enough to Greene's treatment of character in the novel.

The prominent revenge motive in *The Witch of Edmonton* arises from two rather different stories. One of these traces events in the life of Mother Sawyer, an old woman who is unjustly persecuted as a witch until she turns to real witchcraft in order to gain revenge against her tormentors. She conjures the devil, who appears, as in Goethe's *Faust*, as a black dog. The Dog demands that she sell her soul to him and seal the pact with a blood covenant reminiscent of the one Mephistopheles demands of Marlowe's Faustus. Once loose in the world, the Dog works evil not only against Mother Sawyer and her enemies but against others as well, providing the dramatic link between her story and that of Frank Thorney. Frank, who has tried to escape disinheritance by keeping his marriage to Winnifrede a secret from his father, finds himself trapped in an arranged marriage to Susan Carter, whom he does not love. He contemplates possible means of escape from his dilemma but takes no action until the black Dog rubs against him; then he murders Susan and subsequently tries to place the blame on the innocent Warbeck. The cycle of murder and revenge are thus clearly depicted as the devil's work: Somerton, who loves Susan, is reported willing to sell his soul in order to get revenge against Warbeck. But the same black Dog that instigates the murder eventually points the way to the discovery of Frank's guilt.

Greene's protagonist has characteristics in common with both Frank Thorney and Mother Sawyer. Like Frank, Pinkie marries a girl he does not love and then plots her death; also

like Frank, who is led into “deeper mischief” than he intended, Pinkie feels “as if he were being driven too far down a road he only wanted to travel a certain distance.” But Pinkie’s more important kinship is with Mother Sawyer, the Faustian character who sells her soul for revenge against her enemies. Pinkie commits his first murder to avenge the death of Kite, his gang-leader and spiritual father. Yet it is clear that Pinkie’s whole life—his turning to crime, his rejection of the church, his hatred of women and pleasure—is an act of revenge against the world that has afforded him nothing but misery and unhappiness:

[A] prick of sexual desire disturbed him like a sickness. That was what happened to a man in the end: the stuffy room, the wakeful children, the Saturday night movements from the other bed. Was there no escape—anywhere—for anyone? It was worth murdering a world.
(92)

Ironically, these same emotions might have led Pinkie in a different direction. Once he was a choir boy who thought of becoming a priest—probably for the seclusion and privacy of the celibate life. Now he keeps life at bay with a razor blade. Even so, fragments of the liturgy intrude regularly into his thoughts, and beneath a vicious and violent exterior he preserves a paradoxical innocence, neither smoking nor drinking nor consorting with women. He never ceases to think of the possibility of repentance and the sacraments. “*Corruptio optimi est pessimas*” the old priest says to Rose after Pinkie’s death; the worst is corruption of the best. The same judgment could be made of Marlowe’s Faustus, and it seems clear that Pinkie’s decision to murder Fred Hale for revenge is a Faustian pursuit of power and knowledge.

The power Pinkie pursues is “Napoleonic” power, as discussed earlier, to supplant Colleoni as ruler of the Brighton underworld, to be a conqueror. The Faustian knowledge Pinkie discovers is a metaphysical fusion of the spiritual and the sexual attained through his relationship with Rose. Greene emphasizes this double meaning by using *know* in its Biblical as well as its popular sense when Pinkie, Dallow, and Cubitt

discuss Pinkie's forthcoming marriage and Pinkie accidentally reveals that he has murdered Spicer:

"You think you know things." All the Boy's hatred was in the word "know" and his repulsion: he knew—like Prewitt knew after twenty-five years at the game. "You don't know everything." He tried to inject himself with pride, but all the time his eyes went back to the humiliation.... You could know everything there was in the world and yet if you were ignorant of that one dirty scramble you knew nothing. (149)

The marriage holds out the prospect of not only carnal knowledge but also the darker knowledge of the most profound corruption: the corruption of another soul. Pinkie and Rose plan to enter a permanent state of mortal sin through their secular marriage. Rose cannot make confession that morning, and Pinkie exults in the knowledge of his role as evil seducer:

He had a sense now that the murders of Hale and Spicer were trivial acts, a boy's game, and he had put away childish things. Murder had only led up to this—this corruption. He was filled with awe at his own powers. "We'd better be moving," he said and touched her arm with next to tenderness. As once before he had a sense of needing her. (167)

That "once before" is also part of Pinkie's journey into knowledge, the discovery that evil needs goodness to corrupt: "What was most evil in him needed her; it couldn't get along without her goodness.... She was good, he'd discovered that, and he was damned: they were made for each other" (126).

Pinkie may be unlearned, but he understands intuitively both the consequences of this knowledge and the Faustian penalty it entails: "his temporal safety for two immortalities of pain." His view of the wedding contract recalls the blood-sealed contracts of Faustus and Mother Sawyer and identifies Pinkie himself as at least potentially a tragic character:

[I]n the good old days, it occurred to him, you signed covenants like this in your blood.... He had no doubt

whatever that this was mortal sin, and he was filled with a kind of gloomy hilarity and pride. He saw himself now as a full grown man for whom the angels wept. (169)

Toward the end of the novel Pinkie's evil counsellor, the lawyer Prewitt, affirms the boy's Faustian role by quoting to him the appropriate lines of Marlowe's Mephistopheles: "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it." The allusion is insistent, since Prewitt repeats it a few lines later. It offers no discovery, however, to Pinkie, who realizes as much shortly after the consummation of his marriage: "This was hell then; it wasn't anything to worry about: it was just his own familiar room" (182).

Perhaps Pinkie has realized the truth discovered by Marlowe's Faustus: that to cut oneself off from God is to be in hell. But Greene's literary approach to hell extends beyond such similarities in plot, character, and theme and into the patterns of imagery in the novel as well. In Goethe's *Faust* and in *The Witch of Edmonton* the reality of evil, indeed the very presence of Satan in the world, is embodied in the black dog. Greene alludes to that same presence by introducing the superstition about black dogs into the novel and by using repeated images of dogs to suggest the pervasiveness of that evil in the world.

When Ida Arnold places her bet on Black Boy in the four o'clock at the Brighton racecourse, the bookie Tate records it incorrectly, as Ida points out:

"You've written Black Dog."

"Black Dog.... What was I thinking of. Black Dog, indeed."

"That means Care," Ida said.

"Well," he barked with unconvincing geniality, "we've always something to worry about." (70)

Greene's introduction of the image of the black dog here seems casual, but a brief look at the pervasiveness of dog images in the novel suggests otherwise. Ida, for example, speaks of an engagement at the Dirty Dog (10), the gramophone plays a song about a watchdog which "talks of our love" (51), Dallow grins "like a large friendly dog" (53), and Colleoni, whose name sounds doggish, has "something a little doggish" in his eyes (65). When Pinkie enters the lobby of Colleoni's hotel, a "little

bitch sniff[s] at him and talk[s] him over with another little bitch on the settee,” but when Colleoni approaches they stop talking (61). Ida extends a “plump and patronizing paw” to Rose, then “barks” at her to be sensible and abandon Pinkie. Tate “barks” at Ida, and Dallow threatens to shut Judy up “if she barks” (122–23).

Interviewed at the police station, Pinkie reads notices about “Dog Licenses,” and when Cubitt later discovers that Pinkie will need a marriage license he says, “You dog, you.... You’re a young one at the game” (116). Later, an unhappy Cubitt hears boats in the channel blowing their sirens “like dogs at night waking each other” (155), and when Ida offers him twenty pounds for information about Pinkie, he watches her indifferently, “as if he had lost his grip on thought as you loose a dog’s lead...” (162).

On their wedding day Pinkie and Rose watch a romantic film in which the prelude to a sexual encounter foreshadows their own that night. The film’s music—“I know in my heart you’re divine”—makes love sound heavenly, but to Pinkie it is hellish: “It was the commonest game under the sun—why be scared at what dogs did in the streets?” (179). To marry, he thinks, is “like ordure on the hands” (101). And Dallow, hearing Pinkie’s explanation of how he once wanted to become a priest, laughs and steps into dog’s ordure.

Near the end of the novel, when Pinkie and Rose stop at a Peacehaven hotel enroute to their rendezvous with death, Pinkie encounters an old schoolmate whose appearance brings back much of the bitterness and hostility of his boyhood. Greene writes: “[T]hey bristled like dogs at the sight of each other” (229). In the meantime, music in the lounge wails “upward like a dog over a grave” (231), and a moment later two men enter the lounge and shake “out their moisture like dogs,” then fall silent “scenting the girl in the lounge” (237).

The satanic black dog of *The Witch of Edmonton* brings evil visibly into the world and leads fundamentally good but weak man like Frank Thorney to commit murder. If the play demonstrates how quickly and easily the devil enters the lives of men, that devil nevertheless remains a localized intruder. Greene’s images of dogs have the obvious function of reducing his characters’ motives and actions—particularly those involving love and sexual desire—to a bestial level, a process that

underscores the strong current of naturalism in the novel while it accounts for no small part of the seediness in this memorable version of the author's ravaged world. Moreover, as allusions to the black dogs of *Faust* and *The Witch of Edmonton* these frequent references to dogs suggest not just the reality but the omnipresence of evil in the world. Greene's literary approach to hell therefore succeeds in creating not only a character whom the reader can believe worthy of hell but also a visible world whose surfaces and textures as well as its spiritual dimension make hell credible.