

## Graham Greene

This winter, Graham Greene's *Ways of Escape*, the long-awaited sequel to his first memoir, *A Sort of Life* (1971) will be published in New York. In the new book, the British novelist assembles a pastiche of recollections of his adventures around the world during the past 50 years—exploits that resulted in such vivid novels as *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The Quiet American*, and *Our Man in Havana*. Yet Greene has always brought a special dimension of faith to his novels. Here critic Frank McConnell reassesses Greene's penchant for "action" and "belief"—his long prolific career, his devotion to Catholicism and socialism, and his affinity with the movies. Selections from Greene's own writings follow.

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by Frank D. McConnell

Imagine a not-quite young, not-quite happy man with a tedious and/or dangerous job in a seedy, urban or colonial, locale.

Now, imagine that something happens to force him to betray whatever is dearest to him—a loved one, an ideal, a creed. In the aftermath of his faithlessness, he comes to discover precisely how dear was the person or thing he betrayed. In the corrosive admission of his failure, he learns, if he is lucky, to rebuild his broken image of the world and to find his place in it.

Now add scenes of grotesque violence and grim comedy, incidental characters (tawdry, sinister, and dotty), and a limpid prose style. You have, of course, conjured up any of the 23 novels of Graham Greene. You have also glimpsed the spirit behind one of the most paradoxical and brilliant storytellers of this century.

Greene was born in 1904 and published his latest novel, *Doctor Fischer of Geneva, or The Bomb Party*, in 1980. Although he confided to an interviewer that *Dr. Fischer* was so short (156 pages) because, at age 76, one does not want to begin lengthy

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*Greene, to his irritation, has often been labeled a "Catholic" novelist. When the Vatican once (unsuccessfully) tried to persuade him to suppress *The Power and the Glory*, another so-called Catholic novelist and a good friend—Evelyn Waugh—came to his support.*

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projects, he shows no signs of tiring. Indeed, a restless, nervous creativity has characterized all his novels, short stories, plays, travel writings, and political essays. In the first installment of his autobiography, *A Sort of Life* (1971), he says that he became a writer because it was the only profession that alleviated the great disease of existence—boredom.

There may be some self-deprecation in that statement. A man who calls his a "sort of" life is, whatever else, not vain. And Greene is, in fact, notoriously shy, even reclusive.

Boredom is not a passive state, however, but a frantically energetic one: the fluttering of the mind desperately trying to escape the cage of an impoverished existence. And the impoverished, the seedy, the cheapened are the central contours of the Greene landscape, just as the bored, the failures, and the betrayers are his permanent heroes.

But this is the first of many contradictions in Greene's work. He may concentrate exclusively, obsessively, on the dreariness and sadness of modern life. But what emerges from his tales is not blank despair (though he can come close to that) or advocacy of social revolution (though he has always been a committed leftist). What materializes, rather, is a vision of the ways that even society's disorder, urban sprawl, and tackiness can be-

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come the stuff of true moral perceptions, of imagination and charity.

In other words, if for Greene the act of writing wards off tedium—is, literally, a salvation from boredom—his stories play out the theme in a major key. For they are about, finally, the Redemption of the Bored.

The son of the headmaster of Berkhamsted School in rural Hertfordshire, Greene claims to have known the curse of boredom from an early age. As a student at his father's school, where, he says, he felt like a "quisling," he made several attempts to take his own life. In 1920, after he tried running away, he was sent to London to undergo psychoanalysis. Six months later he was back home and still bored—"fixed, like a negative in a chemical bath." He discovered a forgotten revolver belonging to his brother and proceeded to play frequent games of Russian roulette. Later (1922–25) at Balliol College, Oxford, he recalls, he was almost continually drunk—another desperate attempt to escape.

### Removing the Clichés

Greene's first jobs—as an unpaid apprentice reporter on the *Nottingham Journal* (he drew an allowance from his father) and then as sub-editor on the *London Times* (1926–30)—supplied valuable experience for a would-be fiction writer. He later recreated middle-class Nottingham's "Dickensian atmosphere" in *This Gun for Hire* (1936). And, in retrospect, his stint on the *Times* was instructive. "I can think of no better career for a young novelist," he writes in *A Sort of Life*, "than to be for some years a sub-editor on a rather conservative newspaper." Greene spent his time "removing the clichés of reporters . . . compressing a story to the minimum length possible without ruining its effects."

As for his early personal relationships, Greene has disappointed the prurient. In 1927, he married Vivien Dayrell-Browning, a Roman Catholic, and converted to her religion. The couple had two children, a boy and a girl, before the marriage

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broke up during the 1930s. In his new autobiography, *Ways of Escape*, Greene retains his reticence regarding his family, fastidiously observing what he calls "the 'copyright' of others' lives."

Greene's first novel, *The Man Within* (1929), was a modest commercial success, selling 8,000 copies. Its royalties—and advances for future books—provided him with enough money to live, he thought, for three years. He happily quit the *Times*. The move was premature.

His next two novels—*The Name of Action* (1930) and *Rumour of Nightfall* (1931)—were failures.\* The latter sold only 1,200 copies, and the *Times* refused to rehire him.

*Orient Express* (1932) was a moderate success, but *It's a Battlefield* (1934) and *England Made Me* (1935) met with public indifference. Always restless, Greene, with a £350 advance from his publisher, and his 23-year-old cousin Barbara, in 1935, trekked through the jungle of Liberia. The result was *Journey Without Maps* (1936). Greene next received an advance for a book on the persecution of the Catholic Church in Mexico during the turmoils of the 1930s (*Another Mexico*, 1939). He could now live by his writing.

In 1941, during World War II, he joined the British Secret Service (MI-6) and ran a one-man intelligence outpost in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Two years later, he returned to London and worked in MI-6's subsection for counterespionage in the Iberian peninsula. Kim Philby, the famous Russian KGB "mole," was in charge of that subsection, and Greene has never disclaimed his wartime friendship with the British defector. Greene is philosophical about the job of a spy: "There is a bit of the schoolmaster in an Intelligence officer: he imbibes information at second hand and passes it on too often as gospel truth."

### Predicting Trouble

Since World War II, as his books have become more popular, Greene has continued his globe-trotting unabated—Malaya, Vietnam, Kenya, Poland, Cuba, the Congo, Argentina, often as a well-paid free-lance magazine journalist. And he has had an uncanny nose for trouble. A friend, actor Alec Guinness, once remarked that if he heard that Greene had visited a place, he himself made plans to stay away from it for one or two years—knowing an upheaval was coming.

Greene has been a critic of the French and then the U.S. mis-

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\* Greene has subsequently renounced both of these books, which, he says, "are of a badness beyond the power of criticism properly to evoke."

### ENCRUSTED WITH CHARACTERS

With a novel, which takes perhaps years to write, the author is not the same man at the end of the book as he was at the beginning. It is not only that his characters have developed—he has developed with them and this nearly always gives a sense of roughness to the work: a novel can seldom have the sense of perfection which you find in Chekhov's story, "Lady with the Lapdog." It is the consciousness of that failure which makes the revision of the novel seem endless—the author is trying in vain to adapt the story to his changed personality, as though it were something he had begun in childhood and was finishing now in old age. There are moments of despair when he begins perhaps the fifth revision of Part One, and he sees the multitude of the new corrections. How can he help feeling, "This will never end. I shall never get this passage right"? What he ought to be saying is, "I shall never again be the same man I was when I wrote this months and months ago." No wonder that under these conditions a novelist often makes a bad husband or an unstable lover. There is something in his character of the actor who continues to play Othello when he is off the stage, but he is an actor who has lived far too many parts during far too many long runs. He is encrusted with characters. A black taxi driver in the Caribbean once told me of a body which he had seen lifted from the sea. He said, "You couldn't tell it was a man's body because of all the lampreys which came up with it." A horrible image, but it is one which suits the novelist well.

*From Ways of Escape*

adventures in Vietnam. The 1954 battle at Dien Bien Phu, he writes, "marked virtually the end of any hope the Western Powers might have entertained that they could dominate the East." And he has seldom portrayed Americans in a flattering light. Think of "ignorant and silly" but well-intentioned Alden Pyle in *The Quiet American* (1955), or the tourists in *Our Man in Havana* (1958).

Greene's antipathies may have been re-enforced by U.S. laws. For one month in 1923, at Oxford, Greene was a member of the Communist Party. Hence, until the early 1960s, under the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, he had to obtain special permission to enter America, and his stays were limited to four weeks. Indeed, he was deported from Puerto Rico in 1954 for violating the act. He last visited the United States, oddly enough, in 1977 when his close friend and admirer, Panamanian strongman General Omar Torrijos, named him an official delegate to the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty in Washington.

These days, at home in Antibes on the French Riviera,

Greene is fond of dividing his career into three phases. First, as he sees it, he was a political novelist (from *The Man Within*, presumably, to *The Confidential Agent* in 1939); next a religious novelist (from *The Power and the Glory* in 1940 to *The End of the Affair* in 1951); and then, once again, political (from *The Quiet American*).

It is a tidy breakdown, but it is subtly wrong. As his novels themselves attest—and as the epigraph to *The Honorary Consul* (1973) from Thomas Hardy\* acknowledges—politics and religion, rightly understood, are not alternatives to, but complementary perceptions of, the puzzle of human existence itself.

This outlook helps explain why Greene often seems most “religious” when he is writing about spies and policemen (*The Ministry of Fear*, 1943; *The Third Man*, 1950) and most “political” when he is writing about priests and saints (*The Power and the Glory*; *A Burnt-Out Case*, 1961).

It explains why, though a Roman Catholic, he remains in continual conflict with Church orthodoxy and why, though a socialist, he has never been able to adhere to the ideology of the party. If he has a true faith, it is probably a faith in the novel—that multifaceted, ironic, and complex vision of life. And such complexity can—and should—dissolve all orthodoxies.

Such a sense of life, though, is best seen in action. Here is the first paragraph of one of Greene’s most successful books, *This Gun for Hire*:

Murder didn’t mean much to Raven. It was just a new job. You had to be careful. You had to use your brains. It was not a question of hatred. He had seen the minister only once: he had been pointed out to Raven as he walked down the new housing estate between the little lit Christmas trees—an old, rather grubby man without any friends, who was said to love humanity.

An amoral killer stalks his prey, a sad old humanitarian, among a forest of absurdly decorated Christmas trees.

It is an almost perfect Greene movement. In a single take, it captures the killer whose cold violence threatens society’s security, the benevolent victim whose well-meaning innocence (he “was said to love humanity”) is a kind of threat, and the paragraph’s hidden heroes—those artificially lit, tiny Christmas trees. Their shining signifies, at once, the sleaziness of a commercialized Christmas and the lost solemnity and radiance of

\*“All things merge in one another—good into evil, generosity into justice, religion into politics. . . .”

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the Birth they are supposed to honor.

No other modern English novelist is as satisfying an entertainer as Greene is. Indeed, his influence has been at least as great on later practitioners of the spy novel (John le Carré, Len Deighton) as it has been upon "serious" novelists, such as Iris Murdoch, V. S. Naipaul, and Paul Theroux. In a century when literary fiction, from James Joyce to Samuel Beckett, has been marked by a narrowing of consciousness and an ever-increasing degree of difficulty and involution, Greene is a maverick. He is an important writer who deals with weighty ideas, and he is also unabashedly popular and unashamedly a storyteller.

Murder among the Christmas trees: It is a world of passionless assassinations and sinister, mean streets, and it is all but totally without hope. It is also the world of that most perdurable form of popular narrative, the gangster film, from *Little Caesar* to *The Godfather*.

I used the cinematic term *take*, above, to describe the effect of the opening of *This Gun for Hire*. And, indeed, most of Greene's novels are so readable because, among other things, they are so easy to visualize. They often progress like camera shot-analyses for a screenplay.

Not that Greene is simply "influenced" by film. Writers as different as Vladimir Nabokov and Norman Mailer have been affected by this accessible mass art. Nabokov regarded it as yet another instance of the vulgarization of culture (in *Lolita*). Mailer treats it as an incarnation of the rowdy, countercultural energies of the American psyche (in *The Deer Park*). What Greene—uniquely—has done is to use the resources of melodramatic movies in a way that both reflects the predicaments of contemporary life *and* is vastly entertaining.

In fact, Greene has written or collaborated on the screenplays for most of his novels that have been filmed. And almost all of his novels have been; *The Third Man* (1950) was first a story, next a screenplay, and then a "novelization" by Greene. Moreover, from 1935 to 1940—the period of his earliest triumphs—he was a movie reviewer for *The Spectator*. His film criticism, collected in *The Pleasure-Dome*, remains among the best from that exciting era of international cinema.

Greene has always been aware, and quite proud, of his popularity. Fond of tracing his ancestry to his distant forebear Robert Louis Stevenson, enamored of the tradition of Victorian fiction when the novel was in touch with its audience, and optimistic about film's ability to re-create that golden age, Greene savors the idea of being not just a great writer but a great popular writer. Until recently, he insisted upon separating

## GREENE'S WORLD



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|----|------|---|---------------------|
| 1  | 1932 | <i>Stamboul Train (Orient Express)*</i>                 | <i>Istanbul</i>     |
| 2  | 1935 | <i>England Made Me (The Shipwrecked)*</i>               | <i>Stockholm</i>    |
| 3  | 1940 | <i>The Power and the Glory (The Labyrinthine Ways)*</i> | <i>Mexico</i>       |
| 4  | 1948 | <i>The Heart of the Matter</i>                          | <i>West Africa</i>  |
| 5  | 1950 | <i>The Third Man</i>                                    | <i>Vienna</i>       |
| 6  | 1955 | <i>Loser Takes All</i>                                  | <i>Monte Carlo</i>  |
| 7  | 1955 | <i>The Quiet American</i>                               | <i>Vietnam</i>      |
| 8  | 1958 | <i>Our Man in Havana</i>                                | <i>Cuba</i>         |
| 9  | 1961 | <i>A Burnt-Out Case</i>                                 | <i>Congo</i>        |
| 10 | 1966 | <i>The Comedians</i>                                    | <i>Haiti</i>        |
| 11 | 1973 | <i>The Honorary Consul</i>                              | <i>Argentina</i>    |
| 12 | 1978 | <i>The Human Factor</i>                                 | <i>South Africa</i> |
| 13 | 1980 | <i>Doctor Fischer of Geneva, or the Bomb Party</i>      | <i>Switzerland</i>  |

\*U.S. title in parentheses.

his fiction into what he called "entertainments"—the more dramatic of his potboilers—and "novels"—the more solemn performances. He has lately dropped the distinction, perhaps because so many of his readers have noticed that the "entertainments" are often more serious than the "novels."

Another key consideration of Greene's joining of high and low culture is the literary decade in which he began his career. During the 1930s, some of the brightest young Englishmen tried to unite high, intellectual, revolutionary ideas with familiar, even "vulgar" forms. College-style Marxism—class struggle articulated by upper-class minds—resulted in much absurdity and many instances of embarrassing literary slumming. Yet this era produced chilling images of the unspeakable-within-the-banal. W. H. Auden's 1939 apocalyptic ragtime, "Refugee



**THE WORKS OF GRAHAM GREENE**

1925 Babbling April ( <i>verse</i> )	1955 The Quiet American
1929 The Man Within	1957 The Potting Shed ( <i>drama</i> )
1930 The Name of Action	1958 Our Man in Havana
1931 Rumour of Nightfall	1959 The Complaisant Lover ( <i>drama</i> )
1932 Stamboul Train (Orient Express)*	1961 In Search of a Character ( <i>travel</i> )
1934 It's a Battlefield	1961 A Burnt-Out Case
1935 England Made Me (The Shipwrecked)*	1963 A Sense of Reality ( <i>stories</i> )
1936 Journey Without Maps ( <i>travel</i> )	1964 Carving a Statue ( <i>drama</i> )
1936 A Gun for Sale (This Gun for Hire)*	1966 The Comedians
1938 Brighton Rock	1967 May We Borrow Your Husband? ( <i>stories</i> )
1939 The Lawless Roads ( <i>travel</i> ) (Another Mexico)*	1969 Collected Essays
1939 The Confidential Agent	1969 Travels with My Aunt
1940 The Power and the Glory (The Labyrinthine Ways)*	1971 A Sort of Life ( <i>autobiography</i> )
1943 The Ministry of Fear	1973 The Pleasure-Dome (Graham Greene on Film)*
1947 Nineteen Stories	1973 Collected Stories
1948 The Heart of the Matter	1973 The Portable Graham Greene
1950 The Third Man	1973 The Honorary Consul
1951 The Lost Childhood ( <i>essays</i> )	1974 Lord Rochester's Money ( <i>biography</i> )
1951 The End of the Affair	1976 The Return of A. J. Raffles ( <i>drama</i> )
1953 The Living Room ( <i>drama</i> )	1978 The Human Factor
1954 Twenty-One Stories	1980 Doctor Fischer of Geneva, or The Bomb Party
1955 Loser Takes All	1981 Ways of Escape ( <i>autobiography</i> )

\*U.S. titles.

Blues" is an example:

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin.  
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:  
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't  
German Jews.

It also spawned the bleak backgrounds of Greene's spy novels, detective stories, and melodramas.

The Anglo-American detective story comes complete with built-in assumptions about the moral confusion of life in the modern city (think of the atmosphere of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's London) and about the chances for cleansing that urban chaos (recall the priestly role of detectives from Sherlock Holmes to Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe). This tradition is a near perfect vehicle for a writer obsessed, as Greene is, with

## READING GREENE

The best place to begin reading Greene is still his "entertainments." *This Gun for Hire*, *The Confidential Agent*, and especially the splendid, underrated *Ministry of Fear* map the ambiguous contours of his moral and political world. They are thrillers whose excitement is generated through a tension between action and ideas.

Among the "novels," the trilogy of *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, and *The Heart of the Matter* is essential. Greene's most deeply and problematically "religious" novels, these three present visions, successively, of damnation, purgation, and salvation—all projected against the backdrop of urban and colonial politics. *The End of the Affair* and *A Burnt-Out Case* elaborate his religious themes. And *The Quiet American*—his "Vietnam novel"—and *The Comedians*, set in Haiti, do the same for his political concerns.

Moments of rich if bitter comedy sparkle in all Greene's books, even the grimmest. (Critics, Greene writes in his new autobiography, "were too concerned with faith and no faith to notice that in the course of the blackest book I have written I had discovered comedy.") In *Our Man in Havana* and *Travels With My Aunt*, he gives full rein to his comic talent, producing wonderfully funny books that glimmer with a deep darkness as much as his darkest novels flirt with laughter.

*The Honorary Consul*, *The Human Factor*, and *Doctor Fischer of Geneva, or The Bomb Party* constitute a summary of the *seedy*—"Why," laments Greene, "did I ever popularize that last adjective?"—world of espionage and moral choice. Rich and rewarding in themselves, they are even more enjoyable when read in the context of Greene's long, extraordinary career.

—F. D. McC.

the union of religious experience and public morality.\*

In this respect, it is interesting to compare Greene's fiction to the work of another great entertainer and moralist, Alfred Hitchcock. French film director François Truffaut first observed that Hitchcock's thrillers were all parables of the Fall. In, say, *Rear Window*, *North by Northwest*, and *Frenzy*, an innocent man stumbles onto a situation fraught with violence and evil, only to learn that he too is somehow implicated. This perennial Hitchcock motif is analogous to the theme of betrayal and self-

\*Greene, nevertheless, is not very fond of the old conventional British detective story: "Outside the criminal class sexual passion and avarice seemed the most likely motives for murder; but the English detective writer was debarred by his audience of the perpetually immature—an adjective which does not preclude a university professor here or there—from dealing realistically with sexual passion, so he was apt to involve his readers in a story of forged wills, disinheritance, avaricious heirs, and of course railway timetables."

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knowledge in Greene's fiction. The crucial difference is that Greene's version is not more "serious"—but darker. Greene believes much more than did Hitchcock in our involvement with evil—and much less in the chances for the innocent to survive malevolence.

Critics have probably made too much of "Greene as Catholic novelist." He himself insists that the label is misleading, claiming that he is a novelist "who happens to be a Catholic." In a recent interview with his old friend, critic V. S. Pritchett, Greene cryptically described himself as a "Catholic atheist." In his new autobiography, he writes that, for a long time, he was not "emotionally moved, but only intellectually convinced" by the Catholic faith. But Catholicism is, undeniably, central to his imagination. He entered the Roman Catholic Church in 1926, just before his marriage and three years before his first novel, *The Man Within*, was published. And he has remained a Catholic despite the breakup of his marriage and Church censure.\*

Why Greene is a Catholic—and why it matters that he is a Catholic—is most clear in *The Power and the Glory*, the book that initiates what he describes as the second, "religious" phase of his career. The hero, an anonymous, alcoholic priest in Mexico during the 1930s, is about to be executed for following his vocation:

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.

This kind of sainthood is indistinguishable from the passionate social gospel announced in Auden's famous "September 1, 1939": "We must love one another or die." It is a sainthood that unites the salvation of the self and the salvation of the world. Piety and politics are indissolubly bound up with one another. It is Greene's austere and uncompromising view that justice and charity, if they cannot be the same thing, can be nothing at all.

One explanation of the Fall is contained in an ancient parable. In his alienation from God, Adam irreparably separated the roots of the world-tree, which represents the presence of the

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\*The Roman Curia tried unsuccessfully to force Greene to suppress *The Power and the Glory* some 10 years after its publication in 1940. In *Ways of Escape*, Greene recounts a meeting years later with Pope Paul VI: "Mr. Greene," the pontiff remarked, "some parts of your books are certain to offend some Catholics, but you should pay no attention to that."



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Depicting the elaborate dinner parties given by Doctor Fischer of Geneva for his rich friends, Greene probes the limits of power—and of greed.

Lord; i.e., Adam divided the roots of His Justice from the roots of His Loving Kindness. All human history, then, can be viewed as an attempt to heal this rift—to reunite justice and mercy in society as well as in the individual.

I do not know if Greene ever encountered this myth, but it comes uncannily close to the heart of his own perception of man's affairs. His spies are touched by yearnings for the sublime; his saints are tormented by their responsibilities to others. They all dramatize the fact that man may be either just or charitable but, tragically, not both.

And yet we want to be both. That is the aim of our most hopeful political thought and our earnest moral aspirations. The advantage of the novelist over the political theorist and the theologian is that the writer can *show* us this wished-for union of head and heart, and also demonstrate why the world's disorder makes its attainment so difficult.

Throughout Greene's books, justice and love are placed in intricate counterpoint. No writer of our time is more unrelenting in his depiction of the tawdriness of so much of modern life. No one is more adamant in his articulation of the nastiness of which we are all capable. And yet no author so compellingly brings to light the pathos underlying even the most hateful of his characters.

In an early novel, *England Made Me* (1936), Greene invents a

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minor character named Minty, a gossip, wholly loathsome journalist. His petty cruelty extends even to trapping a spider under a glass so that he can watch it starve to death. But in one scene, as we watch Minty say his prayers and crawl into bed, we are also given a revelation: "And like the spider he withered, blown out no longer to meet contempt; his body stretched doggo in the attitude of death, he lay there humbly tempting God to lift the glass."

That sentence is shocking in its precision. Minty remains despicable. Yet we are forced to see that his hatefulness is a part of his humanity. His is a hatefulness founded on hopelessness ("humbly tempting God to lift the glass" may be one of the finest lines in all Greene's fiction).

It is a short step from this kind of perception to a world like that of the West African colony in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948). Greene's existential policeman, Major Scobie, reflects that in that cruel climate one could love people almost as God loves them, knowing the worst. Scobie will abandon this abstract, bitter charity. He falls in love with a woman not his wife. His mortal sin reveals to him the radiance of the truth he has betrayed.

But Scobie is one of Greene's saints. His shattering experience points toward, if it does not reach, the union of justice and charity. No wonder Greene has been attacked by orthodox religionists as well as by die-hard socialists. He has continued to remind us that the novelist—the imaginative man—cannot afford to be orthodox. He can only be totally honest about the reality and complexity of experience.

Greene's most recent books, since *Travels with My Aunt* (1969), have a valedictory, summarizing quality about them. Greene appears to be revisiting the major locales of his writing and re-examining his fiction with a view toward giving it a final shape. Again, one is reminded of Hitchcock, who, in his last films, created a virtual précis of his own strongest work.

The "final shape" of Greene's work, however, extends beyond the books themselves to the influence they have had. Like his contemporary and sometime adversary, George Orwell, Greene is an indispensable voice of moral sense and moral passion in an era when both sense and passion are too often drowned out by the stridencies of ideology and egotism. If we now speak of nightmare totalitarianism as "Orwellian," we also think of the modern city (London, New York)—that wasteland of poverty and frequent violence—as "Greeneland."

Percy Bysshe Shelley, with all the optimism of a Romantic, called poets the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." Such were his hopes for the wedding of personal vision and pub-

lic history. Shelley's Victorian disciple Robert Browning was less sanguine, perhaps more realistic, about the chances for that marriage. Adrift and often ignored in the welter of events, the poet may nevertheless be an agent, a secret observer whose accounts highlight the face of our disorder.

This is how Browning—Greene's favorite—describes the poet in "How It Strikes a Contemporary" (1852):

We had among us, not so much a spy,  
As a recording chief-inquisitor,  
The town's true master, if the town but knew!  
We merely kept a governor for form,  
While this man walked about and took account  
Of all thought, said and acted, then went home,  
And wrote it fully to our Lord the King  
Who has an itch to know things, he knows why. . . .

Diffident as he is, Greene would no doubt disclaim such a function. Nevertheless, it is an accurate description of the role he has played for 50 years.

A sampling of his work follows:

## THE ACT OF LIVING

*Greene used his trip to Liberia in the winter of 1934–35 as an occasion to examine his past and the current state of his own mind. In this excerpt from Journey Without Maps (1936), he reflects on his Catholicism and finds that, after his frequent attempts at suicide, he will go on living:*

The fever would not let me sleep at all, but by the early morning it was sweated out of me. My temperature was a long way below normal, but the worst boredom of the trek for the time being was over. I had made a discovery during the night which interested me. I had discovered in myself a passionate interest in living. I had always assumed before, as a matter of course, that death was desirable.

It seemed that night an important discovery. It was like a conversion, and I had never experienced a conversion before. (I had not been converted to a religious faith. I had been convinced by specific arguments in the probability of its creed.) If the experience had not been so new to me, it would have seemed less important, I should have known that conversions don't last, or if they last at all it is only as a little sediment at the bottom of the brain. Perhaps the sediment has value, the memory of a conversion may have some force in an emergency; I may be able to strengthen myself with the intellectual idea that once in Zigi's Town I had been completely convinced of the beauty and desirability of the mere act of living.

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## LIFE DURING THE BLITZ

*The mise en scène of Greene's melodramatic The Ministry of Fear (1943) is London at the height of the World War II blitz. He sets the stage and introduces his pitiable hero with typical cinematic verve:*

Arthur Rowe lived in Guilford Street. A bomb early in the blitz had fallen in the middle of the street and blasted both sides, but Rowe stayed on. Houses went overnight, but he stayed. There were boards instead of glass in every room, and the doors no longer quite fitted and had to be propped at night. He had a sitting-room and a bedroom on the first floor, and he was done for by Mrs. Purvis who also stayed—because it was her house. He had taken the rooms furnished and simply hadn't bothered to make any alterations. He was like a man camping in a desert. Any books there were came from the twopenny or the public library except for *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *David Copperfield* which he read, as people used to read the Bible, over and over again till he could have quoted chapter and verse, not so much because he liked them as because he had read them as a child and they carried no adult memories. The pictures were Mrs. Purvis's—a wild water-colour of the Bay of Naples at sunset and several steel engravings and a photograph of the former Mr. Purvis in the odd dated uniform of 1914. The ugly arm-chair, the table covered with a thick woollen cloth, the fern in the window—all were Mrs. Purvis's, and the radio was hired. Only the packet of cigarettes on the mantelpiece belonged to Rowe, and the toothbrush and shaving tackle in the bedroom (the soap was Mrs. Purvis's), and inside a cardboard box his bromides. In the sitting-room there was not even a bottle of ink or a packet of stationery; Rowe didn't write letters, and he paid his income tax at the post office.

## IS HARRY LIME REALLY DEAD?

*"To me," Greene has written, "it is almost impossible to write a film play without first writing a story." The Third Man (1950) was never intended for publication; Carol Reed's movie, Greene has said, is "the finished state of the story." Rollo Martins, an American writer of westerns, travels to Allied-occupied Vienna right after World War II in search of Harry Lime, a black marketeer, portrayed by Orson Welles in the film version. Col. Calloway, head of British Military Police in Vienna, narrates Rollo Martins's arrival:*

One never knows when the blow may fall. When I saw Rollo Martins first I made this note on him for my security police files: "In normal circumstances a cheerful fool. Drinks too much and may cause a little trouble. Whenever a woman passes raises his eyes and makes some comment, but I get the impression that really he'd rather not be

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bothered. Has never really grown up and perhaps that accounts for the way he worshipped Lime." I wrote there that phrase "in normal circumstances" because I met him first at Harry Lime's funeral. It was February, and the gravediggers had been forced to use electric drills to open the frozen ground in Vienna's Central Cemetery. It was as if even nature were doing its best to reject Lime, but we got him in at last and laid the earth back on him like bricks. He was vaulted in, and Rollo Martins walked quickly away as though his long gangly legs wanted to break into a run, and the tears of a boy ran down his thirty-five-year-old face. Rollo Martins believed in friendship, and that was why what happened later was a worse shock to him than it would have been to you or me (you because you would have put it down to an illusion and me because at once a rational explanation—however wrongly—would have come to my mind). If only he had come to tell me then, what a lot of trouble would have been saved.

## A SHOAL OF BODIES

*In the 1950s, Life and other news magazines ran Greene's vivid dispatches from Vietnam. This excerpt, describing the French defense of Phatdiem against the Viet Minh, is from The Quiet American (1955). The passage was first published, however, in 1953 as an article in The Listener of London:*

The lieutenant sat beside the man with the walkie-talkie and stared at the ground between his feet. The instrument began to crackle instructions, and with a sigh as though he had been roused from sleep he got up. There was an odd comradeship about all their movements, as though they were equals engaged on a task they had performed together times out of mind. Nobody waited to be told what to do. Two men made for the plank and tried to cross it, but they were unbalanced by the weight of their arms and had to sit astride and work their way across a few inches at a time. Another man had found a punt hidden in some bushes down the canal, and he worked it to where the lieutenant stood. Six of us got in, and he began to pole it towards the other bank, but we ran on a shoal of bodies and stuck. He pushed away with his pole, sinking it into this human clay, and one body was released and floated up all its length beside the boat, like a bather lying in the sun. Then we were free again, and once on the other side we scrambled out, with no backward look. No shots had been fired; we were alive; death had withdrawn perhaps as far as the next canal. I heard somebody just behind me say with great seriousness, "Gott sei Dank." Except for the lieutenant they were most of them Germans.

Beyond was a group of farm buildings. The lieutenant went in first, hugging the wall, and we followed at six-foot intervals, in single file. Then the men, again without an order, scattered through the farm. Life



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had deserted it—not so much as a hen had been left behind, though hanging on the wall of what had been the living room were two hideous oleographs of the Sacred Heart and the Mother and Child which gave the whole ramshackle group of buildings a European air. One knew what these people believed even if one didn't share their belief; they were human beings, not just grey drained cadavers.

So much of war is sitting around and doing nothing, waiting for somebody else. With no guarantee of the amount of time you have left, it doesn't seem worth starting even a train of thought. Doing what they had done so often before the sentries moved out. Anything that stirred ahead of us now was enemy. The lieutenant marked his map and reported our position over the radio. A noontime hush fell; even the mortars were quiet, and the air was empty of planes. One man doodled with a twig in the dirt of the farmyard. After a while it was as if we had been forgotten by war. I hoped that Phuong had sent my suits to the cleaners. A cold wind ruffled the straw of the yard, and a man went modestly behind a barn to relieve himself. I tried to remember whether I had paid the British consul in Hanoi for the bottle of whisky he had allowed me.

## THE TOOLS OF A SPY

*Greene is a sharp satirist, and one of his funniest novels is Our Man in Havana (1958). Reluctant hero Jim Wormold, a failed middle-aged vacuum-cleaner salesman, is here recruited as a British spy by MI-6's chief Caribbean agent, Hawthorne:*

"When we have your office here properly organized, with sufficient security—a combination safe, radio, trained staff, all the gimmicks—then of course we can abandon a primitive code like this, but except for an expert cryptologist it's damned hard to break without knowing the name and edition of the book."

"Why did you choose [Charles] Lamb?"

"It was the only book I could find in duplicate except *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . . ."

"I brought you some ink as well. Have you got an electric kettle?"

"Yes. Why?"

"For opening letters. We like our men to be equipped against an emergency."

"What's the ink for? I've got plenty of ink at home."

"Secret ink of course. In case you have to send anything by the ordinary mail. Your daughter has a knitting needle, I suppose?"

"She doesn't knit."

"Then you'll have to buy one. Plastic is best. Steel sometimes leaves a mark."

"Mark where?"

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"On the envelopes you open."  
"Why on earth should I want to open envelopes?"  
"It might be necessary for you to examine Dr. Hasselbacher's mail. Of course, you'll have to find a sub-agent in the post office."  
"I absolutely refuse . . ."  
"Don't be difficult. I'm having traces of him sent out from London. We'll decide about his mail after we've read them. . . ."  
"I haven't even said I was willing . . ."  
"London agrees to \$150 a month, with another hundred and fifty as expenses; you'll have to justify those, of course. Payment of sub-agents, et cetera. Anything above that will have to be specially authorized."  
"You are going much too fast."  
"Free of income tax, you know," Hawthorne said and winked slyly. . . .  
"You must give me time. . . ."  
"Your code number is 59200 stroke 5." He added with pride, "Of course I am 59200. You'll number your sub-agents 59200 stroke 5 stroke 1 and so on. Got the idea?"  
"I don't see how I can possibly be of use to you."  
"You are English, aren't you?" Hawthorne said briskly.  
"Of course I'm English."  
"And you refuse to serve your country?"  
"I didn't say that. But the vacuum cleaners take up a great deal of time."  
"They are an excellent cover," Hawthorne said. "Very well thought out. Your profession has quite a natural air."  
"But it is natural."  
"Now if you don't mind," Hawthorne said firmly, "we must get down to our Lamb."

## ANOTHER COUNTRY

*Greene displays his descriptive powers, and his gift for apt metaphor, in this passage from The Honorary Consul (1973), a tale of terror and passion set in Argentina:*

Doctor Eduardo Plarr stood in the small port on the Paraná, among the rails and yellow cranes, watching where a horizontal plume of smoke stretched over the Chaco. It lay between the red bars of sunset like a stripe on a national flag. Doctor Plarr found himself alone at that hour except for the one sailor who was on guard outside the maritime building. It was an evening which, by some mysterious combination of failing light and the smell of an unrecognized plant, brings back to some men the sense of childhood and of future hope and to others the sense of something which has been lost and nearly forgotten.

The rails, the cranes, the maritime buildings—these had been what

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Doctor Plarr first saw of his adopted country. The years had changed nothing except by adding the line of smoke which when he arrived here first had not yet been hung out along the horizon on the far side of the Paraná. The factory that produced it had not been built when he came down from the northern republic with his mother more than twenty years before on the weekly service from Paraguay. He remembered his father as he stood on the quay at Asunción beside the short gangway of the small river boat, tall and gray and hollow-chested, and promised with a mechanical optimism that he would join them soon. In a month—or perhaps three—hope creaked in his throat like a piece of rusty machinery.

### ABANDONED

*Greene has said that of all his novels the one that most satisfies him is The Power and the Glory (1940). It is set in Mexico's Tabasco province during the 1930s. The socialist government has banned religion, closed the churches, and outlawed the clergy. The remorseful "whiskey priest," father of an illegitimate daughter, is on the lam:*

Far back inside the darkness the mules plodded on. The effect of the brandy had long ago worn off, and the man bore in his brain along the marshy tract—which, when the rains came, would be quite impassable—the sound of *General Obregon's* siren. He knew what it meant: the ship had kept to time-table; he was abandoned. He felt an unwilling hatred of the child ahead of him and the sick woman—he was unworthy of what he carried. A smell of damp came up all round him; it was as if this part of the world had never been dried in the flame when the world was sent spinning off into space: it had absorbed only the mist and cloud of those awful spaces. He began to pray, bouncing up and down to the lurching, slithering mule's stride, with his brandied tongue: "Let me be caught soon. . . . Let me be caught." He had tried to escape, but he was like the King of a West African tribe, the slave of his people, who may not even lie down in case the winds should fail.

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