The Earthly Inferno Of Graham Greene

J. W. Miller

St. John Fisher College

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"It has been said that the history of man could be written as a history of the alienation of man. What cloudy, disturbing vision lies at the back of our minds that tells of a better world, a primeval paradise from which we have all been separated? Graham Greene realizes, perhaps more intensely than any other contemporary novelist, that man, made for a more perfect world, is born with a constitutional dissatisfaction for this one. The characters in his novels are always isolated, bewildered by the immense complexity of a civilization for which they have little sympathy, and which they can scarcely comprehend. Pinkie, the boy gangster in Brighton Rock, is "shaken with a sense of loneliness, an awful lack of understanding," and this comment could be made of each individual who shuffles through the author's pages."

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THE EARTHLY INFERNO OF GRAHAM GREENE
J. W. MILLER

Faust: Where are you damned?
Mephistopheles: In hell.
Faust: How comes it then that thou are out of hell?
Mephistopheles: Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.

MARLOWE
DR. FAUSTAUS

It has been said that the history of man could be written as a history of the alienation of man. What cloudy, disturbing vision lies at the back of our minds that tells of a better world, a primeval paradise from which we have all been separated? Graham Greene realizes, perhaps more intensely than any other contemporary novelist, that man, made for a more perfect world, is born with a constitutional dissatisfaction for this one. The characters in his novels are always isolated, bewildered by the immense complexity of a civilization for which they have little sympathy, and which they can scarcely comprehend. Pinkie, the boy gangster in Brighton Rock, is "shaken with a sense of loneliness, an awful lack of understanding," and this comment could be made of each individual who shuffles through the author’s pages.

It is our common experience that men cannot refrain from rearranging their surroundings, hoping to bring heaven to earth. They thrust blocks of steel and concrete into the skies and carve large craters into the earth with super-atomic weapons. Each newly-weaned individual soon evidences a driving urge to place a mark of his personality upon the world, to organize either mentally or physically the vast disorganization that he sees about him. Some try to eliminate undesirable artifacts, like slums or criminals or capitalists. Others project a mental order upon the external world, and are satisfied. Few persons are content to accept with approval and unconcern their contemporary environment.

For centuries men have labored under the delusion that an earthly Utopia can be brought about. When Swinburne exclaimed, at the end of the nineteenth century, "Glory to man in the highest, for man is the master of things," he was articulating a belief that has possessed men like a devil incarnate ever since the Renaissance. There was the doctrine that man was naturally good, that if he
could be educated to separate good from evil, he would reason and act properly. Adam by one act attained this ideal: he became educated, he invaded the temple of truth, he came to a knowledge of good and evil—and he lost the sight of God.

A Faust is continually with us, in one form or another, selling his soul to the devil that he might comprehend the nature and meaning of existence. Centuries ago, knowledge itself was sufficient: to understand why the rains fell, what the moon and stars were, whether a face can stop a clock, a bullet a heart. But now we know, with a savageness that drives us to despair, that knowledge is not enough. It does not tell us how to live, why the performance of one action is preferable to another, or why it is better than doing nothing at all. Objects exist and events take place, but what do they all mean? In our private lives an absence of conviction about what is the good life frustrates our reason, takes the zest out of living, and creates a general boredom.

Faust demanded knowledge, but Mephistopheles cautioned him that happiness was not its handmaid. Heaven is the only real Utopia, the vision of God the only real fulfillment of man's yearning. There can be no Valhalla on earth: "All places are hell that are not heaven," Mephistopheles warned.

Raven, the betrayed and pursued hero of _A Gun For Sale_, thinks that "The only problem when you were once born was to get out of life more neatly and expeditiously than you had entered it." He has no faith in this life, nor in afterlife. He has sought a share of earth's temporary pleasures, but bad luck has marked him from the start. He was born physically deformed: he has a harelip, and people turn from him in disgust. As a youth he witnessed the self-slaughter of his mother, and he carries this familial image with him throughout life. He looks for no happiness in any personal or social relationship. As Greene comments,

He wasn't used to any taste that wasn't bitter on the tongue. He had been made by hatred; it had constructed him into this thin, smoky, murderous figure in the rain, hunted and ugly.

"Hunted and ugly." Such is the very soul of man on earth. Raven is at odds with society, but this is not important: being made for God, we are all at odds with Him, for each of us owes Him a death and until then—"... the foxes have their holes, but the son of man..." observes Greene as the bullets of Raven's enemies finally reach him.

But what of those who are at ease in this earthly life? Mr. Savoy, a writer and one of the travellers on the _Stamboul Train_, sees his mission "to bring back cheerfulness and health to modern fiction. There's been too much of this introspection, too much gloom. After all, the world is a fine adventurous place." Because of his own writing, he claims, the public is being brought up on healthy...
traditions. But Miss Warren, a journalist recording this statement for the Sunday supplements, can only remark:

I'll put that in about healthy traditions... the public will like it, James Douglas will like it, and they will like it still better when he's a Hyde Park case, for that's what he'll be in a few years.

Arthur Rowe, watching a hotel clerk in *The Ministry of Fear*, listens as he gives his commands: "Show this man to number 6, Mr. Travers. Mr. Travers has given orders that he's to be allowed in." Rowe reflects that the man had very few phrases and never varied them. Rowe wondered on how few he could get through life, marry and have children...

Mr. Wormold, in *Our Man in Havana*, has a fairly pleasant occupation selling vacuum cleaners, and a daughter in whom he is proud and happy. But,

He was aware, whenever he entered the shop, of a vacuum that had nothing to do with his cleaners. No customer could fill it...

Pinkie, the teen-age hero of *Brighton Rock*, thinks of social existence in terms of the Saturday night routine his parents engaged in a few feet from his own miserable bed. Rose, the girl he marries in order that she might not betray him to the police, lives with parents who seldom speak while in their "moods", and who balk at allowing her to marry—until money is offered in compensation.

Throughout all of Greene's work is the theme reiterated, pounded rhythmically into the reader's brain like the incessant strains of zither music in his movie *The Third Man*, that man is not made for happiness on earth. Holly Martins, the protagonist of this film, wanders about Vienna in a veritable mental fog; events happen to him and he sets them off by his very presence, but at no time can he either understand or orientate himself to them.

Bertram, in *Loser Takes All*, reflects upon his employer in a statement that has more meaning than is obvious at first glance:

He makes the world and then he goes and rests on the seventh day and his creation can go to pot that day for all he cares.

Human existence often seems like an eternal seventh day. In the entertainments a vast parade of alienated souls wanders through a lonely world. The many characters reflect the modern temper: they are restless and adrift in a discordant environment. They cannot understand what they perceive, they feel isolated, and their reason is impotent against the deluge of knowledge it has itself released. In vain they try to comprehend all, to embrace multiplicity, but it is useless. Yet they must act, because their very natures demand some positive expression. This often results in crime and brutality. Greene himself has noted, in *Journey Without Maps*, that

Today our world is peculiarly susceptible to brutality. There is a touch of nostalgia we take in gangster novels, in characters who have so agreeably
simplified their emotions that they have begun living again at a level below the cerebral... It is not, of course, that one wishes to stay at that level, but when one sees to what peril of extinction centuries of cerebration have brought us, one sometimes has a curiosity to discover, if one can, from what we have come, to recall at which point we went astray.

Man, when he acts, must choose either good or evil; his glory lies in his power to choose, and in the possibility, as T.S. Eliot as noted, of his choosing either salvation or damnation. All of Greene's characters, even those who most thoroughly enwrap themselves in a net of evil, are aware of a possible existence beyond the material. Bertram in Loser Takes All comments:

I suppose in all lives a moment comes when we wonder—suppose after all there is a God, suppose the theologians are right.

The murderer Pinkie, wandering the streets of London, is suddenly startled by an unsuspected presence:

He heard a whisper, looked sharply round... In an alley between two shops, an old woman sat upon the ground; he could just see the rotting and discoloured face; it was like the sight of damnation. Then he heard the whisper: “Blessed art thou among women,” and saw the gray fingers fumbling at the beads. This was not one of the damned; he watched with horrified fascination: this was one of the saved.

Ill at ease in this world, man is born to carry with him the burden of the next. St. Augustine’s refrain, “I am restless, my God, until I rest in Thee,” is a perpetual one. Man is forever conscious of the aridity and transitivity of his daily life. Within him he knows, instinctively, that there is an ever-recurring choice. But men are weak; many check out of life without any convictions about it, and for some it is only “between the saddle and the ground” that “something is sought, and something found.”

The vision of God is one of love, and this love is reflected on earth as the only tie between humans, and between them and God. Love, trust and sympathy are the only forces that can bring peace to men on earth. Arthur Rowe says in The Ministry of Fear that “It is impossible to go through life without trust; that is to be imprisoned in the worst cell of all, oneself.” Raven, having experienced the first intimations of love from his contact with Anne, balks for a second at slaying her fiancee, and in that moment is himself killed. Scobie, in The Heart of the Matter, because of his love for both his wife and mistress, cannot bear to hurt either. If love is the only bond between humans and he severs it—. As the creeping paralysis of the fatal drugs he has taken reaches his brain, his last words express the frustration of ambigious love: “Dear God, I love...”

Wormold, in Our Man in Havana, aims his gun at a spy and murderer. But
he hesitates to shoot, for as the man pleads for his life, Wormold realizes the common humanity they share:

I have to do it, Wormold thought, before he confesses any more to me. With every second the man was becoming human: a creature like oneself whom one might pity or console, not kill.

The old priest in Brighton Rock, whistling and sneezing in the dark confessional, tells Rose of a strange Frenchman:

a good man, a holy man, and he lived in sin all through his life, because he couldn’t bear the idea that any soul could suffer damnation... This man decided that if any soul was going to be damned, he would be damned too. He never took the sacraments; he never married his wife in church. I don’t know, my child, but some people think he was—well, a saint... It was a case of greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his soul for his friend.

Are the characters in Greene’s world mirror-bearers for the author? Possibly. But the fact that in literature there have been so many Infernos and so few Paradises must signify something. Those who are conscious of the shallowness of existence invariably take it upon themselves, consciously or unconsciously, to heighten here on earth the charge and tension of the spiritual. Material life quickly tires us out, and the evil lies in remaining tired. It is only a brief step from being beat to being conquered. There is more to life than the material; earth may be hell because it is not heaven, but into this hell was placed, for a short duration, man—with the ability to love and the necessity to choose. And he was not queried for consent when he was made in the image of God.

CLARENCE A. AMANN

The judge was I—
'Twas given me
To set Him free
Or see Him die.

They took him high
Upon a hill—
As was their will—
And saw Him die

Loud rang the cry
This thief of fame,
Of Kingly claim
To crucify.

PILATE'S REFLECTION

His brow was calm;
A flash of pride
All light did hide—
I washed my palm.

Might one day He
Before me stand
To wash His hand,
The judge of me?

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