

the prison the special treatment demanded is the right to speak Welsh to visitors and services by a Welsh chaplain. And women political prisoners are thanked by the authorities for their good effect on the general atmosphere. This may be the last Welsh Revival, 'ane end of ane auld song' but I shall end by adapting the Polish National Anthem: 'Wales (and her religious tradition) has not yet perished, while they live'.

## Graham Greene: The Writer by Roderick Strange

In September 1971 Graham Greene published his autobiography, *A Sort of Life*.<sup>1</sup> *The Times Literary Supplement* took the opportunity to feature a leading article on his work in which it stated that the autobiography 'reinforces Greene's theories about the relations between art and life', and at once added, 'that is to say, between *his* art and *his* life'.<sup>2</sup> The debate about the relationship between an author's work and his life recurs constantly, but in Greene's case the questions which are raised are particularly acute, his view of the matter being in marked contrast to that expressed by most of his critics.

The critics frequently affirm that his books are principally about himself. Marie-Béatrice Mesnet, for example, hints at this when she compares his travel book, *The Lawless Roads*, with his novel, *The Power and the Glory*, both of which are set in Mexico. 'His only addition to reality in the novel', she writes, 'lies in the characterization of his human material, in his power to conjure up life and the interior history of a man. The entire background is as close to actual fact as possible.'<sup>3</sup> Still more explicitly, Victor de Pange has claimed: 'L'oeuvre de Greene peut se lire comme une autobiographie à peine transposée'.<sup>4</sup>

No doubt it is this trend in the criticism of Greene's work that explains the reaction of the critics to his autobiography, for while they admire the quality of his writing, they confess to a sense of disappointment. They had hoped to learn his secret. Peter Lewis complained outright in the *Daily Mail* that 'Many of Graham Greene's admirers will be disappointed by *A Sort of Life*, the autobiography which might have thrown light on his secret'. Malcolm

<sup>1</sup>Graham Greene, *A Sort of Life* (London, Bodley Head, 1971). All the references to the autobiography are in the text.

<sup>2</sup>*The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 3, 629, 17th September, 1971, p. 1,102.

<sup>3</sup>Marie-Béatrice Mesnet, *Graham Greene and the Heart of the Matter* (London, 1954), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>Victor de Pange, *Graham Greene* (Paris, 1953), p. 13.

Muggeridge, too, writing in *The Observer*, regretted that Greene had not told more and lamented the fact that he is envisaging no sequel to this volume.

Greene himself is wearily conscious of this tendency to identify him with the narrator of his stories. He writes in his preface to *The Comedians*: 'Many readers assume—I know it from experience—that an "I" is always the author. So in my time I have been considered the murderer of a friend, the jealous lover of a civil-servant's wife, and an obsessive player at roulette.'<sup>1</sup> The truth of the matter as he sees it is implicit in the title of his autobiography. He explains on the first page: '... a book like this can only be "a sort of life", for in the course of sixty-six years I have spent almost as much time with imaginary characters as with real men and women' (p. 9). In other words, his life is moulded greatly by his profession. Thus, in his opinion, 'All that we can easily recognize as our experience in a novel is mere reporting: it has a place, but an unimportant one. It provides an anecdote, it fills in gaps in the narrative. It may legitimately provide a background, and sometimes we have to fall back on it when the imagination falters.' And he concludes with what may be the most telling remark of the whole book: 'Perhaps a novelist has a greater ability to forget than other men—he has to forget or become sterile. What he forgets is the compost of the imagination' (p. 182).

That is the way Greene describes the relationship between his life and his art. The question is whether he is right. How reliable is he as a guide to understanding his own work? Are the external sources of his writing really as unimportant as he makes them out to be? Or isn't Peter Lewis right when he remarks pungently of the autobiography: 'Like one of his agents, Mr Greene has now provided his cover story . . . and he's sticking to it'.

On the face of it the evidence is stacked against him. His novels seem to be steeped in autobiography from the general themes, 'living on the dangerous edge of things', to small details like the Pekinese dog he and his wife bought shortly after they were married, which had 'a great passion for dustbins' and was later fêted in a short story called *Beauty*.

Consider, first of all, the significance of childhood in his work. On television, in 1968, he laid particular stress on it as the truly defining period of a person's life; he wrote at length on the same theme in his now-famous essay, *The Lost Childhood*, and it emerges from the start as a guiding principle of the autobiography: 'If I had known it, the whole future must have lain all the time along those Berkhamsted streets' (p. 11). It is hardly surprising, then, to find that childhood is a prominent theme in his fiction, particularly the short stories. It occurs in *The Basement Room*, in which all the experience of a lifetime

<sup>1</sup>Graham Greene, *The Comedians* (Penguins), p. 5. All references to Greene's work, unless otherwise stated, are from the Penguin edition currently available.

is crowded into the brief period of childhood. In a chilling phrase he remarks that the young boy not only had no more courage left, but had none left 'for ever'. 'Life fell on him with savagery: you couldn't blame him if he never faced it again in sixty years.'<sup>1</sup> And, to give one further illustration, he writes in the autobiography: 'I hated the very idea of children's parties. . . . Many years later I wrote a short story about a children's party' (p. 31). The short story is perhaps the one called *The End of the Party*;<sup>2</sup> it revolves around the terror felt by a small boy obliged to play hide and seek in the dark. In all this the influence of life on fiction seems to be pronounced.

But it is not only his childhood experiences which are found in Greene's novels. Characters emerge, too, it may be said. Of particular interest in the autobiography is his account of his time as a journalist. During it he must have had contact with many fascinating people. It is tempting to believe that such a one is Minty, the down-at-heel reporter in *England Made Me*. In his introduction to the new Collected Edition which is gradually being published, Greene has described his arrival on the scene, how he stepped aboard the boat-load of the novel's characters, causing it to list with his excessive liveliness and energy.<sup>3</sup>

Again, places visited are used, sometimes on slight acquaintance as Greene admits of Stockholm in *England Made Me*, but more usually when they are known well. He spent about nine months in Vietnam in the course of writing *The Quiet American*. Earlier in his work, Mexico was prominent. For example, at the beginning of *The Lawless Roads* he writes about the border: 'The money-changers' booths in Laredo formed a whole street, running downhill to the international bridge; then they ran uphill on the other side into Mexico, just the same, but a little shabbier'.<sup>4</sup> At about that time he wrote a short story called *Across the Bridge*. He uses the same setting, but from the Mexican side of the border: 'There was no interest in the place for anyone; it was just damp and dust and poverty, a kind of shabby replica of the town across the river: both had squares in the same spots; both had the same number of cinemas. One was cleaner than the other, that was all, and more expensive, much more expensive.'<sup>5</sup>

Each of these examples seems to confirm the markedly autobiographical character of much of Greene's writing. Other instances could have been given, such as his description of the way the novelist, Bendrix, works in *The End of the Affair*. It is remarkably like his own. And, finally, Greene appears to compound this theory when he writes about a novel which he later abandoned uncompleted. The story he

<sup>1</sup>Graham Greene, 'The Basement Room' in *Twenty-One Stories*, p. 24, 23.

<sup>2</sup>Graham Greene, 'The End of the Party' in *ibid.*, pp. 34-43.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Graham Greene, *England Made Me* (London, Heinemann, Collected Works, 1970), pp. ix-x.

<sup>4</sup>Graham Greene, *The Lawless Roads*, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>Graham Greene, 'Across the Bridge' in *Twenty-One Stories*, p. 67.

still believes to be ingenious: 'A young governess was found murdered in a country house, and a multiplicity of strange clues baffled the police. Only the local priest recognized behind them a girl's psychology and realized where they led—to a small girl of twelve who had committed the crime because her beloved governess was in love with a man. The priest, of course, did not betray the child.' He unravels the threads: 'my sister's governess, jealousy of the man she was to marry, perhaps the long summer at Harston House, even Father Trollope and my new conversion; yet if I had been asked about the story then, I would have said it bore no relation whatever to my life' (p. 181). Such a statement seems to provide conclusive evidence. Could not each of his books be broken down in the same way?

But is this the whole story? Certainly it shows that there is an autobiographical element in Greene's novels. However, that is not at issue, for the argument is not that Greene's life plays no part in his fiction—clearly an untenable opinion—but that the part it does play is considerably less important than is commonly supposed. The suggestion is that a closer study of the novels reveals the accuracy of Greene's assessment of his own work.

In the first place, the evidence of the abandoned novel is double-edged precisely because it was abandoned. Moreover, the autobiographical elements so frequently detected in his books often prove, on closer inspection, to be rather less significant than they seemed originally. To return to the examples already given, it appears that his own dislike of children's parties may have inspired a short story, but the story is more about the terror of the child, Francis, which arises from the fear and dislike, and the way it is communicated to his twin brother. Again, for all the experience of journalism which gives Minty such verisimilitude, he is a distinct artistic creation, not just a character once met, now described. 'He emerged from the pre-conscious', Greene says.<sup>1</sup> The rueful way in which he describes his arrival, a sense of grievance mingled with pleasure at the success of the creation, suggests he ought to be believed. And finally the places. Of course, these have figured widely in his writings—Africa, Mexico, the Far East, the South of France, Cuba, Haiti, not to mention London, Nottingham and Brighton. But to reduce these references to the autobiographical and no more is quite absurd, unless the chicken comes before the egg. Greene has travelled widely for many reasons, but certainly one of these has been the need to gather authentic background material for his novels. It is not so much the travels which have given rise to the books, therefore, as the books which have inspired the travels. (In passing, it may be as well to remember that Greene dislikes actually writing a novel outside England.)

However, it is possible to go still further than this and enquire

<sup>1</sup>Graham Greene, *England Made Me*, in the Collected Edition, p. x.

whether any of Greene's novels are really autobiographical. All—with the possible exception of *The Confidential Agent*—have parts of his experience woven into them, but has he ever written a novel which could be called autobiographical in the same way as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*? Clearly not. Furthermore, while ostensible links with his own life may be uncovered, they fade into insignificance beside the major themes which he obsessively unravels and works over. There is the theme of the hunt, which can be found in many of his novels from *The Man Within* to *A Burnt-Out Case*; there is, particularly in the novels proper (as he has called them), the theme of commitment to God and man which develops into the theme of avoiding commitment in *The Comedians*; there is the theme of the interplay of pity and compassion, noticeably in *The Ministry of Fear*; and there is, underlying the seedy world which he is said to have created, not so much pessimism, as the twin themes of mercy and love. Three examples selected from his novels illustrate decisively the subordinate place taken by his own experience.

The first novel of Greene's to be published was *The Man Within*. It was, however, the third he had completed and this may be significant. First novels are often autobiographical. Greene was aware of this fact and, if anything, reacted too strongly against it. The story is romantic, the style derivative and the autobiographical element almost entirely absent. Perhaps the sense of pursuit owes something to his playing truant from school. But the central theme is a coward's search for self-respect. The romantic flavour of this search is caught best in the remark of the girl, Elizabeth: 'I once knew a man who so forgot his own details . . . , that he believed himself a coward and nothing else'.<sup>1</sup> This is the heart of the book, this is the subject Greene is studying; his own experience is clearly unimportant.

In *The Power and the Glory*, which many people consider his finest book, Greene makes vivid use of the material he had gathered during his visit to Mexico. While there he had heard of a priest 'who existed for ten years in the forests and the swamps, venturing out only at night'<sup>2</sup> during the persecution. The novel he finally wrote was based on this, but not on this alone. It is a study in depth. Greene was irritated by the facile identification of a man with his office, and it is this, fused with the story he had heard, which provided the sources of his book. He makes use of his own experience to provide atmosphere, and a background of places and secondary characters, but they are subordinate to the major interest of the novel, the way a weak man, trapped by his own apathy, can still effectively carry out the functions of his office.

The final example is the most fruitful of all. It really deserves an investigation of its own. However, it is possible to point out the more

<sup>1</sup>Graham Greene, *The Man Within*, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup>Graham Greene, *The Lawless Roads*, p. 106.

salient features. The example is *A Burnt-Out Case* and its special interest derives from the journal Greene wrote while gathering material for it in the Congo. The journal is published in *In Search of a Character*. There aspects of the novel emerge alongside each day's account of his life. His description of the boat journey he took up the river is particularly noteworthy as its recurrence in the novel is one of the parts of his work which Greene has singled out as still affording him satisfaction. The origin of many of the novel's details, the local saying, 'the mosquito has no pity for the thin man', for example, the description of the sick and various anecdotes, can be found in the journal. Yet these are never more than details which crop up as Greene feels his way towards the novel he wants to write. In the journal X becomes C and emerges only gradually as Querry. Who he is and why he has come to the leper colony are questions it takes Greene a long time to answer, accumulating ideas and then often having to discard them. There is activity on two levels, therefore. On the first, the assembling of factual knowledge for use, more or less unchanged, in the novel; on the second, the quarrying of the theme of the novel from the author's imagination and creative talent. But there is activity on a third level, also, the unconscious workings of the writer's mind. In the present case it is clearly fair to regard Querry as a distinct artistic creation of this novel, but on examination it seems probable that he is a continuation of Fowler in *The Quiet American* as well. They have different professions, it is true, Querry is an architect, Fowler a journalist. But there are marked similarities between Querry's state of mind at the beginning of this novel and Fowler's at the end of the other. Both are disillusioned. Both have used people during their lives without loving them. Both are ageing, drying up, frightened of growing old. Both wish there was someone to whom they could say they were sorry. And in the course of *A Burnt-Out Case*, Querry receives the treatment that Fowler needs. There seems, then, to be a definite link between these two novels, yet Greene is unconscious of it. This is significant because, on the one hand, it indicates how much he is working from inside himself, while, on the other, it shows how the final result can be related to something more external. This corresponds exactly to Greene's view that a novel is a distinct artistic creation which nevertheless draws on things outside itself of which the author is unconscious.

Drawing these strands together, it seems that the weight of the evidence will not allow a predominantly autobiographical interpretation of Greene's work. His own experience plays a minor role only. Rather the evidence makes it plain that when he speaks of what he has forgotten as 'the compost of the imagination', he is not providing himself with a cover story, but simply telling the truth. In other words, to answer the original question, Greene is an accurate assessor of his own work. It follows that it is advisable to under-



stand him in the light of what he has written rather than on the basis of some incident from his past.

Finally, where does this leave the autobiography itself? If his life is so unimportant for his writing, what value can an account of it be? The answer is twofold. First, it is valuable because it demonstrates precisely how slight a part his life does play in his work. He points out noteworthy links and associations, most of his books get a mention at some stage, but that is all. As far as he is concerned, working from within and forgetful of his past, there is nothing else to tell. *A Sort of Life*, therefore, sets the perspective for interpreting the rest of his writings. And, secondly, it is valuable because it describes the one period of his life which he believes is genuinely influential, namely childhood. Thus the final judgment on his autobiography must be very favourable, for it makes it possible to understand Greene in the way that it is most vital for him to be understood, as a writer.

## Fragment of an Autobiography by E. E. Evans-Pritchard

One has often been asked by incredulous, though well-meaning, people—and almost apologetically—‘Why did you become a Catholic?’ The suggestion being that there must be some explanation to account for such a strange, even a remarkable, lapse from rational behaviour on the part of one supposed to be some sort of scientist. The question is not well put. I suppose that none of us can say truthfully and certainly why we do anything. It would be better to ask not *why*, but *how*, did a man become a Catholic; and this is the question I shall attempt to answer, so that next time I am asked why I became a Catholic I can just hand over this number of *New Blackfriars*. Perhaps even more alarming and difficult to give a direct answer to is the question: ‘When were you converted?’ Perhaps I had better deal with that one first.

Some people, it would seem, have peculiar notions about what is called ‘conversion’, as though it were some sudden and dazzling experience (it may be with some people; I do not know). So, we are led to suppose, this is what happened on the road to Damascus, but if that dramatic incidence, that traumatic vision, occurred as described, we might recollect that Paul was a highly religious Jew, and so was Jesus, a Jew preaching unto Jews in the tradition of Jewish thought and expression. And we might also bear in mind that when we read that Augustine was converted by Ambrose that