A Lost Leader?
The Course of a Literary Friendship

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In the opening chapter of David Lodge's *How Far Can You Go?*, set in 1952, two Catholic students at London University are comparing the merits of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh:

> Michael's favourite novel at the moment is *The Heart of the Matter*, and Polly's, *Brideshead Revisited.* 'But Greene's awfully sordid, don't you think?' says Polly.
> 'But Waugh's so snobbish.'
> 'Anyway, it said in the *Observer* that they're the two best English novelists going, so that's one in the eye for the Prods.'

In the assertive English Catholic culture of the time the achievements of Catholic novelists, like those of Catholic sportsmen or soldiers, could be flaunted as marks of the superiority of the Faith. Waugh was happy to appear before the world as a Catholic writer, but Greene disliked the term and preferred to regard himself as a writer who happened to be a Catholic.

They had been nodding acquaintances at Oxford in the early 1920s, though they did not get to know each other until 1937, when Waugh contributed to the short-lived magazine *Night and Day*, of which Greene was an editor. By that time each had become a Catholic and established himself as a novelist.

During the 1930s Greene published a brief, admiring review of Waugh's life of the Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion, and Waugh a longer and equally admiring one of *The Lawless Roads*, Greene's account of his visit to Mexico to investigate the persecution of the Catholic church that had been launched by an anti-clerical government in the 1920s and which persisted in parts of the country. Waugh acknowledges that Greene had good reasons for disliking Mexico, but ends his review by offering him this reflection: 'The Mexicans are not only the people who killed the martyrs; they are the people for whom the martyrs died. It is in that aspect alone that martyrdom is valuable'. That corrective note was to recur in Waugh's writings on Greene. The remark about the martyrs bore fruit in *The Power and the Glory*, the novel which emerged from Greene's Mexican experiences. It confirmed and extended the reputation as a

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Catholic writer which had begun with *Brighton Rock* in 1938.

During the war years Greene and Waugh had little opportunity for meeting, but after the war they resumed their friendship. In a diary entry for January 1948 Waugh describes running into Greene and gives the encounter, in his inimitable fashion, a note of farce: 'Mass at 12 at Farm Street where I met the shambling, unshaven and as it happens quite penniless figure of Graham Greene. Took him to the Ritz for a cocktail and gave him 6d for his hat. He had suddenly been moved by love of Africa and emptied his pockets into the box for African missions'. In 1945 Waugh had published *Brideshead Revisited*, his first novel to be informed by Catholicism. Though not universally admired, it was widely acclaimed as a richly written, gripping story of aristocratic life and loves in the between-wars period, nostalgically evoking the amenities and luxuries of peacetime in the era of wartime austerity. It also disconcerted secular readers by attempting to trace the workings of grace in worldly lives. Waugh could now share with Greene the public status of Catholic novelist, and it is significant that his attitude to his friend was not one of rivalry and competition, which one might well have expected, given the jealousies and insecurities of literary life. Waugh seems, rather, to have wanted Greene and himself to appear before the reading public as a mutually supportive partnership, a duo of defenders of the faith.

Later in 1948 Greene published *The Heart of the Matter*, his first novel for several years and the first with a Catholic dimension since *The Power and the Glory*. Like that novel, and like *Brighton Rock*, it has a desperately isolated Catholic central character, and is concerned with the possibility of damnation. The novel was a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic and received a national Catholic literary award in America. The central character, Major Scobie, when faced with letting down his wife and his mistress and, ultimately, God, commits suicide. The damnation or otherwise of Scobie was a question that occasioned much debate among Catholics, bringing in moral theology as well as literary criticism.

Waugh undertook to review *The Heart of the Matter* as a task of some solemnity. He notes that Greene's new novel develops the interest in damnation first evident in *Brighton Rock*, and uncompromisingly asserts, 'It is a book which only a Catholic could write and only a Catholic can understand. I mean that only a Catholic could understand the nature of the problem'. Waugh is concerned that the book's wide sale, particularly in America, means that it will have many readers who do not understand it. He also fears that loyal Catholics may be put off this 'profoundly reverent book' and regard it as scandalous for not presenting the Church in sufficiently attractive terms. Waugh praises the novel for its literary qualities, for what he calls Greene's genius as a story-teller and the power

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of characterization: 'The characters are real people whose moral and spiritual predicament is our own because they are part of our personal experience'. But he is uneasy about the idea that Scobie may have been justified in what he did: 'To me the idea of willing my own damnation for the love of God is either a very loose poetical expression or a mad blasphemy, for the God who accepted that sacrifice could be neither just nor lovable'. The spirit of *The Heart of the Matter* is summed up in the epigraph from Péguy: 'Le pécheur est au coeur même de chrétienté . . . Nul n'est aussi compétent que le pécheur en matière de chrétienté. Nul, si c'est le saint'. Waugh is sceptical of this sentiment; he has been through the essay by Péguy from which it came and subjects it to a withering analysis. He concludes his review, 'Mr Greene has removed the argument from Péguy's mumbled version and restated it in brilliantly plain human terms; and it is there, at the heart of the matter, that the literary critic must resign his judgment to the theologian'.

Greene took the review in good part. Waugh wrote to him, 'I am delighted that you did not take the review amiss. My admiration for the book was great—as I hope I made plain. It was your putting that quotation from Péguy at the beginning which led me astray. I think it will lead others astray'. Greene did, however, correct Waugh on one point in his review: 'I did not regard Scobie as a saint, and his offering his damnation up was intended to show how muddled a man full of goodwill could become once "off the rails"'. This is a prudent statement of authorial intention, but like all such statements it cannot be regarded as the final word on the text.

Waugh's admiration for *The Heart of the Matter* outweighed his reservations, and when he was lecturing in the US and Canada early in 1949 he discussed the book in a lecture which considered G.K.Chesterton, Ronald Knox and Greene as three representative Catholic writers, with very different backgrounds and temperaments but all agreed on the essentials of belief. All three, like Waugh, were converts, and by the fact of lecturing on them he appeared as part of the team. Martin Stannard, Waugh's biographer, describes the lecture as 'a show-stopper. Packed houses greeted him everywhere—and he did not disappoint them'.

In 1950, when Greene sent him a copy of his children's book *The Little Fire Engine*, Waugh responded, 'I agree you are greatest novelist of the century but am not absolutely sure I should recognise this from the dramatic intensity of the story, as the blurb promises'. He was 'hugely exhilarant' when Greene said he liked *Helena*, for few readers did. Thanking Greene for his collection of essays, *The Lost Childhood*, Waugh observes, 'Of course I don't often agree with you. I can never hope to do that this side of death'. When *The End of the Affair* appeared in 1951

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Waugh published a long, admiring review, clearly being happier with it than with *The Heart of the Matter.* He sees Greene as writing a different kind of novel from its predecessors, 'which tended to show Catholics to themselves and set them puzzling'. *The End of the Affair* is addressed to the larger, unbelieving world and insists on the reality of the supernatural order. What Waugh does not quite say is that Greene has gone further than he had in showing the mysterious operations of grace. In *Brideshead Revisited* the apostate Catholic Lord Marchmain makes the sign of the cross on his deathbed in an act of reconciliation; in *The End of the Affair* Sarah Miles appears to work miracles after her death. Waugh offers, in passing, a few relevant criticisms. He pertinently asks, as a matter of plausibility, whether Sarah's intimate journal might not have been missed after Bendrix has had it stolen. He remarks of Sarah's secret baptism in childhood by a Catholic priest:

> There is some speculation as to whether it "took"; whether it was an infection caught in infancy, and so on. But Mr Greene knows very well that she would have been as surely baptized by the local vicar. It would be a pity if he gave an impression of the Catholic Church as a secret society, as Mr.T.S.Eliot did of his Church in *The Cocktail Party*. Clearly that is not Mr Greene's intention nor can it be justly read into his words, but in the dark places where his apostolate lies I can imagine some passages carrying a whiff of occultism.

Once again Waugh offers a corrective note, and his criticism, though lightly made, draws attention to Greene's quasi-magical presentation of Catholicism. On the last page of *The End of the Affair*, Maurice Bendrix, having lost his lover Sarah to God, a more powerful suitor, cries out 'Leave me alone for ever', and Greene does something similar. Waugh's friend and first biographer, Christopher Sykes, reports Greene as saying in 1953 that he has decided to write a political novel (which was to be *The Quiet American*), adding, 'It will be fun to write about politics for a change, and not always about God'. To which Waugh memorably responded, 'I wouldn't give up writing about God if I was you. It would be like P.G.Wodehouse dropping Jeeves half-way through the Wooster series'. The early 1950s were a period of crisis and reorientation for Greene. *The Heart of the Matter* had made him famous as a Catholic literary figure; as a result, he was treated as a spiritual advisor or guru by many Catholics, clerical and lay, who wrote to him about their problems, or tried to have personal encounters with him. Greene found these attentions unwelcome and ultimately intolerable. He later recalled, 'in the years between *The Heart of the Matter* and *The End of the Affair* I felt myself used and exhausted by the victims of religion.' Greene's personal

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life at that time was complicated by his long affair with Catherine Walston, the dedicatee of *The End of the Affair*. He determined to escape from his reputation, and signs of a new attitude on his part were apparent at about the time he decided to give God a rest as a fictional character. In June 1953 he stayed with Waugh, who reported him as being in an unhappy state and telling the Italian Ambassador, when invited to a Catholic conference in Florence, that he was no longer a practising Catholic. That may have been true at that time, but there is no doubt that Greene continued to regard himself as some kind of Catholic until his death nearly forty years later. From time to time he would make responses to interviewers about his beliefs and practice; these tended to be inconsistent and sometimes contradictory, perhaps intended either to provoke or to assuage his interlocutor. Greene was a notorious joker and his statements cannot always be taken at face value without corroboration. He remained at some distance from the institutional Church but maintained a relation with it; he had his private devotions, keeping, it is said, a picture of Padre Pio in his wallet.

Greene was famous as a Catholic writer in France as well as in the English-speaking world, and a translated collection of his writings appeared there as *Essais Catholiques*. François Mauriac had written an admiring introduction to the French translation of *The Power and the Glory* and the book was widely read. Among these readers were certain bishops, who were scandalized by aspects of the book and complained about it to the Roman authorities. They in turn wrote to the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster who passed the word on to Greene; the book was alleged to be 'paradoxical' and 'dealt with extraordinary circumstances', something which might be said of many of the world's greatest novels. It is not clear whether the complaint was about the general unseemliness of the 'whisky priest' as a candidate for martyrdom and sanctity, or whether it was more specifically doctrinal, perhaps related to the priest's final discussion with his captor, the police lieutenant, in which he says that, as a matter of justice, if any man in the province had been damned then he would wish to be damned too. This is certainly dangerous ground, picking up Péguy's notion of solidarity with the damned, which Greene had alluded to in *Brighton Rock* and *The Lawless Roads*. Greene disposed of the complaint without much difficulty:

> I wonder whether any of the totalitarian states, whether of the right or of the left, with which the Church of Rome is often compared, would have treated me as gently when I refused to revise the book on the casuistical ground that the copyright was in the hands of my publishers. There was no public condemnation, and the affair was allowed to drop into the peaceful oblivion which the Church wisely reserves for unimportant issues.

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No doubt the Roman bureaucrats felt they had done all that was required of them by passing on the complaint. Years later, Pope Paul VI, who had read *The Power and the Glory*, told Greene, 'some parts of your books are certain to offend some Catholics, but you should pay no attention to that'.

When Greene was considering how to deal with the complaint in 1954, Waugh wrote to him offering his support if a public protest was appropriate: 'Since you showed me the Grand Inquisitor's letter my indignation has waxed. It was as fatuous as unjust—a vile misreading of a noble book'. Greene's way of dealing with the issue was clearly the right one, but Waugh's pugnacious offer suggested a desire for their old partnership, when they were fighting on two fronts, against secularism and against unenlightened Catholic opinion. Later that year, though, Waugh was angry at Greene rather than on his behalf. Greene had written an open letter to the Archbishop of Paris, published in *Le Figaro*, protesting against his refusal to allow a priest to say prayers at the funeral of the novelist Colette. Waugh described the letter to Nancy Mitford as 'fatuous and impertinent' and said that Greene was tipsy when he wrote it; Greene later remarked, 'I was not tipsy with alcohol when I wrote the letter but tipsy with rage'. But good relations were soon restored; a few weeks later Waugh told Greene how delighted he was that Greene, whom he had sponsored, had been admitted to White's club.

Greene's changing stance to institutional Catholicism was reflected in 'A Visit to Morin', a short story he published in 1959. It is narrated by an Englishman with literary interests who works in the wine trade. He has long admired a famous French Catholic novelist called Pierre Morin; when he is travelling in France he finds himself in Morin's village and takes the opportunity of meeting him and confessing his admiration. He is disconcerted to find that the old man appears to have repudiated the Catholic reputation that brought him so many admirers and disciples. He still goes to church but does not receive Communion, and if he has not wholly lost his faith he has given up on many particular Catholic beliefs. Allowing for the obliquities of fiction, and the change in milieu and nationality, one cannot escape the conclusion that the story reflects Greene's own troubled sense of his situation in the late 1950s and his boredom with the idea of being a famous Catholic writer, or famous Catholic anything. This theme is enlarged on in the novel he published two years later, *A Burnt-Out Case*. The central character, Querry, is a famous Catholic architect who has lost his faith and become bored with his career and retreats to a leper colony run by missionary priests in what was then the Belgian Congo. The Catholicism in this novel is gentler, more humanistic than the hell-fire version that had fascinated Greene in his earlier novels. At the same time, it offers fewer dramatic resources to

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the writer; *A Burnt-Out Case* is much inferior in literary power to *Brighton Rock* (though like that novel, it ends with the melodramatic death of the central figure; some of Greene's imaginative configurations were enduring). Greene tried to deny that there was an autobiographical element in his picture of Querry, but author and character had had similar experiences in their Catholic celebrity, even to the extent of appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine. It is difficult not to read *A Burnt-Out Case* and 'A Visit to Morin' as fables reflecting Greene's attitudes to his faith and his art.

This was how Waugh responded to them. He was shocked and distressed by both works; the *Daily Mail* invited him to review *A Burnt-Out Case* but he declined. He wrote in a diary entry dated 31 December 1960–1 January 1961:

> There is nothing I could write about it without shame one way or the other. Coming so soon after his Christmas story ['A Visit to Morin'] it emphasises a theme which it would be affected not to regard as personal—the vexation of a Catholic artist exposed against his wishes to acclamations as a 'Catholic' artist who at the same time cuts himself off from divine grace by sexual sin . . . It is the first time Graham has come out as specifically faithless — pray God it is a mood but it strikes deeper and colder . . . His early books are full of self pity at poverty and obscurity; now self pity at his success. I am not guiltless as one of those who put him in the odious position of 'Catholic artist'.

Writing to Greene a few days later, Waugh is kinder but uncompromising. He praises what he can about the novel (though in his diary entry he had seen it as showing a decline in Greene's power as a writer) and acknowledges that it is mischievous to identify fictional characters with their authors. Nevertheless, he repeats the—essentially correct—judgment he made in his diary entry, that Greene was exasperated by his reputation as a 'Catholic writer', and was trying to repudiate it. Waugh acknowledges his own responsibility: 'Twelve years ago I gave a number of lectures here and in America presumptuously seeking to interpret what I genuinely believed was an apostolic mission in danger of being neglected by people who were shocked by the sexuality of some of your themes. In fact in a small way I behaved like Rycker'. The remark about Rycker is revealing; he is one of the most strongly realized characters in *A Burnt-Out Case* and by far the nastiest. He is a conspicuously devout, pharisaical middle-aged Catholic, who hankers after the religious life and has married his young wife, whom he bullies, not for love but in the spirit of the Pauline injunction that it is better to marry than to burn. He refuses to accept Querry' s protestations of loss of

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faith, insisting that they really indicate a profound humility. It is curious that Waugh should have even partially identified himself with this odious figure; there is a suggestion, not only of guilt about his earlier dealings with Greene, but of possible unease at the rigidities of his own profession of faith.

In his reply Greene wrote, 'I have always found our points of disagreement — as in the case of *The Heart of the Matter* refreshing or enlightening', and added, 'I do really assure you that never once have you behaved like Rycker'. As to Querry, he conceded, 'Undoubtedly, if there is any realism in the character it must come from the author experiencing some of the same moods as Querry, but surely not necessarily with the same intensity . . . If people are so impetuous as to regard this book as a recantation of faith I cannot help it. Perhaps they will be surprised to see me at Mass'. Waugh responded:

> I was not so dotty as to take Rycker as a portrait of myself. I saw him as the caricature of a number of your admirers (among whom I counted myself) who have tried to force on you a position which you found obnoxious . . . You will not find so much 'hostility' among your former fellowship as the regrets of Browning for his 'Lost Leader'—except, of course, that no-one will impute mercenary motives.

He has not shifted ground in his objections: 'I don't think you can blame people who read the book as a recantation of faith . . . God forbid I should pry into the secrets of your soul. It is simply your public performance which grieves me'.

Commenting on the exchange in *Ways of Escape*, Greene remarked, 'Evelyn's reference to the Lost Leader had surprised and even shocked me a little, for had I not always regarded him as *my* leader?' Shirley Hazzard, in her recent memoir of Greene, confirms that he looked to Waugh as his mentor: 'Although Greene and Waugh were close contemporaries, Graham deferred to Waugh as to an elder and greater writer. His letters to Waugh weirdly verge, at times, on the reverential'. Nevertheless, the difference over *A Burnt-Out Case* marked a crisis in their relationship which might have turned into a rift. Waugh's fear was that Greene had given up the Catholicism that he had once conspicuously professed and become an apostate, which would have been a cause of intense grief to him. Waugh could regard the complications of Greene's sexual life with urbane tolerance, but apostacy was a different matter. It was, for him, the greatest of sins; one sees this is in the anguished and accusatory letters that he sent to his friend Clarissa Churchill when she gave up Catholicism in order to become the second wife of the divorced Anthony Eden. Waugh, as a rigorously orthodox convert, regarded apostasy not just as

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disobeying God's law and, as he told her, 'contributing to the loneliness of Calvary by your desertion', but as an act of disloyalty to the English Catholic community which had kept the faith over centuries of persecution and legal disability. Outside the English context, though, apostasy must be one of the commonest of sins; in Catholic countries millions of people are baptized and brought up in the Church only to abandon it in adult life.

Greene was able to persuade Waugh that 'A Letter to Morin' and *A Burnt-Out Case* did not represent a break with Catholicism on his part. He adopted a light and mollifying tone, replying to Waugh's letter with a facetious postcard, and Waugh responded in a similar vein, alluding to Browning's poem, 'The Lost Leader': 'Mud in your mild and magnificent eye. Hoping for a glad and confident morning'. The friendship was back on course, though it had perhaps been a near thing. Their Catholicism had taken divergent forms, which are more recognisable now than then. Waugh's was strict, precise and doctrinaire; he needed it to be, to protect himself against the temperamental inclination towards chaos and disorder that marked his comic fiction. Like Hilaire Belloc, whom he admired and sometimes imitated, Waugh practised a Catholicism where everything was sharp and distinct, a matter of 'either/or'. Either one had the faith or one had lost it, without half-measures; hence his distress at the idea of apostasy. After the dramatic interest in sin and damnation that marked Greene's novels of the period 1938–48, and his subsequent retreat from his reputation, he moved to a faith that was provisional and exploratory and not easy to define. In his discussion of *A Burnt-Out Case* he quotes Unamuno: 'Those who believe that they believe in God, but without passion in their hearts, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God Idea, not in God himself'. Waugh would have delighted in pulling this utterance apart, exposing its essential vagueness, and many Catholics would still dismiss it in similar terms. Others would see it as expressing a profound but elusive truth, exposing the paradoxical nature of religious language. Such polarities are part of the climate of present-day Catholic thinking, four decades after Waugh and Greene had their exchange.

In January 1966 Waugh wrote to Greene to congratulate him both on his becoming a Companion of Honour, and his latest novel, *The Comedians:* 'I greatly admire *The Comedians.* What staying power you have. It might have been written 30 years ago and could be by no one but you'. On Easter Sunday, 10 April, Waugh died. Greene wrote in his *Times* obituary:

> Evelyn Waugh was the greatest novelist of my generation . . . We were deeply divided politically, we were divided even in our conception of

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> the same church, and there were times when certain popular journalists tried to push us into . . . a confrontation, but [he] had an unshakeable loyalty to his friends, even if he may have detested their opinions and sometimes their actions. One could never depend on him for an easy approval or a warm, weak compliance, but when one felt the need he was there.

Even without the points of difference and disagreement that Greene referred to, it was a friendship that endured against the odds. The lonely, insecure vocation of the prominent author has its professional deformations, among which egotism, a jealous concern with one's place and envy of others' achievements, are likely to be evident. Famous authors are notoriously not easy people to get on with. Shirley Hazzard quotes a friend's judgment on Waugh, 'He liked things to go wrong' and she adds, 'There was a strong element of that in Graham—the inclination or compulsion to foment trouble, to shake up tameness and disturb the peace'. But, she says, 'Graham told us that he "had never had the slightest trouble" with Waugh's intermittently savage temperament'. Writers may start out as friends and comrades in arms, but if they have to share the limelight, quarrels and rifts are likely, as happened with Dickens and Thackeray. One can, if one wishes, detect a hint of grace in the enduring friendship of two such different Catholic writers; who were, in fact, so different as to make the term 'Catholic writer' itself seem hollow. At the very least, their relationship offers a rare and exemplary instance of loyalty and mutual respect.

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