

GREENE'S MEMOIRS: THEMES AND BOOKS IN PROCESS

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The Problem of Memoirs

Ever since Bede wrote his short autobiography at the end of his *History of the English Church and People*¹, English writers have not ceased to ruminate on their personal past. They succeeded in producing a corpus of autobiographical work ranging from diary to fictionalized autobiography to memoirs. Green's memoirs do not only give the reader a glimpse of the writer's life but furnish him with details about the innermost layers of his novels and hints on their making.

Memoirs are very tricky subjects to deal with. Not only is memory fallible and unreliable but "disagreeable facts are sometimes glossed over or repressed, truth may be distorted for the sake of convenience or harmony and the occlusions of time may obscure as much as they reveal".² In an interview given to V.S. Pritchett in *the New York Time Magazine*³ Greene remarks that "even this Kind of book [memoirs] is a re-creation". Mauriac says that when an author selects and chooses certain experiences or events he probably falsifies his true experience. The value of these autobiographic facts experienced during the first twenty years of one's life is highly questionable. This is extremely important when dealing with Greene's memoirs because, as Lerner writes, even though "the writer must be version of the living Graham Greene he may be a distorted and partial version".⁴

Greene acknowledges a faulty memory. "In all these early years I am uncertain what is genuinely remembered".⁵ He knows too that "memory is like a long broken night...the fragments remain fragments, the complete story always escapes".⁶ Though he recognizes the danger of unsettling the psychological dust of time, as a whole his memoirs seem to be sincere.⁷ He calls his autobiography "a sort of life": allegedly it is more selective: it contains less errors; it represents a life lived in the real and in the imaginary world. He tries to be sincere "without irony" because "those emotions were real when we felt them". Thus, conscious of the pitfalls of memoirs writing, he is eager to represent the highly psychologically-built of his life and the background comments on the genesis of book.

Basic memoirs were written by Greene in 1971 with *A Sort of Life* and in 1980 with *Ways of Escape*. The former chronologically reflects on the very first memories and influences of childhood up to the failure felt throughout the publication of his first four novels (till 1932). With some overlapping and following the same lines latter goes up till the publication of *Dr Fischer of Geneva*. However, other memoirs pop up in between his many novels. *The Lawless Roads* is "the personal impression of a small part of Mexico at a particular time, the spring of 1938".⁸ Between December 1941 and January 1942 Greene wrote *Convoy to West Africa*, a journal written before settling on a government job in Lagos and Freetown. Another travel book on the Belgian Congo appeared in 1961 recording memoirs of a journey to the heart of Africa between January 1959 and March of the same year. Some sorts of memoirs are sprinkled in Green's Introductions to the Bodley Head and Heinemann's *Collected Edition* in 1971. Similarly in many of his essays (especially "The Young Dickens" found in *Collected Essays*) Greene intermixes criticism with memoirs, intellectual thinking with autobiography and literary essays with reflections on his past life. Greene's last travel book with fascinating memoirs is *Getting to Know the General* published in 1984 and recording involvements in Central America Between 1976 and 1983.

It is sometimes really difficult to distinguish between what is fiction and what is autobiography not only in Greene's novels but in his memoirs too.

What does concern us in this paper is the relation between Greene's memoirs and selected deep narrative themes in the novels. This may establish Eliot's observation: "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work. It is constantly amalgamating disparate experience. ...in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes."⁹ This corroborates the same critic's remark in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together".¹⁰ The other concerns the importance of Greene's alleged sources of his books spread throughout his memoirs and how these particles are really forming new compounds.

In the discussion that follows it is of prime importance to note that the section will have any meaning if one bears in mind the tension occurring between the following two factors: the distinction between author and narrator and the above quotations by Eliot.

Memoirs and Narrative Themes

Influence of Childhood.

Perhaps due to the psychoanalytic sessions that Greene submitted to at the age of sixteen,¹¹ the theme of a bored childhood constitutes a fixed nucleus in his memoirs and permeates all subsequent narrative. He seems to emphasize that the weblike structure of his life and the stories that come out it exist embrionically at its beginning so that "the whole future must have lain all the time along those Berkhamsted streets".¹² Considering true the dictum that "everything one was to become must have been there, for better or worse",¹³ it is easy to grasp the reason why many of Greene's fictional children or adolescents have repressed feelings. The narrator keeps this up during their adult life: in *The Power and the Glory* Coral and Brigitta forebode a violent future; in *England Made Me* Kate and Anthony stand up to their former incestuous relationship; the rebel Anna-Louise in *Dr Fischer of Geneva* finishes up unhappier still. Greene learn well Kenneth Richmond's

theory of analysis "about the past which hold us all in thrall".¹⁴ From the evil Pinky in *Brighton Rock* to the potbellied children in *The Honorary Consul* to the confused Victor Baxter in *The Captain and the Enemy*, the theme of child unhappiness thrives "because he sees no end to the dark tunnel".¹⁵ Raven's stigma in *A Gun for Sale* summarize this theme: "he had been marked from his birth for this end, to be betrayed in turn by everyone until every avenue into life was safely closed".¹⁶

Parents' Aloofness

Even though Greene acknowledges his parents' "very loving marriage" withstanding "the pressure of six children and great anxieties",¹⁷ he discourses a lot about their aloofness and remoteness. The daily one hour meeting with his mother and the "occasional state visits (note Greene's irony) with her meticulous superintendence of the nursery contribute to her image filled with "her cool puritan beauty". Successive maids who care for the children help achieve his "mother's remoteness, her wonderful lack of the possessive instinct".¹⁸ Greene is very explicit about his father's lack of relationship with his children. "The only separation that really existed was from the children. As a headmaster he was even more distant than our aloof mother" Even in his dreams his father seems to be "always shut away in hospital out of touch with his wife and children".¹⁹

Without implying direct interference between memoirs and fiction, Greene's novels are notoriously conspicuous of hints about lack of relationship between parents and children, of "fatherless" children and childless "fathers". Pinky feels excluded from his parents' life;²⁰ Captain Fellows and his hypochondriac wife are completely alien to their daughter's sensibilities and problems; with a deep feeling of impotence the alcoholic priest leaves his daughter for ever; Scobie is estranged from his dead daughter just as Dr Plarr is from his revolutionary English father and from his alienated cream-cakes stuffed mother; Brown has a vanished father and a deserting mother. It is perhaps in *Dr Fischer of Geneva* that Greene summarizes this recurrent theme. Father-daughter lack of relationship makes Anna-Louise seek "a father more sympathetic than Doctor Fisher, just as I [Jones] may have been unconsciously engaged on a parallel pursuit, of a daughter".²¹

Dreams

Dreams in Greene's memoirs antedate the psychoanalysis sessions. His early dreams range from dead by drowning to struggling with a witch with long mandarin finger-nails.²² During psychoanalysis he is perforced to keep "a dream diary (I have begun to do so again in old age) and the fragments of the dreams I can remember still, though the diary has been destroyed for nearly half a century".²³ The memoirs are sprinkled with dreams linked, among other things, to premonitions, to his father, to Kenneth's wife, with some interpretations.²⁴ He confesses that dreams are important because "two novels and several short stories have emerged from my dream".²⁵

Greene's novels are full of dreams placed strategically at the narrative's critical turnpoints indicating satirical, ironic *Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter* have seven and eight instances of dreams, respectively. Two dreams²⁶ about Brigitta and Coral are linked by whisky priest's reading, in violent circumstances, of Campbell's ballad "Lord Ullin's Daughter". Even though the ballad is considered awful by Greene and "an inescapable symbol of fatuity"²⁷ it highlights the essential theme of the tragic conflict of the priest and his universal love symbolized by the two very different girls. On the other hand, all the dreams in *The Heart of the Matter* refer to suicide. The snake dream²⁸ with its deceiving message of Edenic bliss constitutes, together with the putrefied arm dream,²⁹ Scobie tragic turmoil and friction (enhanced by the tenets of Catholicism) which will deterministically lead to his premeditated suicide. These dream insertions are so important that without them the novel will turn out to be a mere list of successive facts lacking any literary depth and consistency.

Titanism

Perhaps more than any other Twenty Century writer, Greene's position in the literary word is one of protest and rebelliousness because "if you live at all you become involved".³⁰ Greene's initiation (even if, in Stephen Spender's words, one cannot "think of Greene as political in quite the same way as Orwell"³¹) hails back to his school days and more especially to the late 20s and 30s. Class distinction is noticeable when he deals with the

innocent-looking description of Berkhamsted. "A sense of immediate danger was conveyed by the canal — the menace of insulting words from strange brutal canal workers with blackened faces like miners, with their gypsy wives and ragged children, at the sight of middle-class children, carefully dressed and shepherded".³² Early friendly involvement with the Working-class, his disapproval of his mother's social bias, his father's would-be approval of his son's social sensibilities in Freetown, his belated Communist sympathies, his education by the hunger marchers and his early objections to the Catholic Church's rigid moral theology³³ prepare the writer for a life-long literary stance against a host of "isms". "A child learns about injustice early"³⁴ since "politics are part of the air we breathe".³⁵

The vast theme of rebellion is not merely conspicuous in Greene's novels. Without it they will be reduced to mere storytelling. The first novels, especially *It's a Battlefield* and *England Made Me*, are attempts at denouements against the arbitrariness of justice and the might of capitalism. Squalid living conditions with their moral consequences constitute Greene's protest in *A Gun for Sale* and *Brighton Rock*. The tension between haves-nots, anti-imperialism in all its forms (especially in *The Quiet American*) and the plight of the poor in Third World countries (especially in *The Honorary Consul*) are fundamental factors in many of his novels. The salvation of the downthrodnen, of the ugly and of failure is a proposal found perhaps uniquely in Greene's novels. Even if he may have romanticized the protest vocation, Greene's will always be considered problematic due to the indictment inherent to the narrative layers and acquired in far-off circumstances of childhood and youth.

Catholicism

Even though Greene considers himself "more a political writer than a Catholic writer" and calls himself a writer "who happens to be a Catholic"³⁶ his religious "heterodoxy" should be dealt with in a protest context. He makes fun of the *Index of Prohibited Books*, the Roman Curia, the "subtle distinctions of an unbelievable theology" and the "belief [that] never came by way of those unconvincing philosophical arguments".³⁷ His memoirs register a protest against the frustration experienced by Fr Trollope (his religious

instructor), the hypocrisy of a general confession considered as a humiliating ordeal, the "sombre apprehension" after his baptism and his "biased view of Catholic journalism and Catholic humanity".³⁸

Religious inconformism, a constant in Greene's novels, ranges from parodies (as the "Credo in unum Satanum" of *Brighton Rock*) to existential dilemmas suffered by the characters. Nearly all his fictional priests exhibit sterile solutions to concrete human problems and are self-conscious enough to admit their frustration. (Fr Rank's laugh in *The Heart of the Matter* is typical). Love triangles (as in *The End of the Affair*) are bizarrely conceived, with God as a jealous rival, while religious hypocrisy (Milly in *Our Man in Havana* and Rycker in *A Burnt-Out Case*) is shown in crude and devastating terms. Dichotomy between the Gospel and Church teaching (problems raised by suicide in *The Heart of the Matter*, by violence in *The Comedians* and by violation of human rights in *The Honorary Consul*) highlights the distinction between faith and belief. In many of the novels there is a general insistence on the supremacy of the Gospel to the Detriment of the Church's "beliefs" and worldly policies.

Latin America

Greene's attitude to contemporaneity and to Third World countries extends to Latin America, a region not specially explored by British writers. Greene's first mention of Latin America is linked to the exotic, since "many of [his cousins] had been born in Brazil near Santos, on a fazenda which was also the name of the coffee we drank".⁴⁰ His uncle Eppy is described as a "rich worldly business uncle [head] of the Brazilian Warrant Agency".⁴¹ More exotic still is his paternal grandfather's adventure to St Kitts. "[William] went out to St Kitts as a boy of fourteen to join his brother in the management of his father's sugar estates, and his brother Charles died of yellow fever two years after his arrival, in 1840". Legend says that Charles "left thirteen children behind him when he died at the age of nineteen". It is important to emphasize that the author feels closest to his uncle William who remained "alone without parents on a Caribbean Island".⁴² In *Lawless Roads* Greene mentions a funny host of Mexicans with the surname Greene without hinting any relationship whatsoever. Moreover, in his

early teens he acknowledges a fascination of Mexico through a reading of *Montezuma's Daughter* and a History of Mexico.⁴³ In *Ways of Escape* Greene records events during his travels in Cuba, Haiti, Argentina and Paraguay. His last journal *Getting to Know the General* records problematic events in and involvement against tough neo-colonialist policies in Central America.

Surprisingly enough for a British writer Latin America is the background and stuff of 25% of Greene's novels. From the hapless days of the late 30s when he began writing *The Power and the Glory* to his last novel *The Captain and the Enemy* written in the late 80s, a significant evolution of thought and involvement has occurred in his fiction. The Catholic and socialist polarities with a predominantly otherworldly view gradually give place to the raising of rebel voices in darkest Haiti. Revolutionary engagement in Argentina, Paraguay and in Central America are last words in favour of Latin America's poor and marginalized people. Even if no stric conclusions are taken from these novels, nevertheless, they show the characters taking sides, shedding off a false religious stance and engaging themselves in a kind of activity very similar to that contemplated by the Theology of Liberation. Though *Our Man in Havana* is not really about Cuba and *Travels with My Aunt* smacks more of Empire than of Latin America, however, these novels give terrible glimpses of right-wing politically dominated and economically peripheral Latin America countries with truncated programs and stalemates for their people. The Gospel and a more authentic diaspora Church emerges as bulwark of human rights and progress. The otherworldliness view point is substituted by a Theology of Liberation option and involvement.⁴⁴ It seems that at the back of his mind Greene's feeling are one with José Oscar Beozzo's when the latter says: "The cross and the sword, military conquest and spiritual conquest are indelibly associated in the [Latin American's] minds".⁴⁵

Greene's Sources

In his second book of memoirs, *Ways of Escape*, Greene details the background and sources of each and every novel till 1988. Due to their anecdotal constitution their importance in relation to the novels may be highly problematic. Furthermore, as it is impossible

in this paper to examine and verify all existing evidence with regard to all the novels, it is deemed feasible to choose *The Quiet American* and *The Honorary Consul* as samples so that some conclusions may be advanced.

Greene spends four winters in Vietnam (1951-1955) as correspondent of the *Sunday Times* and *Figaro* and his memoirs for this period are extensive and unbalanced. He remembers an American attaché for economical aid who talks of a "Third Force in Vietnam" (very much like Pyle does), plastic bombs hidden in bicycles exploding and causing many casualties, the Dakow bridge (where Pyle dies), Generals Thé and Lattre, the author's experience with opium and the beautiful girls who prepare it (Fowler's addiction and the fictional Phuong), the military plane that attacks Vietminh citizens killing a child and her mother. Parallels between Greene's "reportage" and the novel are too obvious. Nevertheless, the novel conveys much more than the mere listing of events and reports. It seems that the theme of justice and marginalized people, of the revolt against war and hypocrisy, of denouncement against imperialism revitalize the recorded facts in *Ways of Escape* making the general tone one of protest at the core of an endeavour for an ethical and political revolution. Perhaps this is what Lerner captures in Greene's voice: "anger, compassionate, moving and noble".⁴⁶ Particles from the subconscious formed early in childhood, remnants of experience, unquieting rebellious forces, biting feeling and emotional outbursts amalgamated, together with superb technique, to produce something different and unique on the fictional. The result is something new, wholesome and, above all, pregnant.

Greene says that *The Honorary Consul* is the result of a dream about an American ambassador.⁴⁷ However, his knowledge of Paraguay is due to a "writer's intuition" when at his work on *Travels with My Aunt*. One of his two trips to Corrientes is expressly planned to write *The Honorary Consul*.⁴⁸ He has some idea of inexperienced Paraguayan guerrilla groups, the strong hand of General Stroessner and the wave of kidnapping in Latin America to free political prisoners. During his fortnight stay in "uneventful" Corrientes there are cases of a Third World priest banned from his church and of his detested orthodox colleague, murder on the river bank, an aborted kidnapping attempt and a

family suicide. Moreover, Greene denies that Father Rivas has been modelled on Camilo Torres but he acknowledges that he "had to invent a theology for him... acceptable by the Catholic Church [because he] was affected by certain things in Paraguay and by the fact that the head of the Church sat down to dinner with General Stroessner".⁴⁹

The above is very scanty material for a novel considered the best by the author himself⁵⁰ and the most difficult to write.⁵¹ The process, however, is revealing. It seems that Greene transmuted various personal experiences and second hand material into something universal: the slow, painful, partially successful involvement of Latin America man in the process of liberation while struggling against almost insuperable and extremely powerful ingrained odds of dominance.

Conclusions

As has been mentioned above, the relationship between memoirs and fiction is very difficult to evaluate since both are the result of a different process and aim in the author's mind. It seems that Greene's experience taken in a broader sense and partially mentioned in his memoirs is processed and transmuted into universal concepts. These form deep narrative structures that serve as bases for the different novels. Like Shakespeare, Greene "transmute[d] his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal".⁵²

Complementally, an amalgamating process occurs in which fictional characters and events are delineated from the merging of real life elements, producing the general symbol as the novelist's ultimate point of creation. At the same time, the disparate, conflicting and wayward experiences in the memoirs are ordered into a meaningful whole. Eliot says, "For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality..."⁵³

The serenity, stillness and reconciliation which from Aristotle to Eliot are considered the result of poetic activity are to be inversely taken in Greene. His memoirs and fiction seem to show that man's reconciliation will not be achieved in the shallowness of "the Coca-cola civilization". Through transmuting and

amalgamating experiences the fiction writer epitomizes man's attempt in search of the truth: in Greene's case through the optics of the Titans.

Notes

- 1 Pp. 336-338.
- 2 Cuddon, p. 63.
- 3 Reproduced by *O Globo*, March 23, 1978.
- 4 Lerner, p. 231.
- 5 *A Sort of Life*, p. 14.
- 6 Id., p. 25.
- 7 Id., p. 9.
- 8 P. 5.
- 9 Hayward, p. 236.
- 10 Abrams, p. 2297.
- 11 *A Sort of Life*, pp. 72-76.
- 12 Id., p. 11.
- 13 Id., p. 12.
- 14 Id., p. 74.
- 15 Id., p. 79.
- 16 P. 169.
- 17 *A Sort of Life*, p. 20.
- 18 Id., pp. 14, 15, 22.
- 19 Id., p. 21.
- 20 *Brighton Rock*, pp. 91, 93, 129, 143.
- 21 *Dr. Fischer of Geneva*, p. 12.
- 22 *A Sort of Life*, pp. 13, 24.
- 23 Id., p. 73.
- 24 Id., pp. 21, 24, 74.
- 25 Id., p. 24.
- 26 *The Power and the Glory*, pp. 132, 209.
- 27 *A Sort of Life*, p. 41.
- 28 *The Heart of the Matter*, p. 83.
- 29 Id., p. 222.
- 30 Couto, p. 219.
- 31 In Couto, p. 240.
- 32 *A Sort of Life*, p. 13.

33 Id., pp. 137-138.

34 Id., p. 45.

35 Couto, p. 216.

36 Interview with Chistopher Burstall, *The Listener*, Nov 21, 1968.

37 *A Sort of Life*, p. 120.

38 Id., p. 154.

39 Interview with Bernard Violet in *Folha de São Paulo*, May 18, 1991.

40 *A Sort of Life*, p. 16.

41 Id., pp. 107, 140.

42 Id., p. 69.

43 Id., pp. 39-40.

44 Bonnici, pp. 155-165.