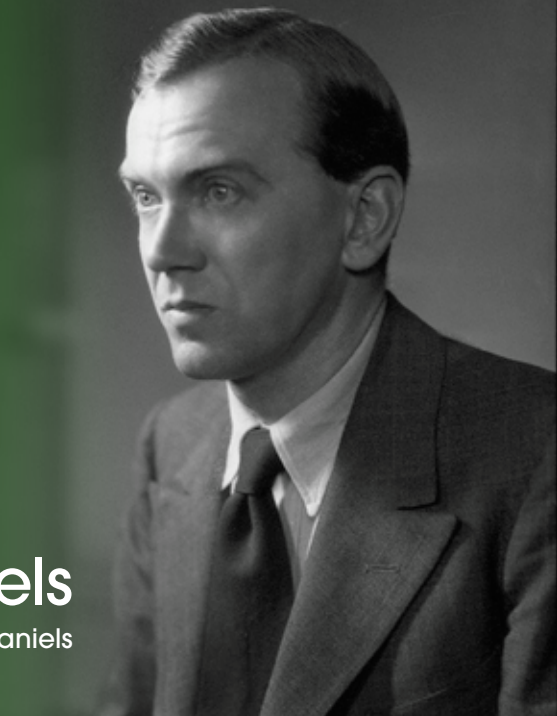


“The appalling strangeness of the mercy of God”

Graham Greene’s Catholic novels

by Rev John McDaniels



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This article derives from a much longer paper which Fr McDaniels delivered at the 2004 Carnivale Christi Arts Festival in Melbourne. It is hoped this extract might be helpful to members contemplating suitable summer reading (or re-reading).

Fr McDaniel’s full lecture is available at www.clergy.asn.au, where it can be viewed online, or downloaded and printed. The complete text, ‘Graham Greene: Convert and Critic,’ delves into the details of Greene’s conversion to Catholicism, and his significant contribution to cinema as an author and film critic.

In 1937, eleven years had passed since Graham Greene’s reception into the Catholic Church. He recalled he had “not been emotionally moved, but only intellectually convinced.” However, he acknowledged he was, as he put it, “in the habit of formally practicing my religion, going to Mass every Sunday and to confession perhaps once a month, and in my spare time I read a good deal of theology ... always with interest. Even so,” he says, “my professional life and my religion were contained in quite separate compartments, and I had no ambition to bring them together.”

All this changed with the politicising of Catholicism during the Communist persecution of the Church in Mexico and the Spanish Civil War. Catholicism for Greene no longer seemed merely of aesthetic and intellectual interest: “It was closer now,” Greene observed, “to death in the afternoon.” In other words, Catholicism had suddenly become exciting, the stuff of which thrillers are made. The four key ingredients of Greene’s most creative period (1938 to 1951) now gelled: evil, Catholicism, the cinema and the thriller.

The style of his four Catholic novels, *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, and *The End of the Affair*, is definitely and specifically Catholic no matter the reservations one might have about the treatment of themes. All four novels hold in balance the two doctrines

the Catholic Church insists on: that human beings have been given unconditional free will to choose (which must include the possibility of choosing the absence of God which is hell) and that God is absolute love who must therefore will all his creatures to be saved. Without the tension between these two doctrines, the novels would not be the spiritual thrillers they are.

Graham Greene fashioned himself an intellectual. Although he was gifted with the art of story-telling, of setting up plots, his characters inevitably become mouth-pieces for repeated themes and ideas. In my reading of his four Catholic novels, I became conscious of the following of Greene’s preoccupations: Catholicism, cynicism, adultery, despair, love (both carnal and spiritual), evil, responsibility and ‘the child’ — usually a boy.

Brighton Rock (1938)

Brighton Rock is not a place. It is a hard rock candy sold exclusively in the English South Coast town of Brighton. The irony of the sweetness of its taste and its unyielding texture perfectly crystallizes a story of one-sided love, murder and betrayal in the ambiguous setting of a bohemian resort town. That what on the surface should have been a simple detective story developed into a thorough-going discussion of good and evil suggests that the stirrings within Greene to frame his fiction in this context began far earlier than his concerns

with the persecutions in Mexico that produced his *The Power and the Glory*.

His memorable line in *Brighton Rock* proclaiming the “appalling strangeness of the mercy of God” was to become the major chord in the three Catholic novels to follow. Greene’s attraction to Catholicism from the beginning was well expressed in a letter to his Catholic fiancée in 1925:

One does want fearfully hard, something fine and hard and certain, however uncomfortable, to catch hold of in the general flux.

Above all, what Greene needed and wanted was a religion that had hard and certain things to say about evil.

Greene’s Pinkie, the young hoodlum guilty of murder who is the central character in *Brighton Rock*, believes in the reality of hell. “What else could there be? ... it’s the only thing that fits.” Strangely though, he is not convinced that there is a heaven. “Oh, maybe,” he says, “maybe.”

An important element of *Brighton Rock* that makes it peculiarly Catholic is its illumination of ‘mortal sin,’ a notion foreign to a secular world audience, although certainly not to a Catholic reader of the time. Ian Ker suggests that Pinkie personifies the dictum of T.S. Eliot that only people who are properly alive are capable of real evil. The young Pinkie, after murdering a bumbling gangland flunkey, knows he is in mortal sin and rejoices in it with hilarity and pride. He feels he is at last a grown man for whom the angels weep. In losing his fear of hell, Greene suggests Pinkie has become fully alive.

Cynically, Pinkie marries the single witness to his crime, Rose, so that as his spouse she can never testify against him. Rose, knowing that the marriage outside the Church Pinkie arranged for them is sinful, and, later, that their suicide pact (as she thinks) involves another mortal sin, is in love and happy to be with him “in the country of mortal sin.” It’s enough for her to have “Pinkie and damnation.”

At this point, notes Ker, Greene suggests that Pinkie is not a fully free agent but the victim of his circumstances:

“An awful resentment stirred in him — why shouldn’t he have had his chance,

seen his glimpse of heaven.”

The hint that Pinkie’s actions did not perhaps have the character of voluntary consent which the Catholic Church lays down as part of the definition of a mortal sin remains undeveloped in the novel. Many years later, however, Greene said, “I don’t think that Pinkie was guilty of mortal sin because his actions were not committed in defiance of God, but arose out of the conditions to which he had been born.”

Maybe that was Greene’s later view, but it is not explored in the novel, nor does *Brighton Rock* support the idea that a sin can be mortal only when it is committed in order to defy God. The theology of the



book is consistently orthodox in assuming that a sin is mortal if the matter is grave and it is committed with full knowledge and consent.

Another recurrent theme of Greene’s arises in *Brighton Rock*:

[Rose] felt responsibility ... she wouldn’t let him go into that darkness alone. She was in mortal sin, it was no good praying. To want a good death would be to be tempted ... to virtue like a sin ... it would be an act of cowardice: it would mean that she chose never to see him again.

Rose’s conviction that the evil act is the honest and faithful act is the kind of moral, or rather, spiritual paradox that was to become the hallmark of Greene’s Catholic novels.

The Power and the Glory (1940)

Greene’s next Catholic novel, *The Power and the Glory*, is the story of a Catholic priest in Mexico in the 1930s who commits the mortal sin of fornication with the peasant woman, Maria, and fathers her child, all this after having fallen into the worse sin of despair. As the only priest left in the state who has neither escaped, nor died, nor conformed to the atheistic anticlerical government, he yet “carries on.” As Greene puts it:

Now that he no longer despaired it didn’t mean of course he wasn’t damned — it was simply that after a time the mystery became too great, a damned man putting God into the mouths of men. Damned because of his own mortal sins, he can still bring salvation to others.

This is, however, orthodox Catholicism. The sacrament dispenses its own graces despite the condition of the soul of its ordained dispenser, and so, this circumstance is not genuinely paradoxical.

What is paradox is Greene’s notion which lies at the heart of the book that the priest achieves his own holiness and eventual martyrdom by virtue of, rather than in spite of, his own sins. Here we are at Greene’s (and Robert Browning’s) “dangerous edge of things.” The *felix culpa*, the happy fault of our first parents in sinning in Eden, can be celebrated paradoxically as the cause of the Incarnation. But is sin itself the path to virtue? It can be, of course, but not without infusions of grace, and a conscious turning away from sin, even at the last moment.

Genuine contrition seems to be missing here. We can only hearken back to Greene’s recollection of, and reaction to his first general confession:

The first general confession, which precedes conditional baptism, and which covers the whole of a man’s previous life, is a humiliating ordeal. Later we may become hardened in the formulas of confession and sceptical about ourselves: we may only half intend to keep the promises we make, until continual failure or the circumstances of our private life finally make it impossible to make any promises at all and many of us abandon confession and communion to join the Foreign Legion of the Church and fight for a city

of which we are no longer full citizens. But in the first confession a convert really believes in his own promises. I carried mine down with me like heavy stones into an empty corner of the cathedral ... the only witness of my baptism was a woman who had been dusting chairs. I took the name of Thomas — after St Thomas the Doubter and not Thomas Aquinas ... I remember very clearly the nature of my emotion as I walked away from the cathedral: there was no joy in it at all, only a sombre apprehension.

Greene's whisky priest seems to embody the assumption that repeated failure in goodness can lead only to despair and that this, paradoxically, is itself a kind of sanctity.

The idea that only a great sinner can become a great saint is also peculiar. "It is astonishing," the priest thinks to himself, "... the sense of innocence that goes with sin — only the hard and careful man and the saint are free of it." It really is as if Greene is projecting, rationalizing away the wages of sin; his consistent adulterous conduct in his private life more than skirted the "dangerous edge of things."

Paradox remains at the heart of *The Power and the Glory*. The priest only becomes a true priest — an *alter Christus* — when he is no longer able to exercise his priesthood freely and when he has abandoned the discipline and obligations of the priesthood along with its security and status:

It sometimes seemed to him that venial sins ... cut you off from grace more completely than the worst sins of all. Then, in his innocence, he had felt no love for anyone: now in his corruption he had learnt.

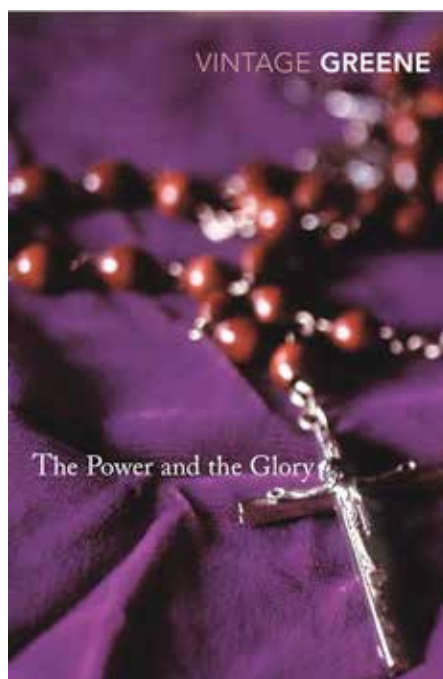
Presumably, without having committed the mortal sin of fornication, he would not have known that "one must love every soul as if it were one's own child. The passion to protect [responsibility again!] must extend itself over a world." Again, it is the idea of T.S. Eliot that only the one who knows evil is sufficiently alive to know good.

Of particular concern is the priest's wondering before his execution, "What was the good of confession when you loved the result of your crime?" (That is, his illegitimate child.) As Ian Ker comments:

To this, the orthodox but paradoxical answer is that one should hate the initial sin but love its fruit if it is good. Perhaps the question is a rhetorical one, but the point is that the priest knows that it is through his own evil act that he had found his humanity and his Christian identity.

In *A Sort of Life*, Greene relates a telling anecdote:

In the 1950s, I was ... summoned by Cardinal Griffin and told that my novel, *The Power and the Glory* ... had been condemned by the Holy Office and Cardinal Pizzardo required changes which I naturally — though I hope politely — refused to make. Cardinal Griffin remarked that he would have preferred it if they had



condemned *The End of the Affair*.

'Of course,' he said, 'you and I receive no harm from erotic passages, but the young ...' Later, when Pope Paul told me that among the novels of mine he had read was *The Power and the Glory*, I answered that the book he had read had been condemned by the Holy Office. His attitude was more liberal than that of Cardinal Pizzardo. 'Some parts of your books will always,' he said, 'offend some Catholics. You should not worry about that'; a counsel which I find it easy to take.

***The Heart of the Matter* (1948)**

The third of Greene's Catholic novels, *The Heart of the Matter*, happens to be my favourite of the four. Greene, however, is quoted in an interview with Quentin Falk, as saying "... I don't like the book much ...

I think it was exaggerated and the religious point of view was exaggerated in it..."

The Heart of the Matter concerns the middle-aged Scobie, a police official serving in a rather unimportant English outpost in Africa, and his ambitious wife, Louise. Both are practicing Catholics. When Scobie is passed over for a promotion, Louise, a shallow woman, is so crestfallen by their resultant fall in social status that she returns in shame and depression to England. In her absence, Scobie and the much younger new arrival to the colony, Helen Rolt, quickly accelerate an initial father-daughter relationship into a full-fledged love affair.

A committed law enforcement officer, Scobie's motives, even in his love life, spring more from a sense of protectiveness, even pity, than of lust. His first sight of Helen had been when she was brought unconscious into the local infirmary on a stretcher, a refugee victim of shipwreck. His first response is pity, and this will remain a lynchpin in their relationship.

When his wife inevitably returns and accounts must be reconciled, Scobie, having to choose between two very dependent women, opts instead for suicide, and there hangs the moral dilemma posed by the novel. In this book, the recurring themes mentioned earlier that most characterize Greene's work are surely all present: Catholicism, cynicism, adultery, despair, love, evil, responsibility and "the child."

The child in *The Heart of the Matter* is Scobie and Louise's daughter who died very young and whose photo in her First Communion dress makes various appearances throughout the novel. Her demise, of course, suggests the reason for the brooding unhappiness that haunts their marriage — for Scobie's tender attention to a wife who has to some extent lost her touch with reality. Here the theme of responsibility also enters in — just as it does in his protective feelings toward the fragile, displaced foreigner in a strange land, the young new neighbour, Helen Rolt.

Significantly, there is a new overriding preoccupation in this novel, and that is the burden of Catholicism. To a would-be convert, a lighter tack on the subject might be: 'Come on in. The water's awful!' But

Greene most definitely does not take the humorous tack. For him the yoke of Catholicism is hard, heavy and humourless.

Like Greene at this period in his life, Scobie finds hell much more real than heaven. When Scobie tells his mistress, Helen, about his dilemma of going to Mass with his Catholic wife, Louise, who expects him to receive communion (as of course he cannot do because he is an adulterer in mortal sin and because he cannot honestly go to confession without ending his relationship with her), Helen asks “You don’t really believe in hell?” Scobie does of course. In that case, Helen suddenly wonders, why is he having an affair with her? “How often,” he thought, “lack of faith helps one to see more clearly than faith.”

The non-Catholic Helen can’t see why Scobie can’t just go and confess everything now. “After all, it doesn’t mean you won’t do it again.” And even if he avoids confession altogether and just receives communion, what difference does it make committing another mortal sin if he’s in mortal sin already? “Be hung for a sheep,” Helen reasons. Scobie replies, “Now, I’m just putting our love above — well, my safety. But the other — the other’s really evil. It’s like the Black Mass, the man who steals the sacrament to desecrate it. It’s striking God when He’s down — in my power.”

“It’s all hooley to me,” says Helen.

Ruefully, Scobie says, “I wish it were to me. But I believe it.”

In her turn, Scobie’s wife, Louise, when she learns that Helen is her husband’s lover, remarks, “But she’s not a Catholic. She’s lucky. She’s free.”

As Scobie himself laments, “The trouble is ... we know the answers — we Catholics are damned by our knowledge.”

To Scobie and Louise, then, Catholicism is necessary for their salvation and yet, at the same time, somehow unwanted. Yes, indeed, for Graham Greene, the water is awful!

The Heart of the Matter succeeds as a gripping spiritual thriller employing stock Catholic themes. In particular, there is nothing unreal about Scobie’s anguished desire to protect his wife from knowledge of the affair with Helen which results in the sacrilegious act of his receiving holy com-

munion unworthily. Unable to promise in confession that he will end the affair with Helen, he is compelled to receive communion in a state of mortal sin when his wife, Louise, insists they go to Mass together and receive the sacrament as a sign that they are starting a new life together.

The fact that Greene has chosen to make Scobie a conscientious police official is a convenient device. His harshest rigidity in obeying the law, either man’s or God’s, is reserved for himself and makes his misery here — especially to the non-Catholic reader — somehow quite plausible.

By taking the sacred host in a state of mortal sin, Scobie damns himself as only a



Catholic can. And thus unfolds one of the finest pieces of prose Greene ever wrote — an especially good example of Greene’s cinematic style:

At the foot of the scaffold, he opened his eyes. He rose and followed her and knelt by her side like a spy in a foreign land who has been taught the customs and to speak the language like a native. Only a miracle can save me now, Scobie told himself, watching Father Rank at the altar opening the tabernacle ...

Father Rank came down the steps from the altar bearing the Host. The saliva had dried in Scobie’s mouth ...

He couldn’t look up: he saw only the priest’s skirt like the skirt of the mediaeval war-horse bearing down upon him: the flapping of feet: the charge of God. If only the archers would fly from ambush,

and for a moment he dreamed that the priest’s steps had indeed faltered ...

But with open mouth (the time had come) he made one last attempt at prayer, ‘O God, I offer up my damnation to you. Take it. Take it. Use it for them,’ and was aware of the pale papery taste of an eternal sentence on the tongue.

In this offering up of his own damnation for his wife and his mistress, one can see a kind of infernal parody of the Catholic practice of offering up one’s communion for the intentions of another. When Scobie commits the same sin later on, on All Saints’, he reflects as one might expect his author to do: “Even this act of damnation could become as unimportant as a habit.”

Overcome with despair, Scobie says to his mistress, “I’m damned for all eternity. What I’ve done is far worse than murder.”

The book draws to its conclusion as Scobie resolves to commit one final mortal sin that will secure his immediate damnation without any chance of further repentance, his deliberate suicide.

We have seen the *felix culpa*, the happy fault that Greene proposes was the fulcrum for the priest’s ultimate salvation through martyrdom in *The Power and the Glory*. In *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie sees it as a *felix culpa* when he explains to God his motive in receiving him unworthily in communion: “I’ve preferred to give you pain, rather than give pain to Helen or my wife because I can observe you suffering ... They are ill with me and I can cure them.”

Anyway, Scobie reasons, God “can look after himself ... You survive the cross every day. You can never be lost.” Pressing his point, Scobie claims that his sin of suicide is really a *felix culpa* from God’s point of view too:

I can’t go on month after month insulting you ... You’ll be better off if you lose me once and for all ... I’m not pleading for mercy. I’m going to damn myself ... But you’ll be at peace when I’m out of your reach ... You’ll be able to forget, God, for eternity.

But, in Scobie’s last moments, God refuses to be shut out. As Scobie ponders the tablets in his hand that will bring him death,

It seemed to him as though someone outside the room were seeking him, calling him ... someone wandered, seeking to get in, someone appealing for help, someone in need of him.

Ian Ker illuminates this passage well: “God is suffering because Scobie is destroying the life God gave him, and, as a victim, God has an undeniable call on Scobie.”

Joseph Pearce writes, “... the vision of the divine in (Greene’s) fiction is often thwarted by the self-centered barriers of his own ego. Only rarely does the glimmer of God’s light penetrate the chinks in the armour, entering like a vertical shaft of hope to exorcise the simmering despair.” I think the following passage from *The Heart of the Matter* is what he means:

His heart beat and he was held in the nausea of an awful unreality. I can’t believe that I’m going to do this. Presently I shall get up and go to bed, and life will begin again. Nothing, nobody can force me to die. Though the voice was no longer speaking from the cave of his belly, it was as though fingers, imploring fingers touched him, signalled their mute message of distress, tried to hold him ...

“What is it, Ticki? You look ill. Come to bed too.”

“I wouldn’t sleep,” he said obstinately.

“Is there nothing I can do?” Louise asked. “My dear, I’d do anything ...”

Her love was like a death sentence. He said to those scrambling, desperate fingers, O God, it’s better that a millstone ...

I can’t give her pain, or the other pain, and I can’t go on giving you pain. O God, if you love me as I know you do, help me to leave you. Dear God, forget me, but the weak fingers kept their feeble pressure. He had never known before so clearly the weakness of God ...

Automatically at the call of need, at the cry of a victim, Scobie (ever the competent policeman) strung himself to act ...

He said aloud, “Dear God, I love ...” but the effort was too great.”

The novel ends with Father Rank having the last word, a word that is as orthodox and Catholic as Scobie’s conviction of damnation and mortal sin. In a fury, the priest tells Louise (Scobie’s widow), who has already passed judgment:

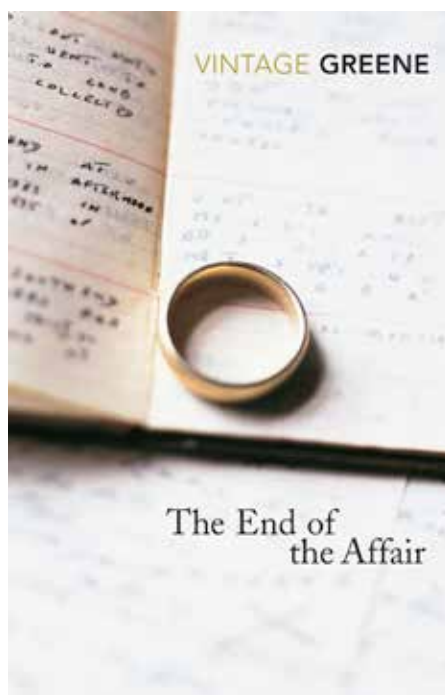
“For goodness sake, Mrs Scobie, don’t imagine you — or I — know a thing about God’s mercy.”

“The Church says ... “

“I know the Church says. The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn’t know what goes on in a single human heart.”

Yes, Scobie had committed the ultimate mortal sin of despair, and yet Father Rank remarks: “It may seem an odd thing to say — when a man’s as wrong as he was — but I think from what I saw of him, that he really loved God.”

We do not know whether Scobie is damned when he commits suicide. Greene’s fellow Catholic and friend, Evelyn Waugh, when *The Heart of the Matter* was published in 1948, denounced Greene’s theological thinking as a “very loose poeti-



cal expression of a mad blasphemy.”

It should be noted that Greene chose the following sentiment of Charles Piguy as an epigraph to *The Heart of the Matter*: “The sinner is at the heart of Christianity. No one is as competent as the sinner in Christian affairs. No one except the saint.”

The End of the Affair (1951)

The fourth and final of the quartet of Greene’s so-called Catholic novels is *The End of the Affair*. In his introduction to it, Greene recalled that a major influence in writing *The End of the Affair* had to do with the theological criticism of Baron von Hugel, specifically the following passage:

The purification and slow constitution of the individual into a Person by means of

the Thing-element, the apparently blind Determinism of Natural Law and Natural Happenings ... Nothing can be more certain that we must admit and place this undeniable, increasingly obtrusive element and power somewhere in our lives: if we will not own it as a means, it will grip us as our end.

Though Greene and his wife lived together for a dozen years, often in extreme financial hardship, and bore two children, in 1940 he started an adulterous relationship with Dorothy Glover.

In 1946, without breaking off either his marriage or his affair with Glover, Greene began an affair with Catherine Walston, a beautiful (and married) Catholic convert for whom he had, at her request, acted as godfather at her reception into the Church. During the impassioned and tortured periodic writing stints of *The End of the Affair*, Greene’s imagination was seized by Catherine Walston in a way that threatened almost to drown him. Writing the novel became a personal obsession: his only hope of release from the pressure cooker of raw emotions that had been building up since his first meeting with this woman in 1946. In the end, he would dedicate the book to her.

The paradox of the *felix culpa* is carried to extreme in *The End of the Affair*, when the character, Sarah Miles, confides to her journal that her and writer Maurice Bendrix’s adulterous passion was paradoxically intended to bring them close to God.

By “You” in the following quoted passage from Sarah’s diary, is meant God:

Did I ever love Maurice as much before I loved You? Or was it really You I loved all the time? Did I touch You when I touched him? Could I have touched You if I hadn’t touched him first, touched him as I never touched ... anybody? And he loved me as he never did any other woman. But was it me he loved, or You?

As Ian Ker suggests, in a passage such as this one might well think Greene is no longer on but over the “dangerous edge of things.” It is very difficult not to see an autobiographical element in Greene’s central character, Maurice Bendrix, the object of Sarah’s illicit love. The paradoxical is now verging on caricature, self-parody:

For he gave me so much love, and I gave him so much love that soon there wasn't anything left, when we'd finished, but You. ... We spent all we had. You were there, teaching us to squander, like You taught the rich man, so that one day we might have nothing left except this love of You.

Less extreme than the idea that God encourages Maurice and Sarah's extravagant fornication (so that he can enter into the void left when their passion is consumed and exhausted), is the paradox that Maurice's hatred and jealousy of God, who now has Sarah to himself for eternity, is a sudden expression of belief in a man who had been a self-professed atheist:

I hate you if you exist ... We have got on for four years without You. Why should you start intruding into all situations like a strange relation returning from the Antipodes?

Maurice is well aware of what his hatred implies however. "I mustn't hate, for if I were really to hate I would believe, and if I were to believe, what a triumph for You and her."

Evelyn Waugh accurately observed:

Bendrix is a distorted narrator whose real story is only beginning at the conclusion of the book ... He is himself unaware of the fate [that is, his possible acceptance of God in his life], we can dimly foresee for him. *The End of the Affair* is an ironic title: the affair has not yet reached its climax when the record ceases.

Anthony West, writing in the *New Yorker*, called the novel "electrifying" from the opening pages:

They have a quality that is immediately recognizable, the quality one becomes aware of as one hears the first few words of the plays of Ibsen's maturity. It informs one that what is to follow is to be an exhibition of an artist's complete control of content and technique ... The book is undeniably a major work of art, and even those who cannot agree that their search for truth can be pursued in the neighborhood of the miraculous and the supernatural will find it rich in aesthetic satisfactions.

Not all readers were as enthusiastic. In *Ways of Escape*, Greene recalled that Pope Pius XII had read *The End of the Af-*

fair (it *was* an international best seller). Afterwards, the Pope had a private word with Bishop Heenan, a friend of Greene: "I think this man is in trouble," the Holy Father said. "If he ever comes to you, you must help him."

The single note of comic relief in *The End of the Affair* serves to introduce the element of 'the boy' — that consistent ingredient in Greene's novels. Here, he is the son of the detective Bendrix employs to trail Sarah and who, in his shrewd innocence, is able to purloin Sarah's diary, the contents of which provide an additional voice for Sarah and form one of the best written and certainly most memorable chapters in the book.

Writes Robert Royal,

The End of the Affair, was a scandalous success, so much so that some Catholic wags complained that it gave the impression Christ had said: "If you love me, break my commandments." Greene and Catherine Walston were certainly busy doing that. Greene began rationalizing the affair.

William Cash writes that Greene was once quoted as saying he felt closest to God and the truest he had ever felt as a Catholic when committing adultery with Catherine. "Greene," Cash suggests, "was a Catholic fatalist."

Lady Longford, who herself converted to Catholicism in 1946, remembers a particular conversation she had with Greene on this theme when he gave a lunch at his flat in St James's Street.

Greene asked her whether she had read [the French theologian, Jean-Pierre] de Causade. 'In the most impressive way he then proceeded to explain de Causade's doctrine of "Submission to Divine Providence." It was a case of accepting all the eventualities of life as God's will, in all circumstances.'

It was certainly something Greene believed in without compunction. 'It was a part of his views, he didn't have to grope towards what he believed and it was all there,' said Lady Longford. 'It came to this: that the last word on life had been given by de Causade, a priest who had a whole lot of women in Switzerland or

France; his job was advising them and he had a great sort of court and the basis of what he taught was that one must *accept* what God said and that was the beginning and the end and you couldn't question it; and this is what he practised. He told me, he said, this is what he held onto.'

Nonetheless, if his affair with Catherine was something ordained by God, then Greene was freed from any feelings of personal guilt; it certainly relieved the mind, as his comment to Lady Longford reveals: 'I can recommend it to you,' he said. 'You will find that it will solve many problems.'

As Royal observes, "Greene's earlier sense of the acute tension between earthly and heavenly impulses was gradually sliding into a much more lax Catholicism. This character flaw weakened his art, as he himself might have predicted."

The End of the Affair was the last of Greene's Catholic novels. When he remarked that he was thinking of making his next book 'non-religious,' Evelyn Waugh retorted, "I wouldn't give up on God quite yet if I were you. It would be like P.G. Wodehouse giving up Jeeves halfway through." Like Waugh, Greene had an enormous respect for Wodehouse, and the warning should not have been lost on him. Despite his own protestations to the contrary, Greene never again wrote with such power as during these years when Catholicism was a vibrant force in his life. ●

Speck THE ALTAR BOY by Margaret Ahern



"Hey Mister! Did you find what you were looking for at collection time?"