The Capacity to Believe: The Imagination of Graham Greene

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For Graham Greene, the only life worth living is the examined life. His highly developed imagination allowed him to embrace the promise of absolute forgiveness that brought redemption and reconciliation into a place of certainty. This outcome compels the reader to seek a deeper understanding of Jesus’ message of love. The imagination must find its footing in reality in order to take flight into other realms of possibility. By anchoring itself in realism, reality is free to engage with the realm of creativity. Janine Langan views the Christian imagination as a stage where humanity can interact with God\(^1\); Greene’s Catholic novels provide the reader with such a forum for interaction.

Greene’s reality for his Catholic imagination was founded in a childhood that experienced God.

One became aware of God with an intensity – time hung suspended – music lay on the air; anything might happen before it became necessary to join the crowd across the border. There was no inevitability anywhere ...faith was almost great enough to move mountains...the great buildings rocked in the darkness.\(^2\)

Born into the Anglican faith Greene lamented its inadequate symbolism for heaven, offering only a brass eagle and a volunteer organist.\(^3\) It was, therefore, in his sought after moments of solitude characterized by peaceful interludes immersed in nature, where he relished both the release from

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\(^3\)Graham Greene, *The Lawless Road.* (London: Longmans, 1939), 5.
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The everyday and the “hour of prayer” that naturally accompanied this time away. His knowledge of the presence of God was evident in these meditations, connecting him with a sense of the heavenly. His earthly life, however, proved hellish. His teenage years at a boarding school marked a period in his life that he hated. He did not report to being physically abused (by the standards of the day, at least); his misery lay in his conflicted relationships. His father was headmaster, his godfather a school master and he felt his friends were treacherous as a result. He experienced feelings of loneliness, abandonment and exclusion and... “for a long while it was only hell one could picture with a certain intimacy – the pitch pine partitions of dormitories where everybody was never quiet at the same time; lavatories without locks: There, by reason of the great number of the damned, the prisoners are heaped together in their awful prison.”

Truancy, depression and an attempted suicide followed, and in this misery Greene came to feel more keenly his sense of faith “... shapelessly, without dogma, a presence above a croquet lawn, something associated with violence, cruelty, evil across the way. One began to believe in heaven because one believed in hell....” The catastrophic events and seemingly helpless situations in his books echo these sentiments. He describes an inordinate boredom that inspired his desperation. Sent to London for psychotherapy by his parents, he spent months at a therapist’s house, a time he remembers in very positive terms. Conditioned as he was by his boarding school years meant he could not enjoy this new found mental freedom brought about by so much unstructured time. He likened this oppressive boredom with the evil of human nature. The antidote to this emotional abyss was to play Russian roulette on the common, fingering with the

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4 David Pryce-Jones, Graham Greene (Edinborough: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), 2.

5 Graham Greene, The Lawless Road, 35.

6 Ibid.
notion that his existence needed to be justified in ways beyond boredom or evil. It would appear that these moments developed into a belief system that Greene could embrace. They also set the stage for the extreme characterization in his novels, where the presence of God can be found in the most hellish of situations.

Greene’s conversion to Catholicism in his early twenties is a matter of much review. The question arises whether it was a matter of necessity (he was engaged to a Catholic), of conviction or of youthful enthusiasm, given that he was said to be “...very sensitive to climates of opinion.” An inkling to demote him into the role of fallen Catholic may also be excused on the merit of his own shadowed lifestyle choices. I suggest, however, that his conversion was due to him finding a belief system that was within his capacity to understand, despite its necessity for transcendence. Further insight reveals a devout, deeply contemplative and well learned convert. The Incarnation and the Passion are elements based in Greene’s sense of reality, while his imagination facilitated an extraordinary capacity for understanding and acceptance. He was an astounding Catholic, one who truly understood the capacity of God’s love.

Upon his initiation into the Catholic Church, when Greene experienced his first confession, he writes that “...I had got somewhere new by way of memories I hadn’t known I possessed. I had taken up the thread of life from very far back, from so far back as innocence,” suggesting that Greene is remembering a connection to a time and place before his life began. He thought outside the conventional orthodox of Catholicism, he vehemently embraced Vatican II but most importantly, he explored the outer echelons of his Catholic imagination. Taken from


the words of the priest in “Brighton Rock,” Greene was able to conceive of “the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.” The priest is referencing the capacity of Christ to forgive and our tendency of underestimating both God’s capacity and his desire to do so. The priest could not fathom God’s release of any soul. Certainly, Greene looked beyond this commonly held concept of eternal damnation and his Catholic novels reflect this.

Greene referred to himself as “a Christian humanist.” For him, it seems that sin itself is not in the evil state or in the wrongful act but in our refusal to acknowledge the fallacies of human nature and in failing to recognize God’s infinite mercy. Mark Bosco writes that the presence of God is found in the “fallen nature” of Greene’s characters. The conversions of his characters are often disastrous in nature, requiring a catastrophic event. They are forced to contemplate their place in the cosmos and often feel unworthy of salvation or, indeed, of a saviour. It is only when they open up to this “appalling strangeness of God’s mercy” that they find redemption. Greene interprets this sense of God by depicting his characters as evil, or at the very least, sinful. The pious and the devout appear far less worthy.

Yet sin is not the central element of these novels, but merely serves as a catalyst. It provides a backdrop to showcase the depths of human depravity; ultimately the sin doesn’t matter as much as recognizing one’s own worth and through this recognition God’s love can enter. Where God’s love is, anything is possible: reform, reconciliation, redemption. Greene awakens his characters through their own suffering, brought about by the raw elements of the human condition. It is indeed the characters’ perception of unworthiness that deems them

12 Ibid., 158.
damnable. Greene’s profoundly evil characters allow the reader to ponder the capacity of God’s mercy and forgiveness, the base of which lies in the soteriology of Christ. Atonement appears then as important in regards to the capacity of God to love.

*The Power and the Glory*’s “whiskey priest” portrays this insight. The story, set in a part of Mexico where Catholicism was being purged, introduces the protagonist, “the whiskey priest” who has led a privileged, selfish existence as parish priest. His vices have often won in situations of temptation. Now in danger and on the run he is forced to acknowledge his values and examine his commitment to both his vocation and his beliefs. He feels shame for his drinking and fornicating, which begets a child. As his privileged position changes to one of dependency, despair and fear, he laments his earlier life and blames his current situation on his sins. Yet, meditating upon the situation, he recognizes his weaknesses as parish priest. He sees that given those easy conditions he could have done a much better job. Doing nothing to excel in his role as priest was no less sinful than his current debauchery. Now, fearing for his life, his cowardice is not the sin anymore than his bravery could be his redemption. His sin lies in his lack of faith and inability to put his trust in God. Interestingly, it is the recognition of this that will result in his redemption. He puts himself in mortal danger to hear the confession of the dying murderer, finally employing the aspect of his work that requires sacrifice. In this ministry he finds satisfaction by virtue of its effort and faith. He could have refused to go but he is instilled with the necessity of being present for this sinner’s confession, despite the danger to himself. Similarly, he risks his life for the sake of having wine for communion. His redemption is entwined with his sacrifice.

While in prison the night before his execution, he is frightened. He thinks of his child and wants her to live forever, even at the peril of his own damnation. His absolute love for her,
he realizes, is what he should feel for everyone in the world. He tries to pray for his enemies, recognizing the need for prayer. He finds he can only pray for his daughter though, something he sees as another personal failure.\textsuperscript{13} His failure is in going empty handed to God for the only thing that mattered was to “be a saint,” warranting some self-restraint and a little courage.\textsuperscript{14} His moment of grace lies in recognizing his weaknesses and his atonement for them. It is a small thing to offer in light of the ultimate sacrifice of Christ’s Passion, but it is genuine.

Self-sacrifice is echoed in \textit{The End of the Affair}. Indeed, the epigraph by Leon Bloy highlights this:

\begin{quote}
Man has places in his heart that do not yet exist, \\
and into them enters suffering \\
in order that they may have existence.
\end{quote}

Sarah finds God in the space that opens up from her self-sacrifice. She makes a pact with him that she will end her affair with her lover Maurice if his life will be spared after a bomb blast. To her amazement he is indeed alive and so she is impelled to keep her promise. She now has no choice but to believe in God, a concept that she has actively denied. For Greene, the sin of adultery is secondary, superficial even. His imagination takes him beyond the pedantic results of these earthly acts; he is interested in the esoteric nature of the pain and suffering that results from them. Again, the sins are just catalysts for meaning. He uses Sarah’s unexpected knowledge of God to open up the idea of sacrifice. She understands that her attempts at love were pathetic up to this point but that her capacity to love is huge. However, for it to be in any way significant, it must involve pain. As she talks to God she says:

\begin{flushright}
\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{13} Graham Greene, \textit{The Power and the Glory} (Middlesex: Heinemann, 1940), 208. \\
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 210.
\end{quote}
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Dear God, I’ve tried to love and I’ve made such a hash of it. If I could love you, I’d know how to love them. I believe the legend. I believe you were born. I believe you died for us. I believe you are God. Teach me to love. I don’t mind my pain. It’s their pain I can’t stand. Let my pain go on and on but stop theirs. Dear God, if only you could come down from your Cross for a while and let me get up there instead. If I could suffer like you, I could heal like you."  

And so Sarah internalizes the infinite capacity of God’s love and the beauty and truth of His sacrifice. She desires it too. She verbalizes for the reader the emotion of God’s love for us, and His desire to absolve our pain and isolation with his sacrificial love.

In *The Heart of the Matter* it is Scobie who sacrifices himself. A clean living, law abiding man, he is married to Louise yet has an affair while his wife is away. On hearing of her impending return he must end the affair but finds he cannot hurt either woman. It appears that Greene has portrayed Scobie as a selfless character and again, the sin of his affair is almost irrelevant given the deeper meaning of the story. It serves to consider a greater understanding of life and to contemplate God’s grace; these are highlighted through Scobie’s inner thoughts. At a dinner party, while the conversation is on a suicide case, Scobie laments that two thousand years of discussion sees us debating the exegesis of the Passion in the same dispassionate, disconnected manner. The question around this character’s suicide relates to how he died and not why, pointing the reader to re-examine the ontological question of Christ.

On figuring out how Scobie can best save each woman from pain, he decides to commit suicide, making it appear as if he dies of natural causes. In this way, the affair is never found out

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16 Ibid., 193.
and the women are spared the hurt and embarrassment of his indiscretions. In the setting of the novel, the drama and hysteria of the affair are shadowed by a deeper meaning. It is Greene’s logic of the situation, tied in with his Catholic convictions that point to the question of sacrifice. Scobie cannot receive communion due to his maculate soul, a source of great despair for him. The exile he feels from the communion of God is more painful than death. Herein lies his damnation. No longer feeling a sense of belonging, his hell is caused by the inability to partake in communion which is his gift from God. Whatever sin he committed is irrelevant and petty compared to this damnation of loss. When he is forced to either take communion or have his indiscretions revealed to his wife, he offers up his eternal life, sacrificing it rather than to cause her pain. The sacrifice is more pertinent than the sin, which serves as an entry point for something more meaningful. Scobie takes on the role that Jesus did, at one point seeing himself as the cross.\footnote{Greene, \textit{The End of the Affair}, 225.} It is in the element of choice that we are compelled to reflect upon the gift of salvation and its implications. Again, Greene calls for the contemplation of God’s “appalling strangeness for mercy.”

Even in suicide, ‘the unforgivable sin,’\footnote{Ibid., 190.} Scobie channels the question of mercy. God sometimes broke his own rules, says Scobie, and would find it possible to “put a hand of forgiveness into the suicidal darkness.”\footnote{Ibid.} Christ, Scobie points out, was not murdered, as God cannot be murdered, and so Christ hung himself on the cross.\footnote{Ibid.} Despite his free will, he did that for us. Greene compels us to reflect on this. In Scobie’s damnation the reader is reminded of the mistake of confusing happiness and love. One does not guarantee the other, as the crucifixion
demonstrates. Ultimately then, in Scobie’s suicide, it is questionable, in light of his ethereal dialogue throughout the book, whether God could or would damn him.

Similarly through the characterization of the evil Pinkie in *Brighton Rock*, Greene visits the issues of sacrifice and suicide. This solipsistic young hit man is newly married to Rose. She feels committed to him in life and in death, mostly because they feel that the consummation of their marriage is sinful as they were not married in a church. Pinkie, due to his own unlawful activities and impending arraignment (or murder), proposes a suicide pact which Rose agrees to. Both Catholic, and thus encumbered with the “special knowledge” of their religion, she feels that her sacrifice will enable his soul to have company in the damned state to which they will both be subjected. There is a place for mercy in her sacrifice. Her innocence, her youth and her lack of love and support incite a calling for God’s mercy and forgiveness. It seems that Greene establishes a connection between sin and purpose, and uses any inherent opportunity for deeper meaning. Goodness, says Greene, “has only once found a perfect incarnation in the human body and never will again, but evil can always find a home there.” The responsibility for redemption lies with the sinner, and it is the human factor of Greene’s characters, the invitation for grace to enter the cavity that sin has left in its wake, which is brought into the reader’s consciousness as they contemplate the interaction of evil and wrongdoing with God’s generous mercy. Greene uses suicide because it leaves no room for interpretation; it is, by all Catholic accounts, the sin that damns the soul. Pinkie knew hell, and while he accepted damnation, Greene determines that it is his drive to mistrust the concept of heaven, offered through Rose’s unconditional love, that would condemn him. Yet the reader’s hope for Pinkie is not damned; the priest conveys the


22 Mark Bosco, *The Catholic Imagination*, 16.
promise of salvation when he tells Rose she “can’t convey my child, nor can I or anyone else the...
appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.”\textsuperscript{23} This mercy beholds Pinkie’s redemption; saved
from killing himself, he is blinded by acid and runs in agony over the cliff to his death. Rose
lives to visit a priest who tells her that “the Church does not demand that we believe any soul is
cut off from mercy.”\textsuperscript{24} This frees her to “hope and pray” for Pinkie’s soul. Her sanctity was his
gift in his pathetic life, which although unacknowledged, it will remain his gift in death.

Greene’s characters and their lives illuminate the mysterious aspects of human nature, of
life, choice and free will. The extent of our responsibility for redemption and reconciliation are
juxtaposed with the infinite capacity of God’s mercy. Eternal damnation is questioned, absolutes
are exposed for examination, lines of redemption are blurred and hope is elevated to higher
echelons of optimism. Meaning is sought, soteriology revisited and hope restored.

\textsuperscript{23} Greene, \textit{Brighton Rock}, 246.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
Works Cited


