Graham Greene: The Art of Fiction, No. 3

Interviewed by Simon Raven & Martin Shuttleworth

Paris Review (Autumn 1953, No. 3)

The eighteenth century succeeds to the twentieth on the ground floors at the bottom of St. James's Street. The gloss and the cellophane of oyster bars and travel agencies are wrapped incongruously round the legs of the dignified houses. Graham Greene lives here at the commercial end of this thoroughfare in a flat on the first floor of a narrow house sandwiched between the clubs of the aristocracy and St. James's Palace. Above him, General Auchinleck, the soldier who was beaten by Rommel; below him, the smartest oyster bar in Europe; opposite, the second smartest.

Readers of *Cakes and Ale* will remember that it was near here that Maugham met Hugh Walpole, but it is not the sort of area in which one expects to find a

novelist, even a successful novelist. It's an area black with smartness; the Rolls-Royces and the bowler hats of the men are black, the court shoes and the correct suits of the women are black, and in the most august flats even the bathing pools set into the floors of the bathrooms are paved with black marble. Nearby are the courtyard and sundial of Pickering Place, where only the very rich penetrate to eat and wine in Carolinean isolation.

Isolation, the isolation of anonymity rather than that of wealth, is probably the lure for Greene, for he is, or was until recently, a man shy of the contacts that congeal to fame. Brown suited, brown shoed, browned face, he opened the door when we rang and ushered us up above the oyster bar to the large room. It was cold for April and a large number of electric fires were burning in various corners of the room. A many-lamped standard of Scandinavian design stood by the window; a couple of bulbs were lit, they made as much difference to the watery April light as a pair of afterburners to a flagging jet engine. They revealed a book-lined room with a desk, a dictaphone and a typewriter, great padded armchairs and a furry rug. A painting by Jack Yeats overstood the mantle; sombre, Celtic, yet delicate, it had something in common with the red pastel drawings by Henry Moore, whose sad classicism against the wall was in keeping with the browness that dominated the whole room. Brown as the headmaster's study or the little office in Lagos where he once said he might willingly have spent forty dreary years, brown as his collection of books was blue—blue with the blueness that the bindings of English academic publishers give to the shelves and studies of dons and scholarly men of letters. It was a shock; subconsciously we had expected the black and purple of a Catholic bookshop, a violence to match Mexico, Brighton and West Africa—what we had found was a snuggery, a den such as might be found in any vicarage or small country house in England. The only suggestion of an obsession, or of anything out of the ordinary (for so many people have Henry Moores these days) was a collection of seventy-four different miniature whiskey bottles, ranged on top of a bookcase, bizarre as an international convention of Salesian novices.

In the retreat of the man within the novelist, the man whom we had come to besiege, they were a welcome discovery.

INTERVIEWER

Mr. Greene, we thought that we could make the best use of our time here if we brought along a few focal questions and let the conversation eddy round them. We felt that any formal questionnaire which we might make out would be based only on a knowledge of your written work and that a portion of the answers would be contained in the assumptions that allowed us to formulate

the questions; we wanted to get beyond this and so we have come prepared to let the conversation lead us and to try to find out, so far as you will let us, the unknown things about you.

GRAHAM GREENE

Very frank. What will you have to drink? (*He produced a bottle and brought water in a majolica jug*.)

INTERVIEWER

Shall we begin by working backwards from your latest production, your play *The Living Room*? It has not been seen in America yet so you will excuse us if we go into it in some detail.

GREENE

Have you seen this play yourselves?

INTERVIEWER

No, a percipient girl saw it for us—she went down to Portsmouth and came back with a review, a synopsis, and a great admiration for it.

GREENE

I am glad; it's my first play. I've been a film man to date and I was rather afraid that I had written it in such filmic terms that it might not have succeeded as a play.

INTERVIEWER

She enjoyed it well enough. She felt that you had conveyed the tense, haunted atmosphere of a house in which a family was decaying because of its ill-conceived gentility and religion; that you had made a drama out of the situation of the girl who was lost in the desert between the unhappiness, truth, and family that lay in the background and the lover and mirage of happiness that lay in the foreground. Her main criticism, and this perhaps has something to do with what you were saying just now about the difference between film and theatrical technique, was that you had made the drama depend too much on dialogue and not enough on action.

GREENE

There I disagree. I obeyed the unities. I confined myself to one set and I made my characters act, one upon the other. What other sort of action can you

have? I get fed up with all this nonsense of ringing people up and lighting cigarettes and answering the doorbell that passes for action in so many modern plays. No, what I meant about filmic terms was that I was so used to the dissolve that I had forgotten about the curtain, and so used to the camera, which is only turned on when it is wanted, that I had forgotten that actors and actresses are on the stage all the time and I had left out many functional lines. Still, most of that has been put right now.

INTERVIEWER

Then the criticism, if it stands, means that the dialogue fell short in some other way; perhaps it was too closely related to the dialogue of your novels which doesn't often carry the burden of the action.

GREENE

I think that is nearer the mark: I tried to fuse everything and put it into the dialogue but I did not quite succeed. (*With a smile*) I will next time.

INTERVIEWER

The particular thing which impressed this critic of ours was your attitude towards the girl's suicide. This is what she writes: "The central point of much of Greene's writing has been suicide, in Catholic doctrine the most deadly sin. But in this play at least his interpretation of it is not a doctrinal one. We are left quite definitely feeling that her soul is saved, if anyone's is, and the message of the play, for it does not pretend not to have a message, is not mere Catholic propaganda but of far wider appeal. It is a plea to believe in a God who Father Browne, the girl's confessor, admits may not exist, but belief can only do good not ill and without it we cannot help ourselves ... the girl's suicide will probably be the only answer visible to most people but Father Browne's own unshaken faith, his calm acceptance of her death, implies that there is another, but that the struggle for it must be unceasing."

GREENE

Yes, I would say that that is roughly true but the message is still Catholic.

INTERVIEWER

How do you make that out?

GREENE

The church is compassionate, you know ...

INTERVIEWER

Sorry to interrupt you but could we ask a correlative question now to save going back later?

GREENE

Go ahead.

INTERVIEWER

Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* committed suicide too. Was it your purpose when you wrote *The Living Room* to show a similar predicament and to show that suicide in certain circumstances can almost amount to an act of redemption?

GREENE

Steady, steady. Let's put it this way. I write about situations that are common, universal might be more correct, in which my characters are involved and from which only faith can redeem them, though often the actual manner of the redemption is not immediately clear. They sin, but there is no limit to God's mercy and because this is important, there is a difference between not confessing in fact, and the complacent and the pious may not realize it.

INTERVIEWER

In this sense Scobie, Rose (the girl in *The Living Room*), the boy Pinkie in *Brighton Rock,* and the whiskey priest of *The Power and the Glory* are all redeemed?

GREENE

Yes, though redemption is not the exact word. We must be careful of our language. They have all understood in the end. This is perhaps the religious sense.

INTERVIEWER

So we have touched the nerve of the theme, the theme that gives, as you have said somewhere yourself, to a shelf of novels the unity of a system?

GREENE

Yes, or rather it explains the unity of a group of my novels which is now, I think, finished.

INTERVIEWER

Which group?

GREENE

Brighton Rock, The Power and the Glory, The Heart of the Matter, and *The End of the Affair*. My next novel will not deal explicitly with Catholic themes at all.

INTERVIEWER

So the *New Statesman* gibe that *The End of the Affair* is the last novel which a layman will be able to read is about to be disproved?

GREENE

Yes, I think so, as far as one can tell oneself. I think that I know what the next novel is about, but one never really knows, of course, until it's finished.

INTERVIEWER

Was that so of the earlier books?

GREENE

The very earliest ones particularly ...

INTERVIEWER

Yes, what about them? How did you find their subjects? Their historical romanticism is so different from what came later, even from *The Entertainments*.

GREENE

How does one find one's subjects?—gradually I suppose. My first three, *The Man Within, The Name of Action, Rumour at Nightfall*—as far as one is influenced by anybody and I don't think that one is consciously influenced—were influenced by Stevenson and Conrad and they are what they are because at the time those were the subjects that I wanted to write about. The entertainments (*Stamboul Train*, written a year after *Rumour at Nightfall* is the first of them; then A *Gun for Sale, The Confidential Agent, The Ministry of Fear*, and *The Third Man and The Fallen Idol*) are distinct from the novels because as the name implies they do not carry a message (horrible word).

INTERVIEWER

They show traces though of the same obsession; they are written from the same point of view ...

GREENE

Yes, I wrote them. They are not all that different.

INTERVIEWER

There is a great break between *Rumour at Nightfall* and *England Made Me* (our favorite novel of yours). What caused the historical novelist to turn into the contemporary one?

GREENE

I have a particularly soft spot for *England Made Me*, too. The book came about when I began *Stamboul Train*. I had to write a pot-boiler, a modern adventure story, and I suddenly discovered that I liked the form, that the writing came easily, that I was beginning to find my world. In *England Made Me* I let myself go in it for the first time.

INTERVIEWER

You had begun to read James and Mauriac?

GREENE

Yes, I had begun to change. I had found that what I wanted to express, my fixations if you like, could best be expressed in the melodramatic, the contemporary, and later the Catholic novel.

INTERVIEWER

What influence has Mauriac had over you?

GREENE

Again, very little I think.

INTERVIEWER

But you told Kenneth Allott, who quotes it in his book about you, that Mauriac had a distinct influence.

GREENE

Did I? That is the sort of thing that one says under pressure. I read *Thérèse* in 1930 and was turned up inside but, as I have said, I don't think that he had any influence on me unless it was an unconscious one. Our Catholicism is very different: I don't see the resemblance that people talk about.

INTERVIEWER

Where do the differences in your Catholicism lie?

GREENE

Mauriac's sinners sin against God whereas mine, however hard they try, can never quite manage to ... (*His voice fell*.)

INTERVIEWER

Then Mauriac is almost a Manichee whereas you ... (*the telephone rang and when, after a brief conversation, Greene came back to his long low seat between the electric fires and topped up the glasses, the conversation was not resumed, for the point, we thought, if not implied, was difficult for him to discuss*.)

INTERVIEWER

Can we now discuss this fresh period that you mentioned just now?

GREENE

We can but I don't think that you'll find out much, for it has not begun yet. All that I can tell you is that I do know that my next novel is to be about an entirely different set of people with entirely different roots.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps then it would be more profitable to talk about the roots of your previous sets of characters? If we leave the historical romantic novels and the entertainments out of it for the moment and concentrate on the contemporary ones it is obvious that there is a relationship between the characters which is a product in part of your absorption with failure, pursuit, and poverty, and in part with interest in a particular type of person.

GREENE

I agree with you, of course, when you say that there is a relationship between, let us say, Anthony Farrant in *England Made Me* and Pinkie, or Scobie, even—

but they are not the same sort of person even if they are the expressions of what critics are pleased to call my fixations. I don't know exactly where they came from but I think that I have now got rid of them.

INTERVIEWER

Ah, now, these fixations—they are what really matter, aren't they? We don't quite understand why you consider that it is so important for a novelist to be dominated in this way.

GREENE

Because if he is not he has to rely on his talent, and talent, even of a very high order, cannot sustain an achievement, whereas a ruling passion gives, as I have said, to a shelf of novels the unity of a system.

INTERVIEWER

Mr. Greene, if a novelist did not have this ruling passion, might it be possible to fabricate it?

GREENE

How do you mean?

INTERVIEWER

Well, put it this way, and I hope we won't seem to be impertinent: the contrast between the Nelson Places and the Mexicos of the novels and this flat in St. James's is marked. Urbanity, not tragedy, seems to reign in this room. Do you find, in your own life, that it is difficult to live at the high pitch of perception that you require of your characters?

GREENE

Well, this is rather difficult to answer. Could you perhaps qualify the question a bit?

INTERVIEWER

You made Scobie say in *The Heart of the Matter*: "Point me out the happy man and I will show you either egotism, selfishness, evil or else an absolute ignorance." What worries us is that you yourself seem to be so much happier than we had expected. Perhaps we are being rather naive but the seventy-four miniature whiskey bottles, the expression on your face, so different from the fixed, set look of your photograph, the whole atmosphere, seem to be the

products of something much more positive than that very limited optimum of happiness that you described in *The Power and the Glory* in this passage: "the world is all much of a piece: it is engaged everywhere in the same subterranean struggle ... there is no peace anywhere where there is life; but there are quiet and active sectors of the line."

GREENE

(*With a smile*) Oh yes, I see what troubles you. I think that you have misjudged me and my consistency. This flat, my way of life—these are simply my hole in the ground.

INTERVIEWER

A moderately comfortable hole.

GREENE

Shall we leave it at that?

INTERVIEWER

Of course. There are just one or two other questions on a similar tack: many of your most memorable characters, Raven for instance, are from low life. Have you ever had any experience of low life?

GREENE

No, very little.

INTERVIEWER

What did you know about poverty?

GREENE

I have never known it. I was "short," yes, in the sense that I had to be careful for the first eight years of my adult life but I have never been any closer.

INTERVIEWER

Then you don't draw your characters from life?

GREENE

No, one never knows enough about characters in real life to put them into novels. One gets started and then, suddenly, one can not remember what toothpaste they use; what are their views on interior decoration, and one is stuck utterly. No, major characters emerge; minor ones may be photographed.

INTERVIEWER

Well now, how do you work? Do you work at regular hours?

GREENE

I used to; now I set myself a number of words.

INTERVIEWER

How many?

GREENE

Five hundred, stepped up to seven fifty as the book gets on. I re-read the same day, again the next morning and again and again until the passage has got too far behind to matter to the bit that I am writing. Correct in type, final correction in proof.

INTERVIEWER

Do you correct much?

GREENE

Not overmuch.

INTERVIEWER

Did you always want to be a writer?

GREENE

No, I wanted to be a businessman and all sorts of other things; I wanted to prove to myself that I could do something else.

INTERVIEWER

Then the thing that you could always do was write?

GREENE

Yes, I suppose it was.

INTERVIEWER

What happened to your business career?

GREENE

Initially it lasted for a fortnight. They were a firm, I remember, of tobacco merchants. I was to go up to Leeds to learn the business and then go abroad. I couldn't stand my companion. He was an insufferable bore. We would play double noughts and crosses and he always won. What finally got me was when he said, "We'll be able to play this on the way out, won't we?" I resigned immediately.

INTERVIEWER

Then you became a journalist?

GREENE

Yes, for the same reason—that I wanted to prove I could do something else.

INTERVIEWER

But after *The Man Within* you gave it up?

GREENE

Then I became a professional author.

INTERVIEWER

So that is what you meant when you said, "I am an author who is a Catholic?"

GREENE

Indeed it is. I don't believe that anyone had ever realized that I was a Catholic until 1936 when I began to review for the *Tablet* and, for fun, or rather to give

system to a series of reviews of unrelated books, I started to review from a Catholic standpoint. If it had not been for that ...

INTERVIEWER

But surely a person would have to be very obtuse who reads any novel from *Brighton Rock* onwards and does not realize it?

GREENE

Some people still manage to. In fact, a Dutch priest wrote to me the other day, discussing *The Power and the Glory*, and concluded his letter: "Well I suppose that even if you aren't a Catholic, you are not too hostile to us."

INTERVIEWER

Oh well, internal criticism.

GREENE

All the same you see what I mean.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, you are "a writer who is a Catholic;" we seem to have cleared up that, but there are still a few gaps to be filled before we can know why you are a writer. Do you remember that you once said on the wireless that when you were fourteen or so and read Marjorie Bowen's *Viper of Milan* you immediately began to scribble imitation after imitation: "from that moment I began to write. All the other possible futures slid away ..."

GREENE

Yes, that was so; I am very grateful to Marjorie Bowen. In that talk I was engaged on a little mild baiting of the intellectuals. Pritchett had said that Turgenev had influenced him most; somebody else, somebody else. I chose Marjorie Bowen because as I have told you, I don't think that the books that one reads as an adult influence one as a writer. For example, of the many, many books on the art of the novel, only Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* has interested me at all. But books such as Marjorie Bowen's, read at a young age, do influence one considerably. It is a very fine book, you know. I re-read it again recently.

INTERVIEWER

We haven't read it but from your description in the broadcast it seems that the book has many features in common with your writing as well as with your philosophy. You said that "The Viper of Milan gave you your pattern of life: that religion later might explain it to me in other terms, but the pattern was already there— perfect evil walking the world where perfect good can never walk again, and only the pendulum ensures that after all in the end justice is done." That explains a great deal about your philosophy, and it seems that the heightened colors and the violence of the Renaissance, as it is depicted by Miss Bowen and also as it is shown in the plays of Webster, also have their counterpart in your writing. As Edwin Muir has said of you: "Everything is shown up in a harsh light and casts fantastic colors."

GREENE

Yes, there is a lot to that. It is true, to a certain extent, about the earlier books, but I don't think that it does justice to the later ones. Melodrama is one of my working tools and it enables me to obtain effects that would be unobtainable otherwise; on the other hand I am not deliberately melodramatic; don't get too annoyed if I say that I write in the way that I do because I am what I am.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever need the stimulus of drink to write?

GREENE

No, on the contrary, I can only write when I am absolutely sober.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find collaboration easy, in particular collaboration with directors and producers?

GREENE

Well, I have been exceptionally lucky both with Carol Reed and recently with Peter Glenville. I like film work, even the impersonality of it. I have managed to retain a certain amount of control over my own stories so I have not suffered as badly as some people seem to have; all the same, filmmaking can be a distressing business for, when all is said and done, a writer's part in making a film is relatively small.

INTERVIEWER

Did it take you long to learn?

GREENE

I learned a lot on some not very good films before the war so I was into my stride by the time that *The Fallen Idol* and *The Third Man* came along.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see much of your fellow authors?

GREENE

Not much, they are not one's material. A few of them are very dear friends of mine but for a writer to spend much of his time in the company of authors is, you know, a form of masturbation.

INTERVIEWER

What was the nature of your friendship with Norman Douglas?

GREENE

We were so different that we could be friends. He was very tolerant in his last years and if he thought me odd he never said so.

INTERVIEWER

Is there, in fact, any relationship between his paganism and your Catholicism?

GREENE

Not really, but his work, for which I have the very greatest admiration, was so remote from mine that I was able to enjoy it completely; to me it was like a great block of stone, which not being a sculptor myself, I had no temptation to tamper with, yet could admire wholeheartedly for its beauty and strength.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, of course, there couldn't be any real connection between your writing and his—or between yours and Mauriac's. For as you have said, your sinners can never sin against God no matter how hard they try, but ...

(*The telephone rang. Mr. Greene smiled in a faint deprecatory way as if to signify he'd said all he wished to say, picked up the instrument and spoke into it.*)

GREENE

Hello? Hello Peter! How is Andrea? Oh, it's the other Peter. How is Maria? No, I can't do it this evening. I've got Mario Soldati on my hands—we're doing a film in Italy this summer. I'm co-producing. How about Sunday? Battersea? Oh, they're not open? Well, then, we'll go to my pleasant little Negro night club round the corner ...

Source: http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5180/the-art-of-fiction-no-3-graham-greene