GOD IN THE DETAILS

Graham Greene's religious realism.

BY RUTH FRANKLIN

 Borges, in one of his enigmatic parables, imagined an empire in which the art of cartography had "attained such perfection" that a map was exactly the same size as the area it covered. At well over two thousand pages, Norman Sherry's authorized biography of Graham Greene, a writer whose slender novels are distinguished by a near-phobia of the extraneous, occasionally seems in danger of reaching a similar condition. The third volume of "The Life of Graham Greene" (Viking; $39.95) has at last arrived, fifteen years after the publication of Volume I, and thirty years after Greene designated Sherry his biographer.

Sherry's sluggish pace owes something to the difficulty of summing up the career of this stunningly prodigious writer. During a writing life of more than sixty years, Greene published twenty-six novels, in an almost unseemly variety of genres, ranging from early thrillers and "entertainments" such as "Brighton Rock" and "This Gun for Hire," through the famous "Catholic trilogy" of his middle years, to a more experimental later phase that includes such unclassifiable works as "Travels with My Aunt" and "Monsignor Quixote." He also produced short stories, plays, film scripts, memoirs, and travel books, plus a vast quantity of correspondence, to much of which Sherry has had exclusive access. (Because of an ambiguous comma in a document Greene signed on his deathbed, other scholars were forbidden to quote from unpublished material until Sherry's project was complete.)

The mention of Graham Greene inevitably evokes "Greendel," reviewers' shorthand for the fictional terrain where all of Greene's novels seem to be set—a desolate colonial outpost with unforgiving weather, which is inhabited by middle level civil servants, simple-hearted locals, and adulterous wives. Greene was always annoyed by this trope, insisting that his books "carefully and accurately described" the world as he experienced it. As if to prove his point, he extracted from Sherry a promise to "follow in his footsteps" to wherever he had set a major work—Mexico, Liberia, Cuba, Vietnam, Haiti, the Congo, and numerous other inhospitable locations. In the course of fulfilling this promise, Sherry contracted gangrene, which required the removal of part of his intestines. His relief at bringing the project to completion is written all over this third volume; in eight pages of acknowledgments, he thanks his Buick dealer, his periodontist, his postman, and "Nellie the night janitress, who nearly always caught me in the late hours working."

Operating under the assumption that every place Greene went and every person he met is significant, Sherry has inevitably become bogged down in the most minute details. But he did discover that Greene had based a number of his characters on real people, the most important of whom, Sherry argues, was himself. This presents a particular problem. Greene lived his life to extremes: he had serious affairs, sometimes simultaneously, with at least three women, amid a host of more casual liaisons; he spied for MI6, smoked opium, visited prostitutes. However, he displayed a remarkable equanimity in the midst of chaos, maintaining a maternal regimen of five hundred words regardless of the circumstances. Combine this with a delight in secrecy—Greene was given to writing two versions of a diary entry to conceal a visit to a prostitute, to using the names of his characters as aliases on his business cards, and to sending two postcards to his mistress, a chaste version addressed to her and her husband at home, and a more intimate one for her to collect elsewhere—and he is a difficult subject indeed. He once wrote to Catherine Walston, one of his longtime lovers, "If anybody ever tries to write a biography of me, how complicated they are going to find it and how misled they are going to be."

The fourth of six children, Henry Graham Greene was born October 2, 1904, in Berkhamsted, England. The family lived at Berkhamsted School, where Greene's father worked his way up to headmaster, and later in life Greene recalled the "green baize door" that separated the safety of the family's living quarters from the alien world of the school. A shy boy, devoid of athletic talent, he suffered severe depressions as a teen-ager and became fascinated with suicide. His autobiography, "A Sort of Life," details experiments with Russian roulette, but Sherry also reports less convincing early attempts such as eating a tin of hair pomade and going swimming after taking more than a dozen aspirin. (In an unauthorized biography, Michael Shelden alleged that there was a more serious incident, in which Greene tried to hang himself in a potting shed.) At the age of sixteen, he was sent to a London psychoanalyst. Though he flourished in the cultured atmosphere of the analyst's home, the treatment did little to banish the allure that suicide held for him, which manifested itself repeatedly in his work.

While a student at Oxford, where he
dabbled in literary activities and published a book of poetry, Greene fell in love with Vivien Dayrell-Browning, a teen-age convert to Catholicism who refused to be involved with him unless he converted as well. He pursued her avidly, writing her as many as three letters a day and even offering a celibate marriage to appease her fear of sex. (Sherry's first volume quotes an inordinate number of these youthful romantic blatherings, even reproducing the back of an envelope on which Greene had repeatedly scribbled “143,” their code for “I love you.”) After leaving Oxford, in 1925, he moved to Nottingham to work the night shift on a local paper, and began the process of conversion. He and Vivien were married two years later.

It is almost impossible to imagine what kind of writer Greene would have been had he not become a Catholic. His impassioned and tortured relationship with his faith is the backbone of his best work, particularly the three novels that form the centerpiece of his career: “The Power and the Glory,” “The Heart of the Matter,” and “The End of the Affair.” Books that do not explicitly concern themselves with the theme of religion cannot altogether stay away from it. Yet his motivations for converting seem to have been less than pious; a friend remembers advising him, “If you need this for your fuck, go ahead and do it.” And from the start he had trouble reconciling the mathematical logic of his mind with the superstition and mystery of the Church. He called himself a “Catholic agnostic” and, at his confirmation, took the name Thomas, after the doubting apostle. In his autobiography, he wrote, “If I were ever to be convinced in even the remote possibility of a supreme, omnipotent and omniscient power I realized that nothing afterwards could seem impossible.”

Once, on being asked why he had become a writer, Greene replied, perhaps facetiously, that “there seemed nothing else to do. It has become a habit and it’s too late to change now.” Certainly, the part about habit was true. He established early the work routine that he followed throughout his life: a letter to Vivien notes the “terrifying thought” that if he continued writing five hundred words a day for forty years, that would add up to seven million three hundred thousand words, “not allowing for leap years. Darling! I should get a cramp!” His friend Michael Meyer observed him at work during a trip to Tahiti in 1959, when he was writing “A Burnt-Out Case”:

He wrote in longhand with a fine pen in a very small, almost illegible script, for two hours each day; no more, no less. In those two hours he would write seven to nine hundred words, the equivalent of two to three printed pages. . . . At 9 a.m. he would stop. This was when I got up, and as I walked along the verandah to the shower room he would look up and say, somewhat complacently I felt: “Nine hundred words this morning,” or, even worse, “Finished my work for the day”—a depressing remark with which to be greeted when I hadn’t yet begun and the thermometer was climbing towards ninety.

Greene’s first two novels were rejected; the third, “The Man Within,” appeared, in 1929, to positive reviews, but then two more failures nearly ended his career. His first commercial success came in 1932, with “Stamboul Train” (published in the United States as “Orient Express”), the story of eccentric passengers on a train from Ostend to Constantinople. In 1935, on an impulse, Greene travelled to Liberia, chiefly because “the most reliable map available still showed large blank areas with only the word ‘Cannibals’ written across.” Here he conceived a hatred of imperialism that lasted the rest of his life. “Everything ugly was European,” he wrote in “Journey Without Maps,” his first travel book. “If there was anything beautiful in the place it was native.” His next journey, in 1938, took him to southeastern Mexico to report on the persecution of Catholics by socialist revolutionaries. Travelling by boat, plane, and mule among the jungle towns of Chiapas and Tabasco, he heard harrowing stories of religious icons destroyed and priests executed or forced to marry, and these events became the material for “The Power and the Glory.”

With this book, Greene developed the creative method that served him throughout his career. The novel’s atmospherics, such as the descriptions of the seedy, rundown port town, derive directly from Greene’s own experience, but the story itself, while based on contemporary events, is pure invention. The main character is a persecuted “whisky priest,” who views himself as a sinner; years ago, he fathered a child with a parishioner. Although his actions endanger his own life and that of anyone he comes into contact with, he continues to travel from town to town offering to hear confessions and perform baptisms. After a dramatic flight to safety across the border, he allows himself to be lured back, and into a trap, by a sinister man identified only as “the mestizo.” Greene works him into the story subtly, building the suggestion of his menace through almost imperceptible details:

The mule came to a stop of its own accord beside a hammock. A man lay in it, bunched diagonally, with one leg trailing to keep the hammock moving, up and down, up and down, making a tiny current of air. The priest said, “Buenas tardes.” The man opened his eyes and watched him. . . . He had only two

“I haven’t actually whacked anyone in a while, but at this point I can get by purely on endorsements.”
port for Fidel Castro's impending revolution. (He displayed art work that Castro had given him in his flat in Antibes.) Nearly ten years later, he got in trouble for stating, in a letter to the London Times, that, given the choice between living in the Soviet Union and living in the United States, he would choose the Soviet Union. Sherry, full of theories when it comes to Greene's love life, has little insight into his politics. "How could this brilliant mind be so easily taken in?" he laments of Greene's friendship with Castro. Yet he is surely right to say that Greene was not anti-American but "anti-anyone, any time, any way, any how, whenever he feels that justice is not being served."

One's sense of Greene's political independence of mind is muddied by the revelation that on many of these trips he was likely doing freelance work for MI6. His involvement with espionage began during the Second World War, when he spent a year as an agent in Sierra Leone, and then worked at SIS headquarters in London under the notorious Soviet agent Kim Philby. Greene remained affectionate toward Philby, despite drawing public scorn for his support of a traitor. He wrote an admiring foreword to Philby's memoir, and visited him in the Soviet Union. But Sherry is not the first to suggest that he was staying on Philby's good side only in order to pass his friend's letters on to MI6. Even while researching "Our Man in Havana," his comic novel about a vacuum-cleaner salesman turned secret agent who fools his handlers by fabricating informers, Greene may have been in the employ of MI6. Sherry wonders whether Greene cooked up the novel as a cover for his own spying, suggesting that "if he made fun of British Intelligence, Cuba wouldn't take it, or him, seriously." But if Greene really did continue to spy throughout his life it is impossible to separate what he truly believed from anything he may have said for the benefit of his employers.

By the late nineteen-sixties, Greene's trajectory had begun its long descent. His affair with Catherine Walston had come to a painful end—partly because she refused to leave her husband, partly because of his own multiple infidelities. (In the appendices to Volume III there is a document titled "Graham's List of Favourite Prostitutes"). On a trip to Africa in 1959, he met Yvonne Cloetta, the wife of a French businessman in Cameroon, who remained his companion for the last thirty-one years of his life. After getting embroiled in tax difficulties in Britain, he settled permanently in Antibes, where he kept a flat around the corner from Cloetta's. Starting with "A Burnt-Out Case," which appeared in 1960, he proclaimed each novel to be his last, but he went on publishing at his usual clip until the final years of his life. In "Greene on Capri," a memoir of a thirty-year friendship with Greene, Shirley Hazzard offers this measured assessment of his later work: "The inspired pain of the earlier fiction would not recur; or even the intensity of those lighter and livelier works that Graham had once differentiated as 'entertainments'. What remained was professionalism: a unique voice and tone, a practised, topical narrative that held the interest and forced the pace of the reader. Poignancy was largely subsumed into world-weariness, resurfacing in spasms of authenticity."

If Greene truly believed that his work took place in "a region of the mind," why did he hold Norman Sherry to his time-consuming, tedious, dangerous promise to follow in his tracks? Why did he take such offense when his critics invoked "Greeneland" as shorthand for his fictional universe? Perhaps it was because, cavets aside, he believed that his obligation as a novelist was to represent people as he encountered them and understood them. Indeed, this sense of obligation extended to God, an integral, though ambiguous, element in his world. As he once explained to a journalist, "I have often tried in my work to show the mercy of God. You cannot show it by portraying only virtuous people; what good is mercy to the virtuous? It is in the drunken priests that you can see mercy working. And I call that optimism. But they call it Greeneland, as though it bore no relation to the real world. And yet, one is simply trying to describe the real world as accurately as one sees it."

In 1991, dying of leukemia in Switzerland, Greene expressed the wish that he might "be remembered, perhaps, from time to time—in the way that one recalls Flaubert." The remark puzzled those around him, but the comparison is illuminating. Greene practiced in his novels a peculiar form of realism: not a realism of the everyday but a vision of the psychological, political, and spiritual difficulties that people face in moments of extremity. He once quoted a line of Browning as a suitable epigraph for all his novels: "Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things. / The honest thief, / the tender murderer, / The superstitious atheist."

Greene's fundamental difficulty as a Christian was that he doubted his own ability to love God—to make the leap of faith, the unconditional surrender, that transforms a sinner into a saint. But his failings as a Christian were his virtues as a novelist, because the novelist's dedication is to humanity, not divinity. If man truly is made in God's image, then the distance between the two poles may not be as great as Greene thought. "Some of us have a vocation to love God," he once prayed. "Some of us only have a vocation to love a human being. Please let my vocation not be wasted." It was not.
mously on Capri, where Greene bought a villa that became his favorite retreat.

As a practicing Catholic conducting an adulterous affair, Greene lived the tension that many of his novels dramatize, between religious strictures and human passion. Certain episodes seem to have been lifted wholesale from Greene and Catherine’s romance. They apparently used “onions” as a code word for sex, as Bendix and Sarah do in “The End of the Affair”; and Greene suggested to Sherry that parts of Sarah’s journal may reflect Catherine’s diary. Scobie, in “The Heart of the Matter,” goes to confession knowing that he will be unable to promise to give up his lover, and hopes for a “miracle”—that the priest will “for once find the word, the right word” to absolve him. But the priest simply tells him that he must stop committing adultery: “He thought: how foolish it was of me to expect the magic word. This is the formula used so many times on so many people. Presumably people promised and went away and came back and confessed again.” He thinks, “I am not going to cheat myself or God,” and he says to the priest, “It would be no good my promising that, Father.” These lines echo a passage in a letter from Greene to Catherine.

Despite Sherry’s fixation on real-life details, it is the interplay of theology and fiction that gives the novels their drama. In “The End of the Affair,” Sarah promises God that she will give Bendix up if he survives a bombing raid, and then she must live with the torture of keeping her side of the bargain. Bendix, who is the novel’s narrator, imagines remonstrating with her:

If this God exists and if even you—with your lusts and your adulteries and the timidity you used to tell—can change like this, we could all be saints by leaping as you leapt, by shutting the eyes and leaping once and for all: if you are a saint, it’s not so difficult to be a saint. It’s something He can demand of any of us, leap.

Greene takes a distinctly forgiving attitude toward the Catholic idea of salvation after sin. Scobie becomes involved in an adulterous affair that sets off a domino effect: he is unable to confess, because he knows he cannot give up his lover; he takes Communion even though he has not confessed, since otherwise his wife will suspect him; and, finally, he succumbs to suicide, seeing no other way out. And yet the novel portrays him as a species of saint, as “The End of the Affair” does Sarah. Orwell, reviewing the book for this magazine in 1948, scoffed at Greene’s “cult of the sanctified sinner”: “When people really believed in Hell, they were not so fond of striking graceful attitudes on its brink.” But this judgment misses the powerful psychological drama that drives Scobie’s dilemma. Scobie loves God, but he loves Helen Rolt also, and the choice between them is not so simple as Orwell makes it out to be. Greene’s novels cannot be reduced to their Catholic elements: the spiritual dilemma is always inseparable from the imagined life of the character.

Sarah’s bargain with God is not unique in Greene’s work. In “The Heart of the Matter,” Scobie, witnessing the suffering of a sick child, prays, “Take away my peace forever, but give her peace.” Greene’s diary and his correspondence reveal similar bargains regarding matters both momentous and insignificant. After a pregnancy scare with one of his girlfriends, he reported to Catherine, “Secretly I made a promise that if there were no baby I would consider . . . going somewhere like Stonyhurst—a Catholic retreat—for three weeks or three months. There wasn’t a baby and now I don’t see how it’s to be done.” Critics have seized on such bargains as a sign of Greene’s religious superficiality—“great balls theologically” was Evelyn Waugh’s opinion. But this metaphysical Russian roulette seems another manifestation of Greene’s profound ambivalence about God. Prayer is a one-way conversation, but a bargain, whether or not the desired result is obtained, implies the presence of someone on the other end.

Greene’s travels can be seen as yet another game with fate. He had an unerring knack for turning up in countries at dangerous moments. In Saigon in the early nineteen-fifties, where he had his first experience with opium, he reported that “one lunches and dines behind iron grilles or wire netting to keep out the grenades.” Many of his observations found their way into “The Quiet American,” the story of an earnest young C.I.A. agent whose ignorance results in tragedy. The book brought accusations that Greene was anti-American, and he did little to deflect them. In Cuba in the late nineteen-fifties, he declared his sup-