

Graham Greene: Techniques of Intensity

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I N the journal of his travels in the Congo, *In Search of a Character*, Greene speaks of Joseph Conrad's "heavy hypnotic style," and deplores the "poverty" of his own.¹ While Greene's style is unquestionably plainer than that of Conrad, it hardly suffers from "poverty." Richard Hoggart describes it as "nervous, vivid, astringent";² Ronald Bryden calls it "superb, spare, unmistakable."³ Indeed, even in the stark, direct novels of Greene's middle years — *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) — it is "vivid" and "unmistakeable." These distinctive qualities are not incidental, but arise from techniques directly related to the highly charged nature of Greene's approach to his subject matter. Although his last three novels — *The Comedians* (1966), *Travels With My Aunt* (1969) and *The Honorary Consul* (1973) — suggest that Greene is partly replacing intensity with a sense of life's absurdity, these later novels still employ many of the techniques of the more intense and disturbed novels.

The intensity projected in the novels, and reflected in the techniques to be examined, arises in part from Greene's conception of a world of violence or incipient violence,⁴ a world moreover whose every action is imbued with transcendent significance. Of Somerset Maugham Greene writes, "Rob human beings of their heavenly and their infernal importance, and you rob your characters of their individuality" (CE p. 204). "Individuality" aside, Greene impresses on the reader the metaphysical significance of his own characters, often in a specifically Catholic framework, of

course. Thus characters such as the whisky priest in *The Power and the Glory* accrete enormous thematic weight, in this case so that the whisky priest's death has overtones of the Crucifixion. Further contributing to the intensity of the novels is the fact that Greene cultivates a sense of "significance" about objects and actions. Thus objects like Scobie's broken rosary (HM p. 199) or actions like the whisky priest's insistence on obtaining wine, even at the risk of forgoing brandy (PG p. 132), all resonate with thematic significance. Sometimes the sense of significance is undefined: one merely feels, for example, from the weight placed on key words, especially when placed terminally, repeated insistently, or coupled with startling modifiers or similes, that apparently insignificant incidents are more important than they first appear.

Equally fundamental to the intense atmosphere of Greene's novels is the manner in which he buffets the readers' emotions, expectations, and even understanding, often in a complex, even melodramatic plot. Indeed, the intensity of Greene's novels often arises from the consequent disturbing effect of dislocation, disorientation, and enigma, not unlike the effect of Mannerist painting or Metaphysical poetry. As will be shown, this effect arises in some instances from the compression of and tension between the concrete and the abstract. In other instances this effect is based on a tension between the elevated or transcendent and the sordid, mundane, or even farcical. Greene's increasing interest in farce, emerging clearly in *The Comedians* and *Travels With My Aunt*, is fundamental to the tone of even *The Power and the Glory*. Thus the somewhat Bergsonian humour arising from the whisky priest's persistent giggling, for example, and his desire to display card tricks at the most unfortunate moments, both traits incongruous with his symbolic role, create a distinct sense of uneasiness. Indeed, part of the effect of this novel arises from the tension between the sense of overwhelming significance in the priest's tragedy and the quite real possi-

bility of its very insignificance. It is the same potential insignificance that makes similarly uneasy, to varying degrees, the readers' reaction to the tragedies of Jones, (*The Comedians*) Querry, (*A Burnt-Out Case*) Scobie, (*The Heart of the Matter*) and Pinkie, (*Brighton Rock*).

Perhaps most characteristic of these dislocating qualities is that which arises from Greene's insistence in all of his novels on the ultimately enigmatic quality of life. And the enigma is a double one, involving the major concerns of Greene's novels: Father Rank's warning to Louise Scobie about the inscrutability of God, "don't imagine you — or I — know a thing about God's mercy" (HM p. 263), is balanced by a recognition of the same limitations on a human level. "The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart" (HM p. 264).

Greene's view of life's enigmatic qualities, like his view of life's absurdity, brutality, and transcendent significance, is strongly supported by his style, especially in the middle novels. Even though Greene's style is generally incisive and controlled, with ideas moving logically in generally short, naturally ordered sentences, it also employs what R. W. B. Lewis calls, in passing, "verbal techniques, which may best be defined as a technique of befuddlement."⁵ Lewis loads his analysis negatively, but he does accurately single out the sense of strain arising from Greene's use of startling word clusters, especially jarring in the context of otherwise direct writing. The compressed strain embodied in the synesthesia of "shrieking darkness" (BR p. 180), "sour green smell" (PG p. 130), or "wet noise" (PG p. 184), for example, mirrors the disturbing world of the novels. The intense and inaccessible experience suggested in the use (and perhaps overuse) of the epithet "appalling" in *The Power and the Glory* similarly constitutes part of an uneasy and unknowable world. Thus Greene notes, "secret and appalling love" (p. 75), "women are appallingly practical" (p. 98), "appalled by her maturity" (p. 102), "he remembered with appalling

suddenness" (p. 108), "appalling humour" (p. 150), "appallingly complicated" (p. 167), "appalling mockery" (p. 248), "appalling sense of loneliness" (p. 282), and so on.

Greene's interest in the inaccessible, the shocking, or the disturbing is evident further in the technique whereby he juxtaposes diverse elements. On a largely verbal level, this uneasy juxtaposition of disparate elements occurs, for example, as the coupling of abstract and concrete epithets. Thus Spicer's girl (in *Brighton Rock*) is "alone with her glass and her grief"; (p. 133) Wilson's face (in *The Heart of the Matter*) is "pink and healthy, plump and hopeless"; (p. 163) and Robinson (in *The Heart of the Matter*) is "tall and hollow-chested and bitter" (p. 43). On a narrative level the juxtaposition of diverse elements occurs as the alteration of focus on different scenes or levels of consciousness. Both comic and grotesque is the use of the device in the description of the death of Brown's mother in *The Comedians*. Amid the sentimental speeches a strident voice rises from the swimming pool: "Oh, Chick, do you really think I *could*?" (p. 71). In some cases Greene uses the juxtaposition of incongruities for intense thematic effect. At one point in *The Heart of the Matter* Scobie sits in the bathroom bandaging his almost symbolic wound while, in the room below, his wife discusses poetry with Wilson: "Down below out of the swing of voices the word 'beauty' detached itself and sank back into the trough" (p. 39). The implications of the juxtaposition are important: the absurdity of discussions of beauty in a world far from beautiful reflects ironically on Wilson and Louise, both proving as false as their high-flown discussion. Just as the aestheticism, abstract and pretentious, intrudes into a world where Scobie is concerned with the concrete and mundane (the binding of wounds) so, ironically, those social standards embraced by Wilson and Louise largely cause Scobie's social downfall and become the inadequate vehicle for evaluating his suicide. Thus the device provides a potent confrontation of the standards involved in the novel — the super-

ficial standards of society and the real world of concrete actions with transcendent significance.

It is in Greene's use of figurative language, particularly in his use of similes, that he so characteristically produces the shock of disorientation, contributing substantially to the peculiarly intense aura of his novels. Of figurative language Greene has written, "My characters must not go white in the face or tremble like leaves, not because these phrases are clichés, but because they are untrue."⁶ While Greene's figures are indeed often remarkably vivid and convincing, they nevertheless seem to reflect less Greene's desire for accuracy than his need to infuse the experience of his novels with an intense and uneasy energy.

In some instances this energy arises from the tension between the attractive or mundane and the grotesque or sinister. The description, "like a figurehead under the stars and black, smooth, concave sky," (QA p. 36) for example, is not applied to a beautiful object but to "armoured cars . . . each with its jutting gun and silent officers." Much of the effect of such similes depends on the tension between tenor and vehicle, as in the description of the gecko (a small lizard) in *A Burnt-Out Case* with "the tiny paws spread on the wall like ferns" (p. 40). In this case the fragile beauty of "ferns" jars with the gecko's sinister associations as symbol of Rycker's machinations on Querry. The gecko misses the moth; if Rycker misses Querry, his failure is only temporary.

In these cases Greene uses an attractive simile to jar with grim reality. More typically, he uses a grotesque image to describe otherwise mundane reality, as if to shock the reader with the reminder of the horror beneath appearance: "music . . . bit, like an abscess, into his brain" (BR p. 109); "the claim was sweet . . . like a refinement of cruelty" (BR p. 127); "he sat . . . with his feet dead like leprosy" (PG pp. 166-67); "interest began to move painfully in him like a nerve that has been frozen" (BOC p. 58); "The

persistent questions reminded Doctor Plarr of fingers pressing the pus out of a boil" (HC p. 280).

The sense of dislocation created by largely emotive conflict in these examples is paralleled by a more conceptual sense of dislocation in those figures of speech yoking abstracts and concretes. In his journal, *In Search of a Character*, Greene writes of Conrad, "How often he compares something concrete with something abstract. Is this a trick I have caught?" (p. 44). It is indeed not only this "trick" Greene has caught, but also its companions — the comparison of an abstract to a concrete and of an abstract to another abstract. Of these three types, it is the second which is most characteristic of Greene's fiction: he is especially disposed to deal with abstracts as if they were concrete and to compare them with concretes. Thus of O'Toole, the CIA agent, Greene writes, "Anxieties in his case would always settle on him like flies on an open wound" (TA p. 294), and of Charley Fortnum, the honorary consul, Greene notes "increasing spots of melancholy, like mold, on his well-bottled bonhomie" (HC p. 53). In these examples, of course, the shock of the similes arises not only from the tension between abstract tenor and concrete vehicle, but also, as in the previous examples, from the repulsiveness of the image. When, however, Greene treats an emotion as a bodily substance, as he so often does, the jarring is specifically that of abstract and concrete. As Wilson sweats, "anger trickled out of him" (C p. 71) and as Fowler descends from a watchtower, "fear seeped away" (QA p. 90).

Less frequent is the comparison of concrete with abstract, the device which Greene himself singles out. The tension between abstract and concrete is meaningful in the simile, "[water] lapped like doubt" (LR p. 124) because "doubt" establishes the significance of the waves as objective correlative. Considerably more disturbance arises, however, where the abstract vehicle is not merely an emotional state but an intrusive element. After being slashed by Colleoni's

gang, Pinkie hides in a stranger's garage. Greene writes of the plants in the garage, "The small pricked-out plants irritated him like ignorance" (p. 109), that is, the plants irritated Pinkie in the same way that ignorance irritated him. The simile produces considerable logical disjointedness, however, at a close scrutiny. In the first place, given Pinkie's allegedly impoverished background, there is no reason why plants should have such a devastating effect on him; they are hardly beyond his experience. Further, there is no logical or implied connection between plants and ignorance; there is no suggestion in the novel that Pinkie feels irritated by ignorance, any others' or his own. In fact, he continually boasts his knowledge and experience. (The inadequacy he feels before Colleoni is based on his lack of success, not on his ignorance.) The difficulties of accepting the simile from this standpoint may lead the reader to see the simile instead as a statement about irritation with ignorance in general and Pinkie's irritation with the plants. To accept such a view, however, is to accept the intrusive nature of the simile. In fact, the very sense of uneasiness and disorientation arising from the logical difficulties suits this, and many similar difficult similes, to the peculiar intensity of *Brighton Rock*.

In other instances of concrete-abstract comparisons Greene produces a similar uneasy intensity by deliberately confusing the figurative and real. Thus he writes of the razor-slashed Pinkie that he "felt pain run like blood down his neck" (BR p. 107), and in *A Burnt-Out Case* of "peace" that it "was there, something you could touch like a petal or smell like wood smoke" (BOC p. 99). Both statements are in fact the reversals of what Greene really means. It is not pain which is *like* blood, or peace which is *like* wood smoke. Rather, the blood and wood smoke, both literal rather than figurative, are like pain or peace respectively because they induce them in the perceivers, Pinkie and Querry. But the odd reversal Greene presents in these

similes is characteristic of his indirect approach to images, dislocating expectation, emotions, and stock responses.

The third class of comparisons involving abstracts, where abstracts are compared with abstracts, also contributes to the intense but uneasy atmosphere of Greene's novels by dislocating understanding and expectation: after all, there is nothing so like an abstract as itself. It is no doubt meaningful to write of Pinkie that "cruelty straightened his body like lust" (BR p. 106). Since Pinkie's cruelty is partly the result of a sex-horror arising from childhood traumas, the simile intensifies the relationship between sexuality and his cruelty. However, the ambiguity of the conflicting abstracts makes the simile elusive. It is, for example, unclear whether "straightened" is itself figurative or literal and whether it is the manner in which the body "straightened" or the "body" itself which is "like lust." Understanding is dislocated in a different manner in those abstract-abstract comparisons which merely appear to be figurative. Inviting a traditional approach to meaning, they effectively defy expectation. Such subsequent uneasiness is especially intense in *The End of the Affair* because here the speaker himself is untrustworthy. When Bendrix writes, "My love and fear acted like conscience" (p. 55), he thus creates a double shock. Rather than making a figurative comparison as at first appears, he is instead analyzing his motives, pointing out that the effect of fear and love on him is similar to that produced by conscience. Moreover, once Sarah's journal makes it clear that Bendrix is deluded about his own attitudes, it becomes evident that his behaviour is after all a manifestation of conscience rather than of "love and fear" as he tries to convince himself here. Yet again, then, Greene plays upon the deceptive accessibility of the simile to produce intellectual and emotional dislocation. Indeed, in some cases, the formal appearance of the simile is entirely illusory: emotions are made to seem enigmatic because, through similes, they become only approximations of normal experience. The whisky

priest's interest in "self-preservation" is "like a horrifying obsession" (PG p. 153); Querry's statement, "you know I am happy here," is "like an admission" (BOC p. 99); Bendrix's thought that Sarah is a Catholic is "like despair" (EA p. 139). In fact, self-preservation really is an obsession for the whisky priest; Querry's statement is an admission; and Bendrix's thought is a despairing one.

Greene likewise throws the reader off balance where he intentionally obtrudes with heavily loaded or exaggerated simile — particularly to disparage the two characters he most despises, Ida Arnold in *Brighton Rock* and Rycker in *A Burnt-Out Case*.⁷ Of Ida he writes: "She rose formidably and moved across the restaurant, like a warship going into action, a warship on the right side in a war to end wars, the signal flags proclaiming that every man would do his duty" (BR p. 122). Obviously Greene is not intending unobtrusively to make vivid Ida's movement. By drawing elements from her conversation and thoughts (e.g. "right side") and playing upon them, Greene expresses his distaste for this woman. His distaste for Rycker is expressed more directly. When Rycker says, "At the bottom of my heart I believe very profoundly in love," Greene comments wryly, "He made the claim as some men might claim to believe in fairies" (p. 37). In both cases the similes are especially jarring because the narrator is otherwise distant.

Such technical devices, creating intensity by disturbing both emotions and intellect, contribute to more than mere "befuddlement": they echo Greene's intense vision of a life of inherent brutality, transcendent significance, and essential inscrutability. These qualities have become increasingly complemented in Greene's fiction by a sense of absurdity: as Doctor Plarr longs to tell Doctor Saavedra, "Life isn't noble or dignified . . . Nothing is ineluctable. Life has surprises. Life is absurd. Because it's absurd there is always hope" (HC p. 23). Implicit even in *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory*, this sense of life's absurdity does not mitigate the peculiarly intense atmosphere of

Greenland examined above, but instead merely qualifies it: even in *Travels with My Aunt* and *The Honorary Consul* the reader is merely in another region of the disturbing, brutal country first strongly depicted in *Brighton Rock*. If these last two books are somewhat disappointing, the very real achievement of *The Comedians* demonstrates the compatibility of absurdity with the distinctive qualities of Greene's earlier novels. And whether or not one finally accepts Greene's works in the first rank of twentieth-century fiction, one cannot fail to be deeply impressed with the distinctive and disturbing world of his novels.

NOTES

- ¹Middlesex: Penguin, 1968, p. 42. All further references are to the following editions, the page numbers being incorporated into the text and preceded by the following abbreviations:
 BOC—*A Burnt-Out Case*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1963.
 BR—*Brighton Rock*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1943.
 CE—*Collected Essays*, Toronto: The Bodley Head, 1969.
 C—*The Comedians*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1967.
 EA—*The End of the Affair*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1962.
 HC—*The Honorary Consul*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973.
 LR—*Lawless Roads*, London: Longmans, 1939.
 In Search of a Character, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968.
 PG—*The Power and the Glory*, Toronto: Heineman, 1949.
 QA—*The Quiet American*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1962.
 TA—*Travels with My Aunt*, London: The Bodley Head, 1969.
- ²"The Face of Caricature," *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 3 (1953), p. 451.
- ³"Graham Greene, Alas," *The Spectator*, vol. 209 (1969), p. 441.
- ⁴For Greene's own comments on violence and brutality, see *Collected Essays*, pp. 447-48 and *Journey Without Maps*, (Toronto: Heinemann), p. 10.
- ⁵*The Picaresque Saint*, (London: Longmans, 1960), p. 247.
- ⁶Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene, V. S. Pritchett, "The Creative Life of Our Time: An Exchange of Letters," *Partisan Review*, vol. 15 (1948), p. 1188.
- ⁷In *In Search of a Character* Greene calls Rycker "despicable," p. 50.