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ADULTERY AS BETRAYAL IN GRAHAM GREENE

IN *The Heart of the Matter*, adultery as betrayal is unquestionably at the heart of Henry Scobie's problems, and the cause of his sufferings and eventual suicide.¹ The most salient trait of his character is his profound pity for other human beings, but pity in Scobie is a strange sentiment which, unlike mercenary corruption, is so dangerous because "you couldn't name its price."

It has been suggested by some commentators² that Scobie's ruin is brought about by his profound pity for the innocent, the exile, the suffering human being. And certainly a strong case can be made for this claim. Now the man's sense of pity is at times commendable; but like Oliver Chant (*The Name of Action*), both Scobie and the child-woman, Helen Rolt,³ are guilty of a self-deception which causes Scobie to betray his wife by committing adultery with Helen.

Scobie deceives himself into thinking that his attraction for Helen is in no way motivated by lust, that his sense of justice and honesty will obviate any illicit relations with her, that she is in the main an incarnation of the innocent child adrift in the world. He sees her as a "stupid bewildered child" who has to be protected from Bagster the philanderer. Her seeming ugliness both repels and attracts him:

... he watched her with sadness and affection and enormous pity because a time would come when he couldn't show her around in a world where she was at sea. When he turned and the light fell on her face she looked ugly, the temporary ugliness of a child. The ugliness was like handcuffs on his wrists.

That last thought is of the utmost significance. Scobie is altogether enmeshed in Helen's web of ugliness, and he is forced to confess his self-deception:

When the sound of Bagster's feet receded, she raised her mouth and they kissed. What they had both thought was safety proved to have been the camouflage of an enemy who works in terms of friendship, trust, and pity.

After his adultery with Helen, Scobie proceeds from one degradation to another. The act of betrayal has set in motion a series of evil acts whose tide he is unable to stem. Because of pity and self-deception Scobie is guilty of a number of infringements, all of which are essentially acts of self-betrayal. Because of pity he opens and destroys the Captain's letter, and he is guilty of professional indiscretion by borrowing money from the racketeer Yusef. Because of adultery he is blackmailed into smuggling for Yusef and becomes a partner to the murder of his faithful Ali. Because of adultery he is guilty of sacrilege and, plunged into the abyss of despair, he commits the unforgivable sin—he kills himself.

This series of events seems to make of Scobie a victim of a very pronounced fatalism and determinism. Scobie is decidedly aureoled with a halo of suffering, and there is every indication that he is a victim of fortuitous circumstances. The vein of fatalism in *The Heart of the Matter* has been noticed by Raymond Jouve, who points out that "comme dans une tragédie antique ou Shakespearienne, la fatalité paraît icisi puissante que la liberté semble ne plus exister que pour faire souffrir l'homme par le destin."⁴

Now, for the atheist, an existentialist life is quite meaningless. While Scobie is no atheist, he certainly does not trust God; he says so quite emphatically. Indeed there is some question in Scobie's mind about divine justice. Scobie cannot reconcile human suffering with divine love. It is inconceivable "that the child should have been allowed to survive the forty days and nights in an open boat—that was the mystery, to reconcile that with the love of God."⁵

Since the world is meaningless and cruel, since divine justice is questionable and truth relative, the world for Scobie, as well as for Sartre and Jaspers, is hell. Helmut Kuhn claims that

the despair over an unresponsive and meaningless world, the turning away from it toward a dreamland which is only a painted veil covering primal negation, death longed for with voluptuousness . . . a love which destroys the beloved one, a greatness of soul which is paralysed by langour and disfigured by the blemish of a guilt past repentance and redemption—all these sober inventions of contemporary imagination haunt Keirkegaard's anonymous writings.⁶

"These somber inventions", particularly the idea of "a guilt past repentance and redemption", certainly haunt *The Heart of the Matter*. Scobie sees himself as, and actually becomes, a victim of a kind of malevolent fate lurking in the universe. He seems to be a victim of a tremendous force beyond his control. He discovers that

he couldn't shut his eyes or his ears to any human need of him: he was not the centurion, but a man in the ranks who had to do the bidding of a hundred centurions, and when the door opened, he could tell the command was going to be given again—the command to stay, to love, to accept responsibility, to lie.

"You are a just man", Yusef tells Scobie. Scobie answers,

I never was, Yusef. I didn't know myself, that's all. There is a proverb, you know, about the end is the beginning. When I was born I was sitting here with you drinking whisky, knowing . . .

This fatalism, with its existential nuances, has disturbed many commentators. It has, for example, led Sean O'Faolain to the conviction that Greene has misgivings about free-will. He has linked Greene with neo-Pascalians such as Bernanos, Camus, and Faulkner⁷: "Marie-Beatrice Mesnet argues that 'Freedom cannot be equated with free-will. But if freedom is merely the power to choose, then Greene's novels would appear to be entirely dominated by fate.'⁸ Because of the machinations of an esoteric fate—and this has the flavour of Jaspers' "absolute chance", Sartre's concept of the world as "absurdity", and Heidegger's idea of man as a creature "thrown into the world" to suffer—Scobie finds himself trapped by the consequences of an act he might well have avoided had he not been guilty of the original act of self-deception. "I think", the commissioner says of Scobie's promotion, "Colonel Wright's word was the deciding factor." But Scobie has already felt "the pale papery taste of his eternal sentence on the tongue." "It's come too late, sir", Scobie says in despair.⁹

Marital irresponsibility and indifference, the unhappy marriage, the broken marriage, all are salient features of Greene's fictional universe. The typical Greene hero does not expect marriage to bring lasting happiness. Love brings betrayal, betrayal brings corruption. This is the philosophy that is crystallized in *The Heart of the Matter*. Scobie sincerely believes that intimate relationships between human beings are doomed to failure, pain, and frustration. For Scobie—and the same is true of Wilson—hell is other people. This pessimism is an essential concept in the philosophy of Sartre.¹⁰ Life is compared to a prison, and this side of heaven is characterized by injustices and cruelties.

Scobie believes that

nobody here could ever talk about a heaven on earth. Heaven remained rigidly in its proper place on the other side of death, and on this side flourished the injustices, cruelties, the meannesses, that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up.

Even the décor and furnishings of Yusef's room "had an eternal air like the furnishings of hell."

The lesson that marriage to Louise has taught Scobie is simply this: love and happiness cannot be equated. And this, too, is the philosophy of Karl Jaspers. In this world, which for the Greene hero is invariably a battlefield, happiness is an absurdity. Even Wilson shares Scobie's pessimism:

[Wilson] wondered how all that dreary scene would have appeared if he had been victorious, but in human love there is never such a thing as victory: only a few minor tactical successes before the final defeat of death or indifference.

Jacques Madaule has intimated that Scobie's unhappy marriage might well stem from the fact that "Louise est neurasthénique comme Mrs. Fellows. . . . Elle est une de ces Anglaises qui ne peuvent se faire à la rude vérité des pays tropicaux."¹¹ This is by no means the truth. Granted, Scobie's unhappy marriage has conditioned his conviction that lack of trust, nagging, and indifference are integral parts of marriage; but hell, you see, is other people, and therefore one cannot expect marriages to survive. One's marriage will end in failure or betrayal. At the root of Scobie's idea that hell is other people is Sartre's philosophy of Object versus Subject. It helps us to understand Scobie's pessimism and, indeed, it will account for the failure of the Rycker marriage in *A Burnt-Out Case*.

As Sartre sees it, we play a serious game with other people. We try to assert our subjectivity while the other person tries to dilute this subjectivity by seeing us as Object. Clearly, the result is that this makes one lose absolute freedom and pure consciousness. In its turn this gives rise to the peculiar brand of existential anguish which Scobie experiences. Since existence precedes essence and one exists and fashions one's image at one and the same time, then, says Sartre, "the image is valid for everybody and for our whole age."¹²

One's responsibility is much greater than one might have supposed, because it involves all mankind. Once I decide to perform an act or make a specific choice, "I am responsible for myself and for everyone else. I am creating a certain image of man of my own choosing. In choosing myself, I choose man."¹³ As Mihalich has indicated,

freedom means a great deal more in Sartre's system than many who are attracted to it ever come to realize. Freedom has another side, and this is anguish. And anguish is rooted in the awareness of each human being that his choices and his actions involve not only himself but all men. . . .¹⁴

For Sartre, then, an act has universal implications, and this brings existential anguish. This concept is crystallized in Scobie's broodings on human responsibility. This situation of anguish is progressive, and culminates in the act of despair, suicide.

Scobie betrays his wife because he is at heart an existentialist. Truth, as far as the existentialist is concerned, is subjective. There are no transcendent norms. Truth is functionalized and temporalized. For Scobie there are times when it is better to lie than to tell the truth, because one might, by telling a lie, relieve someone of pain. The truth is relative:

The truth, he thought, has never been of any real value to any human being—it is a symbol for mathematicians and philosophers to pursue. In human relations kindness and lies are worth a thousand truths. He involved himself in what he always knew was a vain struggle to retain the lies.

There is another reason why Scobie's marriage ends in failure and betrayal. It is rooted in the existential idea that human beings suffer from a decided lack of communication. Moreover, one can never come to know and understand another human being. We find Scobie brooding,

if I could just arrange for her happiness first, he thought, and in the confusing night he forgot for a while what experience had taught him—that no human being can really understand another and no one can arrange another's happiness.

Jaspers has argued that man remains a non-object to himself which cannot be exhausted by knowledge. Scobie has never really known himself and quite flatly tells Yusef so. It is quite true that Scobie has pity for the pain of both Louise and Helen, but in the case of his wife, it is pity directed at her as Object and not as Subject.

There is absolutely no communion of spirit in the marriage of Scobie and Louise. The pivotal thesis of Gabriel Marcel's ontology of love may be regarded as *esse est coesse*. Between Scobie and Louise there is communion neither of the spirit nor of the flesh. What little communion there was before the arrival of Helen, Scobie has betrayed by adultery. Certainly, betrayal can be regarded as a violation of communication between human beings. And one cannot communicate because one does not know oneself or another.

In betraying Louise, Scobie makes an existential choice. Although fatalism is a prominent vein in the novel, Scobie is never denied free-will. The choice for Scobie—as it is for Thomas Fowler in *The Quiet American*—is a relatively small one but with large consequences. This, the existentialist

believes, is often the case in real life.¹⁵ By his choice, Scobie renounces God forever and is fully aware that he has done so. He suffers the Kierkegaardian pathos of human choice.

There are three reasons why Scobie kills himself. Because he will not give up Helen, Louise is doomed to a life of pain and, as Scobie sees it, God will be continually slapped in the face. When Ali becomes a threat to the happiness of Louise and Helen, Scobie becomes a very definite accomplice to the boy's murder. The despair, growing in virulence since the first act of adultery and his sacrilegious communion, overwhelms him. There is only one way out of the impasse—he must destroy himself.

Like the Captain of the *Esperanca* who fears that his soul "in all this bulk of flesh is no larger than a pea", Scobie has a sense of personal worthlessness.¹⁶ It is, indeed, a recurring leitmotiv in the novel. He has made Louise what she is—an object of pity for others. He has deprived her of financial and social rewards by failing to win the commissionership, and he has failed her as a husband. He is convinced that he is a failure as a man. Sartre has argued—and this is difficult to gainsay—that once a man is deprived of a sense of personal value, he will be led to despair and ultimate suicide.

As the despair attendant on betrayal increases, Scobie thinks that "there was only one person in the world who was unpitiable—himself." It is, of course, a vicious circle because his sense of personal worthlessness increases his despair. Because of it, he places himself beyond the help of God.

Because he deliberately refuses to accept the help of God, Scobie kills himself. He sits in the church, and in his fancy he has an argument with God:

. . . And now you push me away, you put me out of your reach. . . . Can't you trust me as you'd trust a faithful dog? I have been faithful to you for two thousand years.

Scobie's reply is emphatic:

No. I don't trust you. I love you, but I've never trusted you. If you made me, you made this feeling of responsibility that I've always carried about like a sack of bricks.

Helmut Kuhn has indicated that "the Nothingness which the existentialist encounters is the shadow of the repudiated God",¹⁷ a theory which is shared by Marcel.

The truth is that Scobie is faced with a conflict that is closely akin to Jaspers' "the law of the day and the passion of the night." The law of the

day imparts order to human life; it demands clarity, coherence, fidelity. But the passion of the night breaks down every order and plunges man into the abyss of nothingness.¹⁸ Scobie cannot reconcile the demands of God with the demands of his sense of responsibility. He cannot abandon Helen, and he cannot continue to hurt Louise and God. A powerful tension is set up. For Jaspers the ultimate term of this polarity and tension is shipwreck. Scobie refuses to continue the struggle against the conflicting tensions of his life. He gives up the ship by killing himself.

Scobie's suicide has received the attention of several critics. R. W. B. Lewis, for example, holds that "it might well be that the suicide of Dick Pemberton . . . may have released in Scobie a congenital self-destructive impulse."¹⁹ And certainly Scobie's frequent dreams of Pemberton and of Pemberton's suicide note would seem to support Lewis's claim. And Kenneth Allott maintains that both "Andrews and Scobie commit suicide and suicide is the ultimate escape—life, not the police or a political rival, is the enemy evaded."²⁰

But it seems rather that Scobie's suicide can be further interpreted in the light of existentialist philosophy. Scobie, as we have seen, considers himself to be a trapped man, trapped by his sin, trapped by his pity and responsibility, trapped by external forces that he does not understand.

Since human beings are precariously trapped on the slippery ladder of time, there is, as far as Sartre is concerned, the tendency to escape, to fall off by committing suicide.²¹ Scobie sees suicide as the only way out of the prison of his sin. In this inhuman world where God does not exist, the temptation to suicide is very strong for the free man. In fact, Albert Camus is convinced that "there is only one truly serious philosophic problem: that is suicide. To judge that life is or is not worth living, is to reply to the fundamental question of philosophy."²² The man who finds himself abandoned must choose whether he will continue to exist or will repudiate his existence by killing himself. As Sartre would put it: since man has introduced nothingness into being, he must consider the possibility of introducing nothingness into his own being.

Scobie's sense of abandonment by others is profound: he feels himself betrayed at all points. Louise discovers his adultery, Wilson discovers his dealings with Yusef, and Father Rank can give him little help. Losing the habit of trust—and here we are reminded of Sartre's concept that existing itself is fraught with confusion and bad faith—Scobie allows Yusef to murder Ali.

It can be argued, of course, that Scobie's suicide is partly motivated by

his desire not to go on offending God. Clearly, Scobie sees his very existence as an offence against God. Moreover, unless he destroys himself he will continue to make Louise and Helen suffer. To this extent his suicide may be regarded as a sacrifice. But what cannot be denied are the facts that Scobie is very emphatic about life and the world as hell and that he repudiates God's help.

In *The Heart of the Matter* Greene reaches a peak of artistic perfection equalled only once before—in *The Power and the Glory*. Since the publication of *Brighton Rock*, Greene's skill as a novelist had gone from strength to strength. In *The Heart of the Matter* his probing finger is more penetrative than it had been in the earlier fiction. There is, however, no change in his thematic material. Scobie is a far more credible character than Oliver Chant in *The Name of Action* (1930); yet both men are ruined by adultery. They are both guilty of self-deception and self-betrayal. They share a common pessimism about love and marriage. The concept of bad faith, announced in *The Name of Action*, is a noticeable leitmotiv in the story of Henry Scobie, and lack of communication, so subtly underlined in the earlier work, accounts for Scobie's ultimate betrayal, his suicide.

NOTES

1. Adultery as betrayal is equally prominent in *The Man Within*, *It's a Battlefield*, *England Made Me*, *Brighton Rock*, *The End of the Affair*, *The Quiet American*, and *A Burnt-Out Case*. It is also the motivating factor of the young boy's corruption in "The Basement Room", and it motivates the suicide of Rose in *The Living Room*.
2. See Donat O'Donnell's *Maria Cross* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 63 *et passim*.
3. Helen is a somewhat stereotyped Greene character. She has the same naïve characteristics as the other child-women: Milly Drover, Lucia Davidge, Rose (*Brighton Rock*), Phuong, and Marie Rycker.
4. "La Damnation De Scobie?", *Etudes*, CCLXIII (November, 1957), p. 169.
5. This sense of divine injustice was announced in *It's A Battlefield*, is quite pronounced in *England Made Me*, and is re-echoed in *A Burnt-Out Case*.
6. *Encounter with Nothingness* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1949), p. 20.
7. *The Vanishing Hero* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1956), p. 81.
8. *Graham Greene and The Heart of the Matter* (London: The Cresset Press Ltd., 1954), p. 80.

9. The idea of success coming too late is pronounced in *It's A Battlefield* and *The Power and the Glory*. Scobie's problem is closely akin to that of Conrad Drover, whose despair and suicidal tendencies are already well rooted when his brother's death sentence is repealed.
10. Note especially Sartre's play, *No Exit*.
11. *Graham Greene* (Paris: Editions du Temps Present, 1949), p. 325.
12. *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: The Wisdom Library, 1957), p. 17.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
14. *Existentialism and Thomism* (New York: The Wisdom Library, 1960), p. 17.
15. See Robert O. Evans' "Existentialism in Greene's *The Quiet American*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, III (Autumn, 1957), pp. 241-248.
16. He shares this with other Greene heroes such as Andrews, Conrad Drover, Oliver Chant, Anthony Farrant, the whisky-priest.
17. *Op. cit.*, p. xxii.
18. See *The Existentialist Revolt*, ed. Kurt F. Reinhardt (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1960).
19. *The Picaresque Saint* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1956), p. 261.
20. *The Art of Graham Greene* (London: Hamish Hamilton, Ltd., 1951), pp. 26-7.
21. See F. Temple Kingston's *French Existentialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961).
22. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1955), p. 1. Notice that Greene's world is not unlike the world of Camus. Indeed the Camusean theme of isolation is quite prominent in Greene's fiction.