

James King

IN THE LOST BOYHOOD OF JUDAS: GRAHAM GREENE'S EARLY NOVELS OF HELL

Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.—Melville

IT HAS BECOME FASHIONABLE in fiction of late to tell of the glories of the criminal. Such recent fascination has no better idol than the murky heroism of Jean Genet's knave in *Our Lady of the Flowers*. And to show readers just how non-fictional such exploits really are, Jean-Paul Sartre composed *Saint Genet*. The exaltation of the criminal may indeed be one of the hallmarks of our present literature, but Graham Greene, still the master storyteller of our generation, produced in the 1930s two studies of the criminal remarkably close in degree to the present Evergreen and Grove Press models. Greene may not be sympathetic to his criminal as protagonist, but he is very careful to present such a character with the vestiges of inverted holiness, sanctity, and priesthood.

Brighton Rock and its dress rehearsal, *A Gun for Sale*, are stories of young criminals who should have been inmates of seminaries rather than murderers. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the hare-lipped Raven of *A Gun for Sale* is the prototype for Pinkie Brown in *Brighton Rock*: they are accomplished professional criminals at an age when they should have been apprentices in the craft of killing, are described as scrawny, underdeveloped creatures, and have little interest in sexual relations. But there is a much more suggestive relationship existing between the two. Raven recalls the killing of Kite, the professional gangster who is the only character common to both books:

Kite had a rival gang. There wasn't anything else to do. He'd tried to bump off my boss on the course. Half of us took a fast car back to town. He thought we were on the train with him. But we were on the platform, see, when the train came in. We got round him directly he got outside the carriage. I cut his throat and the others held him up till we were all through the barriers in a bunch.

Pinkie, the personal protégé of Kite, assumed his position of leadership in the gang upon his death. This is the only direct evidence of interaction between

the two narratives, but perhaps Greene is suggesting that Raven and Pinkie grew up together, were boyhood rivals, and, in turn, joined different gangs. In any case, they are the most remarkable look-alikes in contemporary fiction.

Greene's preoccupation in telling the same story twice is not remarkable if we consider his critical theory of the detective story. He has said that it is now the only true novel form because we live in an age of violence, and the detective story delineates violence and so acts as a catharsis for violence. For Greene, physical danger represents spiritual danger. Accordingly, character portrayal and plot are united in these books to study the development of evil in the souls of young men.

It may seem surprising to classify a novel revolving around a political assassination which portends world war as an "entertainment", but the twisting plot with its own *jeu d'esprit* and the detective Mather who likes everything to be in order, and who, the reader feels, will put everything in order, give *A Gun for Sale* a relief from the total horror pervading *Brighton Rock*. "Murder doesn't mean much to Raven" when he murdered the Minister. It is only when he tries to locate the agent of the armament manufacturer who ordered the killing that Raven comes into contact with Anne Crowder, Mather's fiancée. Though Raven does not really "go soft on a skirt", Anne convinces him that he can have confidence in her. She assures him that trust and fellowship are existent in the universe despite his self-educated notions. Anne even helps him escape from the police, because, unaware of the assassination, she believes Raven has some sort of legitimate grudge against the obese agent, Cholmondeley.

Although *A Gun for Sale* may not be undiluted horror, Greene seldom permits the tubercular obscenity of Raven's existence to escape notice. Raven is a child wise in the ways of a wicked world; he is supremely educated in delusion and despair.

He has been made by hatred; it had constructed him into this thin smoky murderous figure in the rain, hunted and ugly. His mother had borne him when his father was in gaol, and six years later when his father was hanged for another crime, she had cut her own throat with a kitchen knife; afterwards there had been the home. He had never felt the least tenderness for anyone; he was made in this image and he had his own odd pride in the result; he didn't want to be unmade.

At the same time, however, Greene is not content merely to state depravity; as in his earlier stories and continuing throughout his later work,

Greene has found abundant points of departure in the New Testament and the liturgical festivities common to it. In *A Gun for Sale*, it is Raven who tenaciously reconstructs the Gospel story of the Nativity around himself.

"The Holy Family": he pressed his face against the glass with a kind of horrified anger that that tale still went on. "Because there was no room for them in the inn"; he remembered how they sat in rows on the benches waiting for Christmas dinner, while the thin precise voice read on about Caesar Augustus and how everyone went up to his own city to be taxed. . . . They made him a God because they could feel fine about it all, they didn't have to feel responsible for the raw deal they'd given him. He'd consented, hadn't he? That was the argument, because he could have called down "a legion of angels" if he'd wanted to escape hanging there. On your life he could, he thought with bitter lack of faith, just as easily as his own father taking the drop at Wandsworth could have saved himself when the trap opened.

The book ends with the reconciliation of Mather and Anne—the perfect festive ending for a book set during the Christmas season. It also contains, however, a momentous nativity.

Death came to Raven in the form of unbearable pain. It was as if he had to deliver this pain as a woman delivers a child, and he sobbed and moaned in the effort. At last it came out of him and followed his own child into a vast desolation.

And Greene means us to counterpoint this description with Raven's thoughts at the same moment: "While he waited for the door to open he couldn't help remembering many things . . . the girl in the cafe saying: 'He's bad and ugly . . .'; the little plaster child lying in its mother's arms, awaiting the double cross, the whips, the nails." Raven ultimately believes only in despair; he does not know that Anne betrayed him, but he chooses to assume that she did. Although his personality has been fragmented with goodness for the first time in his life, he decides to be unaware of the possibility of goodness. Like Pinkie, he vows perpetual innocence. But the very fact of his being no longer ignorant of human compassion and suffering is his greatest sin. He refuses to trust in human tenderness after he has known it. Raven dies more sinning than sinned against.

According to its own terms, however, *A Gun for Sale* can be read as a serious book only so far; it lacks the repetitive and overwhelming implications of *Brighton Rock*. The Brighton of this latter book is the seascape of unwieldily surrealistic madness, and the hard-candy rock, for which the town is

famous, serves to remind the reader that this is the story of petrified evil. Pinkie is the most terrifying of Greene's demoniacal heroes. In him Greene presented a monster intent on destroying himself and any sensibilities for good that he possessed. Pinkie is already spiritually dead when we meet him: death—a spiritual and physical death—is the only possession that he really owns and can concretely bestow. In his portrayal of Pinkie, Greene created a "spoiled priest" and, through a study of the associations that this implies, some observations can be made concerning Greene's first departure from the tradition of "entertainment".

Brighton Rock was first classified by Greene as an "entertainment"; he now ranks it as the first of his major novels. It is the story of Pinkie's attempt to secure his position of authority in the late Kite's gang by killing a member of the gang responsible for Kite's murder. But the plot revolves around a woman's suspicions about the death of a stranger. Her curiosity and subsequent investigation form the core of the plot. The story line is not a dominating aspect in the presentation; the interest of the reader is always centred on the chilling psychological analysis of the Boy.

Pinkie's murder of Fred Hale takes place on the Feast of the Purification, and purity is a quality that Pinkie values very much. Continually Greene develops the imagery of priestly calling or vocation; the frequent references to the sacred hands, the constant usage of the capital in referring to Pinkie—the Boy, the relationship of the Boy to the gang (the Christ Child instructing the elders in the Temple), and the preoccupation of the author with Pinkie's inverted attitude on evangelical chastity. Pinkie even confides this to Dallow, a member of the gang:

He said in a low voice: "When I was a kid, I swore I'd be a priest."

"A priest? You a priest? That's good", Dallow said. He laughed without conviction, shifted his foot uneasily, so that it trod in a dog's ordure.

"What's wrong with being a priest?" the Boy said. "They know what's what. They keep away"—his whole mouth and jaw loosened; he might have been going to weep; he beat out wildly with his hands towards the window; Woman Found Drowned, two-valve, *Married Love*, the horror—"from this."

Poverty may have been the source of Pinkie's vocation, but the sacerdotal ordination to chastity and evil was watching his parents making love as a child, the "Saturday night exercise". Here Pinkie found his dedication to Hate. Although the process may have been gradual, he developed a solidly formul-

ated realization of a calling. One of his earliest memories concerns a certain Anne Collins.

"She went to the same school as I did," the Boy said . . . "she put her head on the line," he said, "up towards Hassocks. She had to wait ten minutes for the seven-five. Fog made it late from Victoria. Cut off her head. She was fifteen. She was going to have a baby and she knew what it was like. She'd had one two years before, and they could 'ave pinned it on twelve boys."

Pinkie finds out "what it's like" only when he has to marry Rose, a waitress at a restaurant where Pinkie has left evidence of Hale's murder, to prevent her from unwittingly betraying him.

It is the corrupt lawyer Drewitt who tells Pinkie of the legal statute preventing a wife from testifying against her husband. To the depraved Drewitt, Pinkie is a father confessor: "I want to tell you things Pinkie, I want"—the literary phrase came glibly out—"to unburden myself." Drewitt sees the evil that infects the Boy's existence. He recognizes it in himself and feels that in confessing to this *prêtre noire* he can find remission, forgiveness, and perhaps mercy for his offences. Although the members of the gang are unsavoury individuals, their treachery cannot arrive at any kinship with that of the Boy; they do not have a specifically conceived mission of willing evil to others.

Ida, a London tart who knew Fred Hale for only a few hours, is unconvinced by the newspaper story relating his death. The most individual character in the book, she decides to find out, to her satisfaction, what really happened. Ida's relationship to Pinkie is not the most important, but it is certainly the most curious in the entire book. Like the Lieutenant in *The Power and the Glory*, she has devotion to a cause as a saving grace. According to Greene's theology, Ida should be condemned; yet the book leaves her position deliberately undecided. Her complete lack of innocence, which should merit her destruction, is another of her charms and the most compelling aspect of her personality.

She circulated the dregs of cheap port in her glass and remarked to no one in particular: "It's a good life." There was nothing with which she didn't claim kinship: the advertising mirror behind the barman's back flashed her own image at her; the beach girls went giggling across the parade; the gong beat on the steamer for Boulogne—it was a good life. Only the darkness in which the Boy walked . . . was alien to her: she had no pity for something she didn't understand.

In antithesis to Ida's often sentimental sensuality, the Boy's almost ascetic at-

titude and virginity stand out in marked contrast. Pinkie's salvation should have originated from the point where Ida's "damnation" begins.

Rose is innocence. Greene paints her in such melancholic tones of black and grey that the reader's sympathy, like Ida's, is with her constantly:

She didn't even know the name of a drink. In Nelson Place from which she had emerged like a mole into the daylight of Snow's restaurant and the Palace Pier, she had never known a boy with enough money to offer her a drink. She would have said "beer" but she had no opportunity of discovering whether she liked beer. A twopenny ice from an Everest tricycle was the whole extent of her knowledge of luxury.

Pinkie thinks of her as an ugly little "polony". His only reason for the marriage is self-protection: Rose's knowledge could ruin him and his ministry. But both are at an abyss in their relationship. The Boy's eschatological beliefs cannot include a heaven; Rose's cannot exclude one:

"But you believe, don't you," Rose implored him, "you think it's true?"

"Of course it's true", the Boy said. "What else could there be?" he went scornfully on. "Why", he said, "it's the only thing that fits. These atheists, they don't know nothing. Of course there's Hell. Flames and damnation", he said with his eyes on the dark shifting water and the lightning and the lamps going out above the black struts . . . "torments."

"And heaven too." Rose said with anxiety. . . .

"Oh, maybe," the Boy said, "maybe."

Greene is saying that in Rose's willingness to traffic with a criminal there was at least love. Rose loves Pinkie with the ardour with which only a truly innocent person can love evil. This is her *hamartia* and the cause of her tragedy.

The misery of the grotesque ending is hers and—in a curious way—the reader's. On the day of their marriage, Rose asks Pinkie to make a recording of his voice telling her how much he cares for her.

He put in a sixpence and speaking in a low voice for fear it might carry beyond the box he gave his message up to be graven on vulcanite: "God damn you, you little bitch, why can't you go back home for ever and let me be?"; he heard the needle scratch and the record whir, then a click and silence.

Carrying the black disk he came out to her. "Here", he said, "take it. I put something on it—loving."

After Pinkie's violent death, Rose goes to a priest who tells her that if there was love in the relationship, there was perhaps some good.

He had existed and would always exist. She had a sudden conviction that she carried life—and she thought proudly: Let them get over that if they can; let them get over that. She turned out into the front opposite the Palace Pier and began to walk firmly away from the direction of her home towards Billy's. There was something to be salvaged from that house and room, something else they wouldn't be able to get over—his voice speaking a message to her: if there was a child, speaking to the child. "If he loved you", the priest had said, "that shows . . ." She walked rapidly in the thin June sunlight towards the worst horror of all.

The final scene in the book has to be reconstructed by the reader; the rhythm of Pinkie's apostleship is beyond the confines of the printed page of a novel.

Another contemporary British novelist, Elizabeth Bowen, has suggested in *A Death of the Heart* that innocence is the most destructive force in the universe ("The victims of innocence lie strewn all about."). Pinkie was, despite his actions, a very innocent person before his marriage to Rose. He assumed that sex had to be a bad thing; he did not know that it could be good. Pinkie's confrontation with Rose's innocence is his final agony. For once, the possibility of virtue enters the Boy's warped soul; the rite of sex unexpectedly allows the sentiments of good to come into his heart. But Pinkie is not willing to abide by the sentiments of good. He prefers his own brand of destructive innocence. He returns to his priestly dedication; he does not really wish to mollify his philosophy of sex as the basest faculty of the human spirit.

Priesthood was for Pinkie a means of escape from that which he feared the most. "The dark Weevil under the storm of frozen rain flowed between him and any human enemy." He makes his consecration to virginity for precisely the wrong reasons. In the Christian schema, evangelical chastity is a means of offering to God a gift of the human potential for reproduction. It is not considered the rejection of an evil entity, but is the putting aside of a good thing to offer God a better one. The Boy feels that sex is an intrinsically evil thing; he cannot see that what he advocates is the real evil. His seeing his parents performing the marital act, while a young boy, has drawn up a terrible resentment in his ego. It is to him a purely animalistic act which he must avoid at all costs. His career in depravity begins at this juncture and increases until the marriage. When he surrenders himself to Rose, his nature for the first time comes into contact with a good and accepts it. This is the climax of the

novel. Beforehand the Boy could not have been condemned since he did not know goodness; his "maybe" has become a "yes" to the possibilities of Paradise. When he decides to live in the malign condition he is at last aware of, his affirmation turns to a final denial.

It has been said that Greene is Jansenist subjectively and condemns all his heroes regardless, although he may seem to redeem them objectively. This is not true. Scobie is no better than he should be, and the whisky priest is much better than he should be. Pinkie is a victim of environment until his marriage to Rose. If there is any tragedy in Pinkie's existence, it is the misfortune of one who cannot love or ever merit salvation. Pinkie has to look down to see up.

No living writer can give a more distasteful image or metaphor than Greene. In *A Gun for Sale* and in *Brighton Rock* he is at great pains to shock his reader with the ugliness of two adolescents. His novels of apprenticeship are strikingly modern in their insistence on the fragmentation and chaos of modern life and their ability to mirror effectively such a vision in the ironic derangement of the sacred. These books may lack the precise implications of *The Heart of the Matter* and the pulsating drive of *The Power and the Glory*, but in his presentation of two tales of youth, Greene has drawn evil in very uncompromising terms.

DEVELOPMENT SITE

Robert Beum

All the dark woods yield:
To please a buzzing, abstract head
Whose beauty is a graded field,
Leaf and feather stripped, unspread.

Nothing deep, shy, chaste:
Slice down to the bright useful grade;
And a hard master planted: the waste
Shade will flourish, or the blade.