CHAPTER I

THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT
Well over a century ago, Matthew Arnold complained of how "the sea of faith" had retreated from the shores leaving the naked shingles exposed. The 'predicament' that we think of as a twentieth-century phenomenon was realised most perceptively and acutely by Arnold, amongst others, in the nineteenth century itself. It was, by and large, dismissed then as romantic melancholy, but there is no doubt that Arnold was a deeply vexed soul, troubled by fears besieging the destiny of mankind, and as a prophet he projected those fears into his poetry trying to make the world conscious of them and, in being conscious, apprehensive. As he himself said in The Scholar Gypsy, we find people ascending, one after another, the intellectual throne and prescribing their "hourly varied anodynes" for the sickness of modern life. If accepted philosophy is a way of explaining our life to ourselves and of feeling comfortable in the circumstances in which we are placed, we do lack today such an accepted or acceptable philosophy to make us feel at ease. As someone remarked, what we have or can have today are only philosophies
rather than a philosophy — a matter of individual variation, like taste.

What discoveries about the world and about man have led to such a disorientation are too often rehearsed to need elaboration. Whether it was Darwin or Karl Marx or Freud, or modern astronomy, every one of them has contributed a little to a new, and rather depressing, view of man and the universe. Nor has history helped to uplift the spirit of man fallen from his own elevated concept of himself. The world-wars as well as the class-wars within societies have served only to show that man, already stripped of his dignity, is not a particularly rational and not even a particularly decent species of creation.

A sensitive man set adrift without rudder or sail on the unchartered ocean of life is bound to feel rather lost, unsure of what he should live for and how he should order his life. Literature responds to life. In ages of faith and exuberance, it justifies the ways of God to man and celebrates man's infinite capacity for
good and evil. In ages of distress, it
mourns or defies the conditions of existence.
The modern wasteland has provided fertile ground
for literary products. Poems and plays and
novels have served as a vast confessional —
log-books of the individual psyche — as a record
of internal voyages of discovery and of shipwrecks,
of islands and ports glimpsed or touched.

It is true that literature is no longer
an art of letters only, a fine way of dealing
with the known, or a forceful way of stating
the familiar. It is an altogether more "desperate
game", not simply a superior one — and as David
Beiches justly remarks, the writer after the
nineteen-twenties seems to be more concerned with
himself as a man rather than as an artist. It is
a fair generalization, for most of the modern
writing does seem to take on the lineaments of a
philosophical quest rather than of a purely artistic
endeavour.

This philosophical quest was, however,
a sort of historic necessity because the world in
which they found themselves was none too happy a
place to live in. It was

... a world without faith, where men exist solely as the hunter, strengthened by hardness and savagery, and the hunted, tragically weakened by a disturbing sense of guilt, where sexual relations are unsatisfactory because they are exclusively carnal and women exist merely as corollaries to sex, helping or hindering some vital masculine action, the whole a compound of violence, terror and a beguiled search for some form of faith. 1

Meant to serve as an anchor to their ultimate thoughts, the quest ended in sterile endeavours in the case of many modern writers. With Graham Greene and a few others, it ended meaningfully in a new apprehension of spiritual truth which gave a point and a direction to their literary creations. 2 To Graham Greene this spiritual stability came through the Roman Catholic Church. Like many other great writers before him,

1 Julian Symons: *Writers and Writings: A Study of Writing in the Thirties* - Focus One, ed. R. J. Don and Pears

2 It is of no consequence at this stage to consider how doubts and difficulties assailed Graham Greene later. His positive beliefs and faith held good while he was engaged in producing his major and most significant works of fiction.
be found were empirical accounts of experience totally inadequate to the ultimate mystery of human existence.

Quite early in life, while he was only twenty-two, Graham Greene adopted the Roman Catholic religion, because it seemed to answer most of his doubts that demanded resolution. And ever since then, Roman Catholicism has had the most pronounced impact on his thought and writing. He was drawn to this faith because the existence of evil, which he had noted so acutely during the sensitive period of his adolescence and youth, was clearly recognised and serenely faced by its philosophy. Evil, therefore, is less terrifying to the faithful than to a non-believer "whose whole being may be disturbed by this entity which can neither be ignored nor fitted into any optimistically-humanist view of the world." In an environment of gloom, despair,

1 R. J. Rees: An Introduction to English Literature (New York, 1966), p. 158
isolation, hatred, violence and widespread evil, Roman Catholicism offered him the much-needed moral support and spiritual stability. He was no longer now a citizen of the two worlds, 'one dead and the other powerless to be born'. Earlier he had confessed, "I find myself torn between two beliefs. The belief that life should be better than it is and the belief that when it appears better it is really worse." Now he began to regard pain as something desirable, something not to be afraid of. "It was as if I had discovered that the way to enjoy life was to appreciate pain." He even started appreciating 'failure' because, he said, it had not the 'shapelessness of success'. When readers complained that his religious novels were depressing, Graham Greene's cool and confident reply was, "Not at all. They are most optimistic. They deal with the infinite mercy of God." His newly acquired faith enabled him to

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* I am indebted to John Atkins for providing me with statements and extracts from Graham Greene's interviews to the journalists, as also from some of his broadcasts which I could not have easily procured otherwise.

accept 'despair' as part of the human condition, as fundamental as desire itself. Thus pain, failure and despair which earlier tortured his mind acquired a new setting — if not an entirely new meaning.

Graham Greene has even defended the practice of 'confession' of the Roman Catholics, in terms easily understood by a non-Catholic modern man. The tortured and hunted Dr. Czinner timidously approaches the priest, Mr. Wilde, with a request:

'I wished to speak to you,' he said, 'of confession.' At the sound of the word he was momentarily young again.

'It's a difficult subject,' said Mr. Wilde. He examined his hands for a moment and then began to speak rapidly. 'I am not dogmatic on the point. I think there is a great deal to be said for the attitude of the Roman church. Modern psychology is working on parallel lines. There is a similarity in the relationship between the confessor and the penitent and that between the psycho-analyst and the patient.' There is, of course, this difference, that one claims to forgive the

* We may recall here T.S. Eliot's use of Mr. Heil, a doctor in the role of a priest, in his play, The Cocktail Party.
sins. But the difference,' Mr. Gile continued hurriedly, as Mr. Chinner tried to speak, 'is not after all very great. In the one case the sins are said to be forgiven and the penitent leaves the confessional with a clear mind and the intention of making a fresh start; in the other the mere expression of the patient's vices and the bringing to light of his unconscious motives in practicing them are said to remove the force of the desire. The patient leaves the psycho-analyst with the power, as well as the intention, of making a fresh start.'

The clear religious overtones of Greene's major fiction are undoubtedly allied to his Roman Catholic faith. The terrible suffering undergone by his characters — Major Scobie (The Heart of the Matter), an Irish priest (The Power and the Glory), Conrad Rover (It's a Battlefield), and Anthony (England Made Me) — is directly related to their creator's faith that pain is preferable to pleasure, that it purifies, chastens and subdues (leading to the highly desirable quality of humility). It is through suffering and pain that his otherwise weak and sinful characters raise themselves to a more or less heroic stature. But

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1 *Stamboul Train*, Part III, ch. 3, p. 268
their heroism is measured by the magnitude of their attempts to embrace faith in a wickedly godless world.

Greene believes that God is kind to those who fail, even to those who sin, rather than to those who succeed but are arrogant and indifferent to Him. The unmistakable suggestion in his novels appears to be:

He is more likely to be discovered by the tortured deniers. Thus, those who hate may be closer to God than those who love; those who deny closer than those who believe; those who despair closer than those who are elated; those who kill closer than those who save; those who commit suicide closer than those who fear to; those who ponder despair closer than those who accept dogma. In every instance, Greene feels that God seeks out the ones who would deny Him, for they are probing the very roots of His existence, and with this, God can sympathise. God is, in Greene's terms, reborn only in those who question Him, and dies within those who acquiesce unquestioningly to His supremacy.

It may be noted here that in his religious beliefs Greene is very close to Evelyn Waugh,

another distinguished novelist of the age, both believed that suffering is preferable to pleasure; and evil, rather than virtue, brings one closer to God; both declared that we must not expect to derive joy from our faith. Both of them, with due regard for objectivity and artistic restraint, gave expression to their beliefs in their novels. Very naturally, their strongly held faith forced itself into their work. It would, however, be unfair to say that they 'trumpeted' their religious beliefs. In fact, perceptive critics like Collins have admired this quality of restraint in Graham Greene (which is equally true of Waugh). He says:

Himself a Roman Catholic, he presented life in terms of the faith of the Roman Catholic church, in the main objectively through the minds of his characters, yet with some restrained personal commentary. The general effect is of a Roman Catholic telling a story with a severe care for fact, making no parade of his faith, which, however, he cannot conceal, and preaching no obvious moral, since the grimly pathetic stories should arouse in any thoughtful reader an anxious questioning of his own faith and a testing of his own values in the light of the events and people he has met.

Graham Greene has been equally careful about the process of acquisition of faith of his characters. Belief is not grafted on them; it always grows from within. Their progress to faith is a highly tortuous one, and a prolonged one too. To begin with, none of them is a truly faithful one, apart from those whose 'faithfulness' is intended to be ridiculed. It is through intense suffering, trials, and inner experience that they attain their faith. There is no facile surrender to the comfort offered by an established faith. His characters reach their state of acceptance the hard way. It is indeed an 'achievement', the result of learning, and an exercise in self-discipline which is a pre-requisite of humility which is itself integral to faith. It is this attainment to faith that gives dignity and point and relevance to Graham Greene's characters in their quest for stability; and it is this which gives credibility to the action which is most often a movement from protest and distress to submission and peace—peace that subsists at the heart of endless agitation.
Though it is highly important to know that Graham Greene is a Roman Catholic, that he is committed, as it were, to the writing of novels about the omnipresence of sin and the never-failing possibility of grace, it is not everything about this outstanding writer of the age, as some would have us believe. Whereas Greene's Catholic belief and his preoccupation with sin and grace would always be central to any proper study of his novels, it does not mean that a consideration of his work should "reduce itself to an essay on moral theology." \(^1\) Atkins is right when he says that such an approach "serves no purpose but to drain such work of humanity, humour, jollity and ultimately vitality." \(^2\) And he rightly blames Greene for encouraging such an approach: "Greene himself encourages the reader to put the Catholic cart before the creative horse. The central

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preoccupations of the novels might very well have been expressed without any recourse to theology."

It is not necessary to be enthusiastic about his theological interests in order to be able to appreciate the merit of Graham Greene's fiction or to admire his skills as a novelist. Somewhat indignantly but forcefully Atkins cuts to size the advocates of the theological approach when he says: "What I want to stress here is that, except when he is self-conscious, Greene's equipment is part of the common property of the humanist English novelist, and should be viewed as such." Numerous instances can be cited in support of the view that Greene's work is more important as social commentary than as theological argument. Atkins believes that "the theology is on the surface, planted there rather weightily, in many cases by Greene himself, but it is a surface growth." 1

1 John Atkins: Graham Greene (London, 1970), Preface to the 2nd. edn.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.
Moreover, there have been serious objections to Graham Greene's theology itself. Francis L. Kunkel states the real objection to Greene's theology:

Not only are the Catholic characters great sinners, but they are frequently less happy in the state of grace than they are in the state of sin. Sarah Miles, for instance, is a carefree, relaxed sinner before her conversion and life of virtue plunge her into woe. The nearer she approaches to God, the less joy she takes from the created world and human love. Pascal describes the wretchedness of man without God; Greene describes the wretchedness of man with God. 1

Graham Greene is not keen to defend himself on these grounds. He just offers a brief explanation and humbly submits to the criticism:

The novelist depends preponderantly on his personal experience, the philosopher on correlating the experience of others, and the novelist's philosophy will always be a little lopsided.*

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1 Francis L. Kunkel (ed): "The Theme of Sin and Grace", Graham Greene: Some Critical Considerations

* The Lost Childhood and Other Essays, p. 40
Thus, unique emphasis on Greene's theology as such is not only uncalled for but may be even a distraction. Any such attempt is bound to divert our attention from the sterling qualities of his fiction. He is an excellent story-teller who has demonstrated his ability to capture the attention of a very wide public. His devices are many and varied. Sometimes he plunges the reader directly into the centre of disaster, and sometimes he adopts a style that arrests our attention immediately. 

Brighton Rock is regarded as Greene's first important novel since, for the first time, he has made there his statement about the fundamental problem of good and evil. Yet the theological content of the novel does not affect its readability. It grips our attention as it opens:

Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him. With his inky fingers and his bitten nails, his manner cynical and nervous, anybody could tell he didn't belong — belong to the
early summer sun, the cool evening wind off the sea, the holiday crowd. 1

In addition, he shows a keen social awareness and a remarkable knack of picking up topical elements—air raids, black-outs, diamond-smuggling, the Cold War, high finance, spy-scare etc. His work shows freshness, energy and a lively awareness of the 'passing-snow'. The theological content of his novels only gives them "a special tone or starting point", and we will do well to heed Atkins' warning: 2

If you follow Greene's story as a human drama you will keep your feet on solid ground and you will know where you are. If you surrender to the allurement of a theological interpretation (including any he himself provides for us) you will soon be lost in a never-never land of assumptions that you may be tempted to accept simply because they are strange and at times outrageous....Green's theology, when stripped of the skill with which it is presented, is really little more than a convoluted metaphysical structure. 3

1 Brighton Rock, Part I, p. 1
2 John Atkins; Graham Greene, London, 1970
3 Ibid.
This is only to say that these are not thesis novels, where the emphasis on the central idea is so great as to reduce people and events to symbols and motifs or merely allegorical signs. They are presentations of life and not expositions of dogma, and they have the force and the immediacy of felt life.
Though Graham Greene has sometimes written as a militant Catholic, he has not totally surrendered to all its dogmas, rituals and beliefs. This would be obvious to any careful reader of his books. Impeled strongly by his beliefs, he yet retains his artistic objectivity and humanism and writes according to his inspiration. He has taken positions quite at variance with those of the Roman Catholic church. The Catholic critics have, therefore, been highly dissatisfied with him. In the Catholic world, he was severely criticized "because his characters find sex a trial and marriage a burden." They complained: "The marriages described in The Heart of the Matter and The End of the Affair are horribly dreary.

1 Quoted in Editor's Preface to The Power and The Glory, Time Reading Program, 2nd ed., Time Incorporated, (New York, 1962)
loveless unions". He was found guilty of playing up the "sinfulness, indeed, the nastiness of sex and the marriage act", instead of describing "its twofold natural end, the procreation of children and the expression of mutual love".  

In Graham Greene's own words, The Power and The Glory "was twice denounced to none by French bishops" and the archbishop of Westminster read him a letter from the Holy office concerning his novel because it was "paradoxical" and "dealt with extraordinary circumstances".  

Greene's refusal to defend divine justice, when the attack is valid, is evident from the exchange between the chaplain and the assistant Commissioner of Police in It's A Battlefield:

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1 Quoted in Editor's Preface to The Power and The Glory, Time Reading Program, n.l. edn., Time Incorporated, (New York, 1962)

2 Graham Greene: Introduction to The Power and The Glory, n.l. edn. of Time Reading Program (New York, 1962)

3 Ibid.
The Chaplain said, "I can't stand human justice any longer. It's arbitrariness. It's incomprehensibility."

"I don't mean, of course, to be blasphemous, but isn't that very like, that is to say, divine justice such the same?"

"Perhaps, but one can't hand in a resignation to God." I

His impatience with the Catholic dogma is voiced more than once through Scobie and the priest in The heat of theSetter, who courageously and firmly question the Church's teaching. When Scobie discovered Ramerton's suicide note, his pity was suddenly aroused for the young man, and he told Father Clay that God would forgive him. The priest pompously began to elaborate on the attitude of the Church when Scobie cut him short impatiently: "Even the Church can't teach me that God

1 It's a battlefield, pp. 230-31
doesn't pity the young."

Again, the same impatience with dogma can be noticed in the dialogue between Mrs. Scobie and the priest (this time, it is a different priest) after Scobie's suicide:

"For goodness' sake, Mrs. Scobie, don't imagine you — or I — know a thing about God's mercy."

"The Church says ..."

"I know the Church says. The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart." 2

A possible explanation of the apparent conflict and contradictions in Graham Greene's beliefs may be that he came to the Roman Catholic Church at a time (he was twenty-two then) when many of his views and attitudes had been firmly rooted in him. In any case, we do not find him dogmatically loyal to his Church, and we have his own statements to confirm it:

1 The Heart of the Matter, p. 73
2 Ibid. p. 194
Disloyalty is our privilege, but it is a privilege you will never get society to recognise, all the more necessary that we who can be disloyal with impunity should keep that ideal alive. If I may be personal, I belong to a group——the Catholic Church——which would present me with grave problems as a writer if I were not saved by my disloyalty.1

Graham Greene confirms his emphasis on this privilege in an exchange of letters with Elizabeth Bowen and V.S. Pritchett, published in 1948 under the title *Why Do I Write?*

Thus what we have is a Catholicism with reservations, from a Catholic with the right of dissent, as it were.

1 In a broadcast discussion with Elizabeth Bowen and V.S. Pritchett on the theme, *The Artist in Society*, July 1948