CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process.

Henry James, in a letter written in 1915 to H.G. Wells
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1

In *A Sort of Life* Graham Greene writes:

The writer has the braggart’s excuse. Knowing the unreality of his success he shouts to keep his courage up. There are faults in his work which he alone detects; even his unfavourable critics miss them, dwelling on obvious points which can be repaired, but like a skilled intuitive builder he can sniff out the dry rot in the beams. How seldom has he the courage to dismantle the whole house and start again.¹

This mature reflection serves a dual purpose: Greene is aware of faults in his own work which his unfavourable critics usually miss; he is also aware of the unreality of his success. Greene, the most fascinating English novelist of the present century, has received critical attention which is largely unfavourable. Many full-length studies of his novels discuss his beliefs and their impact on his creative work. Greene is not only a practising novelist but a good critic of novels. Some of his interesting remarks on various novelists are sometimes quoted against him. During the 70's, many of the British critics have by-passed his work with a few general comments. For instance, Bernard Bergonsi does not discuss Greene at all in his book, *The Situation of the Novel*. On the other hand, Evelyn Waugh gets maximum points

because

The total pattern of Waugh’s work reveals a consciousness that is indeed dedicated to looking backward, to reliving the past and trying to preserve its values, and which ultimately is unable to resist the pressure of modernity, although it never willingly surrenders to them.

Malcolm Bradbury’s Possibilities does not give much importance to Greene’s work. Frank Kermode’s article on Greene included in Puzzles and Epiphanies spotlights the characteristic vulnerability of Greene’s fiction:

Mr. Greene’s war against the intolerable God his intellect accepts is an extremely personal matter, and its obsessive presence is felt everywhere, colouring, distorting, taking the place of, more generalized ‘experience’, suggesting that ‘will and conduct’ are only defensive tactics in the struggle with omnipotence.

Laurence Lerner, after quoting Greene from his essay The Young Dickens, says:

He sees the world of Oliver Twist as a manichaean world, where only Fagin, Monks and Sykes are real: ‘we can believe in evil-doing, but goodness wills into philosophy, kindness and those strange vague sicknesses into which Dickens’ young women so frequently fall.’ This is to make it sound like a novel by Graham Greene – which, in parts, it almost is. Certainly this essay is the best critical account of Mr. Greene’s novels that I know; it is a mistake to think of Brighton Rock as a realistic story. Seán O’Faolain speaks of his novels as miracle plays, but the parallel with Dickens seems to me even more illuminating: if these are miracle plays they are disguised as novels, and convincing. Dickens, too, does not quite belong in the central tradition of the English novel.

Lerner's comment connects Greene with Dickens who is not considered to be in the central tradition of the English novel, and it follows that Greene is also outside that tradition. Kenneth Allott and Miriam Parris's *The Art of Graham Greene*, which is still the most balanced assessment of Greene's fiction we have, discusses the literary influence of Conrad and James on Greene's work. Some of the writers, Greene values, like Rider Haggard, Edgar Wallace and Stevenson have not contributed much to mould his craftsmanship.

Greene found his bearings as an artist during the 30's. This period in literary history is now labelled as the 'Auden Generation' and it is distinguished from the modernism of the 20's. The modernism of the 20's is characterised by far-reaching experimentation in literary forms and the language of literature. During the 30's a kind of ideological orthodoxy takes the place of individualists vision. Greene's vocation as sub-editor made him aware of what was passing on the political front. But his novels, *It's a Battlefield* and *England Made Me* are not coloured by any ideological tinge. His conversion to Catholicism during the 30's was partly intellectual and partly domestic. In *A Sort of Life* he says:

> I remember very clearly the nature of my emotion as I walked away from the Cathedral; there was no joy in it at all, only a sombre apprehension. I had made the first move with a view to my future marriage, but now the land had given way under my feet and I was afraid of where the tide would take me. Even my marriage seemed uncertain to me now. Suppose I discovered in myself what
Father Trollope had once observed, the desire to be a priest ... at that moment it seemed by no means impossible. Only now after more than forty years I am able to smile at the unreality of my fear and feel at the same time a sad nostalgia for it, since I lost more than I gained when the fear belonged irrevocably to the past.¹

His early novels do not reveal his personal commitment to his adopted faith. It is only later that his views on matters of faith became pronounced and insistent. But right from the beginning of his career, Greene seems to pay more attention to his craftsmanship than to the possibilities of forging links with the European past as Joyce and Eliot did. An assessment of Greene as novelist involves an explanation for his not trying to experiment or to benefit from the experiment of novelists like Joyce and Woolf.

Greene's by now innumerable critics have repeatedly stressed his obsessions, often quoting his remarks on Walter de la Mare's:

> Every creative writer worth our consideration, every writer who can be called in the wide eighteenth-century use of the term a poet, is a victim: a man given over to an obsession.²

Sediness, squalor, Original Sin, corrupted childhood, betrayal and treachery, we are told, are some of his obsessions. His well-known essay, The Lost Childhood, mentions King Solomon's

---

Mines, The Viper of Milan and Sophie of Kravonia, which made a deep impact on his imagination. The Viper of Milan has given him his pattern - perfect evil walking the world where perfect good can never walk again. Bowen’s novel made him aware of the 'sense of doom that lies over success'. What is to be emphasised at this point is whether what Greene discovered and made his own from these minor masterpieces has any bearing on and relevance to the idea of modern and modernism as a whole.

Frank Kermode in Continuities, with a wealth of scholarship discusses the 'modern' and attempts a discrimination of modernisms. He observes:

That the Modern is a larger and more portentous category than the New our own usage confirms, or at any rate did so until very lately. The New is to be judged by the criterion of novelty, the Modern implies or at any rate permits a serious relationship with a past, a relationship that requires criticism and indeed radical re-imagining. This sense of 'modern' is the one Mr Spender explored in his book The Struggle of the Modern. His is a traditionalist modernism. There is another kind, which Spender wanted to call the 'contemporary', and which Mr Trilling characterises as anti-cultural. This is the schismatic modernism associated with Barstow's 'clean break' and 'new start', or, less academically, with the doctrine of The New.

The above critical observation is quoted from Kermode's long and interesting review of the book, The Modern Tradition, edited by Richard Ellmann and Charles Fiedelson. The title The Modern Tradition itself suggests that as a literary concept it is so inclusive as to combine myth and music. The very comprehensive-

ness of the concept paradoxically imposes a certain limitation when we try to operate it as a workable concept to evaluate the creative writing produced during and after the 20's. No doubt, the concept is useful in discussing various schools of criticism like the New Criticism, the Chicago School, the Archetypal Approach, Structuralist Poetics, etc., that emerged after the 30's. Spender's traditionalist modernism is unmistakably useful since it isolates some of the characteristic features of the literature of the 20's. Since we propose to discuss the modernity of a novelist, it is pertinent to have close look at Stephen Spender's views on 'Moderns' and 'Contemporaries'. The 'Contemporaries' are, according to Spender, a part of the world in which, for which, they write. They feel that they are responsible to the society. But the 'Moderns' like Joyce, Woolf, Eliot and Lawrence would feel an entirely different kind of responsibility. They are in a way isolated.

The modern is acutely conscious of the contemporary scene, but he does not accept its values. To the modern, it seems that a world of unprecedented phenomena has today cut us off from the life of the past, and in doing so from traditional consciousness. At the same time it is of no use trying to get back into the past by ignoring the present. If we consider ourselves as belonging not just to our own particular moment in time but also to the past, then we must also be fully aware of our predicament which is that of past consciousness living in the present.1

From this it follows that it is not mere experiment with the literal form but awareness of the difference between the past and the present projected in terms of intense individual vision that is the hallmark of the Modern. Since this requires more than ordinary peep into the inner self, the Modern takes a deep plunge into the inner world, while at the same time keeping a temous contact with the outer. That the English novel did not continue in this direction is an oft-repeated fact. For instance, Frederick R. Karl observes, "The contemporary novel is clearly no longer 'modern'."  

Lionel Trilling, largely concentrating on the American literary scene, expresses disapproval of the modern element in the novel because of its loss of contact with human manners and morals. He seems to think that, after all, modernism is not something that produces a liberating influence. Although Greene reached maturity much later, he made his mark in the world of letters during the flickering stages of the modern movement. In a way he seems to support what Trilling says. Writing on Mauriac, Greene observes:

For with the death of James the religious sense was lost to the English novel, and with the religious sense went the sense of the importance of the human act. It was as if the world of fiction had lost a dimension; the characters of such distinguished writers as Mrs Virginia Woolf and Mr E.M. Forster wandered like cardboard

symbols through a world that was paper-thin. Even in one of the most materialistic of our great novelists - in Trollope - we are aware of another world against which the actions of the characters are thrown into relief. The ungainly clergyman picking his black-booted way through the mud, handling so awkwardly his umbrella, speaking on his miserable income and stumbling through a proposal of marriage, exists in a way that Mrs Woolf's Mr Ramsay never does, because we are aware that he exists not only to the woman he is addressing but also in a God's eye. His un-importance in the world of the senses is only matched by his enormous importance in another world.

The novelist, perhaps unconsciously aware of his predicament, took refuge in the subjective novel. It was as if he thought that by mining into layers of personality hitherto untouched he could unearth the secret of 'importance', but in these mining operations he lost yet another dimension. The visible world for him ceased to exist as completely as the spiritual. Mrs Dalloway walking down Regent Street was aware of the glitter of shop windows, the smooth passage of cars, the conversation of shoppers, but it was only a Regent Street seen by Mrs Dalloway that was conveyed to the reader: a charming whimsical rather sentimental prose poem was what Regent Street had become: a current of air, a touch of scent, a sparkle of glass. But, we protest, Regent Street too has a right to exist; it is more real than Mrs Dalloway, and we look back with nostalgia towards the shop houses, the mean courts, the still Sunday streets of Dickens. Dickens's characters were of immortal importance, and the houses in which they loved, the mews in which they dammed themselves were lent importance by their presence. They were given the right to exist as they were, distorted, if at all, only by their observer's eye - not further distorted at a second remove by any imagined character.}

What Greene says here is of great importance not only in evaluating his novels but in seeing the English novel in the larger context of tradition and modernism. The exclusive preoccupation with the psyche of the characters is not the only way to articulate a significant vision about man and the world. Wayne Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* convincingly argues that Joyce's narrative rhetoric pays heavy price for what it achieves. Summing up the discussion on *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he says:

Whatever intelligence Joyce postulates in his reader - let us assume the unlikely case of its being comparable to his own - will not be sufficient for precise inference of a pattern of judgements which is, after all, private to Joyce. And this will be true regardless of how much distance from his own hero we believe him to have achieved by the time he concluded his final version. We simply cannot avoid the conclusion that to some extent the book itself is at fault, regardless of its great virtues. Unless we make the absurd assumption that Joyce had in reality purged himself of all judgment by the time he completed his final draft, unless we see him as having really come to look upon all of Stephen's actions as equally wise or equally foolish, equally sensitive or equally meaningless, we must conclude that many of the refinements he intended in his finished *Portrait* are, for most of us, permanently lost. Even if we were now to do our homework like dutiful students, even if we were to study all of Joyce's work, even if we were to spend the lifetime that Joyce playfully said his novels demand, presumably we should never come to as rich, as refined, and as varied a conception of the quality of Stephen's last days in Ireland as Joyce had in mind. For some of us the air of detachment and objectivity may still be worth the price, but we must never pretend that a price was not paid.1

Robert Martin Adams, approaching *Ulysses* in terms of the material that went into it, reaches the following amazing conclusion:

There is an appetite for self-destruction in Joyce and in his fiction which is very reminiscent of Swift. He breaks the texture of the book which he has taken such pains to establish, for no other evident reason than that he has got the reader to trust in it. He is contemptuous of smooth surfaces and easy responses; he fractures them to display power over his world, himself, his reader. The book which he produced is great and intricate work of mind; it is also a violent and ingenious machine for the extinction of mind. Loaded with ambiguities of arrogance and loathing, it is an intricate, unstable balance of creative and destructive instincts. It is a book and an anti-book, a work of art particularly receptive to accident. It builds to acute and poignant states of consciousness, yet its larger ambition seems to be to put aside consciousness as a painful burden. It is designed to fascinate the reader's thoughts by involving them in the labyrinth of the book's structure and references; but then to entangle and frustrate them, to answer one puzzle with another, to conceal and withdraw, so that all the mind's sterile ingenuities may be swept away in the final blind vitality of an assertion from the loins.1

Robert Martin Adams's opinion of *Ulysses* unmistakably conveys the impression that Joyce is not a suitable model for a practising novelist. Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* with a nice discrimination of the issues involved feels,

There is often something confusing, something hazy about them, something hostile to the reality which they represent. We not infrequently find a turning away from the practical will to live, or delight in portraying it under its most brutal forms. There is hatred of culture and civilisation, brought out by means of the subtlest stylistic devices which culture and civilisation have developed,

---

and often a radical and fanatical urge to destroy. Common to almost all of these novels is haziness, vague indefinability of meaning: precisely the kind of uninterpretable symbolism which is also to be encountered in other forms of art of the same period.

From the above discussion one point clearly emerges. The modernism of the moderns is not an asset by itself. It is not the only way available to the artist, especially to the novelist, in his artistic quest. Greene, aware of the dangers involved, employs traditional methods to dramatise the tensions involved in modern existence. His emphasis is rightly on the significance of human act. His much-discussed awareness of evil acquires a new dimension and larger context if we discuss his themes in terms of the climate of opinion that prevailed during the inter-war period.

Aldous Huxley, one of the best satirists of modern life we have, writes:

The real trouble with the present social and industrial system is not that it makes some people very much richer than others, but that it makes life fundamentally unlivable for all. Now that not only work, but also leisure has been completely mechanised; now that, with every fresh elaboration of the social organisation, the individual finds himself further degraded from manhood towards the mere embodiment of social function; now that ready-made, creation-saving amusements are spreading an ever intenser boredom through ever wider spheres, - existence

has become pointless and intolerable. Quite how pointless and how intolerable the great masses of materially-civilised humanity have not yet consciously realised. Only the more intelligent have consciously realized it as yet. To this realization the reaction of those whose intelligence is unaccompanied by some talent, some inner urge towards creation, is an intense hatred, a longing to destroy. This type of intelligent hater-of-everything has been admirably, and terrifyingly, portrayed by M. André Malraux in his novel, Les Conquérants. I recommend it to all sociologists.

In his early novel, Antis Hay, Huxley drives home the point very powerfully. Existence is meaningless. Why it has become meaningless, the passage quoted above amply explains. Evelyn Waugh's The Handful of Dust presents a similar theme in the tragic fate of Tony Last. The reckless gaiety of the 20's conceals an inner agony caused by chronic boredom. Eliot's The Waste Land presents a similar theme in terms of myth and metaphor. Rootlessness, sense of isolation, frustration are some of the features of modern existence that the literature of the inter-war period presents. Greene's early novels like The Man Within, It's a Battlefield, and England Made Me have thematic resemblance with the works mentioned above. His vision of life is stated in a lucid manner in his travelogue, Journey Without Maps, published in 1936:

"Today our world seems peculiarly susceptible to brutality. There is a touch of nostalgia in the pleasure we take in gangster novels,"

in characters who have soagreeably simplified their emotions that they have begun living again at a level below the cerebral. We, like Wordsworth, are living after a war and a revolution, and these half-castes fighting with bombs between the cliffs of skyscrapers seem more likely than we to be aware of Proteus rising from the sea. It is not, of course, that one wishes to stay for ever at that level, but when one sees to what unhappiness, to what peril of extinction centuries of cerebra-
tion have brought us, one sometimes has a curi-
osity to discover if one can from what we have come, to recall at which point we went astray.¹

As has been pointed out earlier, the symbolist methods introduced into the English literary scene by Joyce and Eliot are not suitable to an aspiring novelist. Greene follows the traditional methods of realism developed in England during the nineteenth-century to articulate in his fictions the vision succinctly stated in the passage quoted above. A doubt may arise whether the thrillers of Greene conform to the conventions of realism.

Murder, and any other crime, is not a part of entertainment but an integral part of life. We are all murderers, we are all spies, we are all criminals and to choose a crime as the mainspring of a book's action is only to find one of the simplest ways of focusing eyes on our life and our world.²

But Greene is not interested like a detective novelist in the mystery of crime. On the other hand, he draws our attention to the organised violence generated by the Great War which ramifies

itself into all sorts of irrational acts. It is only in his Catholic novels that he tries to present the irrational in man within the framework of religion. Even here, he does not violate the canons of realism. J.P.Stern in his masterly book On Realism says:

The riches of the represented world; its weightiness and resistance to ideals; its consequential logic and circumstantiality - these I take to be among the attributes one would expect to find in realistic literature.

In trying to articulate his impressions of life and the reality he shared with others, Greene makes a liberal use of the narrative devices developed by James, Conrad and Ford. His technical accomplishment largely consists in the skilful use of the 'point of view'. Many of his novels contain the international theme, a Jamesian legacy to the English novel.

The crux of the Greene canon is his Catholic novel. In assessing these novels, many critics disapprove of his peculiar theology. But, as Beatrice Mesnet rightly points out,

Greene invites us to meditate on our own destiny, offering us not cases to solve and classify but the mystery of people like Pinkie or Soobie or the nameless whisky-priest who cross our paths in real life. He opens our eyes (and our hearts) to the miseries around us to which we are too often blind; he tells us that, while the rejects of society, the lawless ones of this world, may need our particular love in order to rise above a tragic situation, it is not in our power to show them the way to happiness.

His preoccupation with evil leads him to emphasise suffering which has a redeeming quality in this world and which procures grace. It is reasonable to suppose that literary realism is opposed to theological notions like grace. But as Stern points out, "...where it shows the workings of Divine Grace, realism must show it as that which perfects, not as that which breaks, human nature".\(^1\)

In his Catholic novels Greene tells the story in such a way that the working of Grace becomes part of the reality the book dramatizes in terms of human act. Greene's Catholic novels would have been a blasphemous onslaught on the Church in any other period of history except our own. Since our age has witnessed unimaginable suffering caused by the diabolic will of a few, we no longer refuse God's mercy even to the worst sinner. But even this kind of justification would definitely encounter stiff opposition when we discuss a novel like *The End of the Affair* in which miracles becomes part of the narrative. But *The End of the Affair* is a novel, a work of art, and we do not find artistic lapse in Sarah's becoming the channel of Grace and effecting the cure of the incurable.

Many novels of Greene were turned into films. This explains the similarity between him and Dickens. Among the Victorian masterpieces, the novels of Dickens were found suitable to cinematicographic presentation. Graham Petrie, discussing the contribution

---

of Dickens to the art of film, observes:

His fictional methods depend largely on the handling of imagery and what might appear to be pure narrative or description in such a way that the climactic events of the later novels, like Stephen Blackpool's death or Krook's spontaneous combustion, however melodramatic or unlikely they may appear on a literal level, seem to be merely the inevitable realization of an imaginative pattern that the reader has been absorbing, to some extent unconsciously, as the book develops.¹

A novel like *It's a Battlefield* employs this kind of technique without violating the conventions of realism. In the entire corpus of Greene's writing, we do not come across image clusters that draw attention to themselves apart from the drift of the narrative. His style is plain and conveys the significance of the scene with least effort and immense economy. To illustrate the point, we can pick up two novels at random, *The Man Within* and *Loser Takes All*, and analyse his narrative method.

iv

*The Man Within* is his first novel, published in 1939. It tells the story of a young man who is by nature a coward caught in a nasty trap. Although Greene himself thinks the story embarrassingly romantic, it merits consideration because it dramatizes a typical Greene situation. As the title itself suggests, Andrews is a dual personality. While a part of him

craves for action, the other part retards it because of the terror involved in action. In a fit of rashness he writes an anonymous letter to the police about the smugglers who are his associates. When they pursue him for treachery, he flees. Elizabeth, a lonely unhappy girl, tells him to give witness against the smugglers in court. The following passage reveals Andrews' predicament:

'I will return,' he said out loud, but the inner critic who had been still for so long roused himself as though at a challenge and taunted him. You coward, what use? What are you that she should look twice at you? At least a fool, he protested, who may be running himself into a trap for her. The mooker spoke suddenly as though in the heart itself, denuded for the once of reproach. Would she not be worth of the full risk? Then if you come back you bring her something of value. Yes, but that 'if'.

There was the rub. I was born a coward, he protested, and I will live a coward. At least I have shown these fools that I must be reckoned with, and rising and turning his back on the cottage, he began to walk rapidly in the direction of Lewes, as though he would outpace an image moving at his side of a girl's face set between candles, the mouth twisted with the wry taste of a betrayal.

This passage conveys some of the features of Greene's style and method. Romantic love does not fascinate Greene. His heroes waver always at critical moments. There is not one sentence in the passage that shows any kind of excitement on the part of the hero. Andrews retreats and betrays the girl's trust because of his fear to act. The passage is free of intrusive metaphors and does not stop the flow of narrative even though it happens to be

Andrews' dialogue with himself. Throughout the novel we find
the word 'critic' repeatedly used. Andrews' pathetic indecision
gains dramatic force because of the presence of Carlyon who acts
as his father and guardian and whom he initially betrays. The
novel presents the theme of loneliness and isolation with the
nineteenth-century smugglers and trials as the background. In
spite of its textural thinness and lack of narrative drive, it
shows Greene's skill in trying to focus attention on the fortunes
of a single character.

_Loser Takes All_ is not a full-length novel, but a long
short story. A farcical comedy, it deals with the misery of
loneliness, isolation and frustration. It parodies Rousseau's
famous proposition that man is born free but is in chains every-
where. The narrator Bertram says, "Rousseau might have written
that man was born rich and is everywhere impoverished". Bertram
and his fiancée Cary are persuaded by Bertram's boss to have
their wedding at Monte Carlo. Having spent all the money he
has, Bertram borrows from the hotel manager and gambles at the
casino. Before his boss arrives, he becomes richer than the boss
and contemplates his overthrow by purchasing some of the shares
in the company. In the process of avenging and outwitting his
boss, and calculating his newly-acquired currency notes, he
becomes a machine and ceases to love his fiancée. The following

passage serves to illustrate the tone and the theme of this interesting farce:

I sat back on the sofa with a gasp of triumph. I felt the equal of any man. It had really been a very neat piece of detection. So simple when you knew, but everyone before me had accepted the perfection of the machine and no machine is perfect; in every joint, rivet, screw lies original sin. I tried to explain that to Dreuther, but I was out of breath.

Without fuss and with great economy the passage articulates an intuitive grasp of modern reality - "everyone before me had accepted the perfection of the machine and no machine is perfect". In the world nothing is perfect. Original sin is too original to be disguised. But the point of interest is that the narrator is out of breath when he tries to explain this. At one breath the reader is made aware of a broad spectrum of impossibility. 

Loser Takes All employs first person narration. It is not the narrator but his boss that conveys the crashing insight, "I am too old and the young would call me cynical. People don't like reality. They don't like common sense". This reminds us of Eliot's oft-quoted line, "Human kind cannot bear very much reality".

In the following chapters an attempt is made to offer a critical reading of Greene's novels basing on the assumptions discussed in the foregoing pages.

2. Ibid., p.110.