

Graham Greene and The Honorary Consul

— *machismo* and human weakness —

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I

Twenty years have passed since I first read Graham Greene's works. I was very impressed by "The Power and the Glory" (1940) and since then I have taken a keen interest in his other works.

One of the reasons for my interest was that Greene's techniques were surprising. The accuracy and diversity of Percy Lubbock's ⁽¹⁾ "point of view" affected Greene. His skill at scene changes apparent not only in "The Third Man" already screened but in all his other novels; the thrilling development of plot which is attractive to the reader, his talent for entertainment and so forth were admirably demonstrated in most of his works. His view of life and religion was also unique. These days there is a core of religious thought prevalent, in which the criminal is regarded as being closest to God. This idea may remind one of François Mauriac, but at the same time it reminds me of Shinran ⁽²⁾'s firm philosophy which teaches that Buddha truly wishes to save the evil man.

Needless to say I am aware that the merits found in the novels of Graham Greene could also be regarded, by some, as weak points. The following ideas have already been fully discussed by other critics of Greene. Examples are; ⁽³⁾ *he tended to depend upon the thrilling element of the story*, thus ⁽⁴⁾ *his plots became a little too artificial and mechanical*; ⁽⁵⁾ *his expression was sometimes ambiguous, his figurative writing occasionally shallow and he often resorted to arbitrariness*. ⁽⁶⁾ *In his treatment of life and religion as well the virtues can be overridden*. His conscious treatment of only evil makes the world of his novels appear far too one-sided. In this respect his works perhaps fail to represent real life as fully as we might wish. As a result Greene is regarded as a heretic by traditional Catholics.

Despite such criticism, I remain attracted by the charm of Greene's works. For some time however I have avoided commentary on his literature, as I was unsure whether it was possible for me, a Japanese Buddhist surrounded by a completely different culture from Greene's, to fully understand his works, and also to fully appreciate what he intended to portray in his literary world.

In 1966 "Silence (Chinmoku)" by Endo Shusaku, was published and was successful in gain-

ing popularity. "Silence" is a story about a Catholic missionary named Rodrigues. He entered Japan at a time when Christianity was strictly prohibited. He made every effort to perform his duties in the face of incredibly severe persecution, but finally he was forced to step on a copper tablet engraved with a cruxifix to prove his apostasy. The reader, however, still feels that Rodrigues will be saved. This novel was the first in Japan to deal with Catholicism. I was much moved by it and my doubts about commenting on Greene's world began to fade.

However, the unique atmosphere created by Catholic writers eg. various Catholic ceremonies and many excerpts from the Bible may confuse non-Christians so that they either fail to see some important symbolic meanings, or they overrate the significance of the symbolism. The Catholic based western world is very different from the eastern world. In a monotheistic world God and men are clearly separate, while in the Orient which is strongly affected by pantheism man is descended from the gods and thus it is possible for him to be united with nature and the universe. On this point Catholicism is a positive, and pantheism a passive philosophy with no similarities.

Endo Shusaku once wrote *a book*⁽⁷⁾ about Catholic writers, and "Silence" can also be considered as a criticism of "The Power and the Glory" Graham Greene's Catholic novel. Endo's skill in developing the theme and the plot in "Silence" is in no way inferior to Greene's. "Silence" has at least given me a hint that⁽⁸⁾ *it is possible to review Greene's world by concentrating, not on his religion alone, but on the human aspect presented by Catholicism.* By doing so I think I will be able to follow the thread of human universality through his novels, even though my religious background is unlike his. As a matter of course I do not intend to limit my criticism to his techniques, as his Catholic philosophy is quite unique and his works tend to stem from it. To begin with, however, one must be free from traditional Catholicism and a conventional view of nature in order to appreciate Greene's works.

I would like to discuss "The Honorary Consul" in terms of "*machismo*" i.e. an exaggerated sense of masculine pride, and also in terms of a new theological point of view shown in this work.

II

The protagonist, Eduardo Plarr, is a medical practitioner. His father is an Englishman and his mother a Paraguayan. His father, a member of a revolutionary group is put into prison, and it is not known in the early stages of the novel whether he is alive or not. Plarr is indifferent to everything and distrustful of man as well as God. He hates to be involved in anything. He is extremely impassive and typical of modern man.

The story is set in the region along the river Paraná in Paraguay and Argentina. The

communist influence in this region was swept away in 1954 and a dictatorial government prevailed. Manipulated by El Tigre, the mysterious ringleader of remaining members of a revolutionary group, Plarr's schoolmates, Leon Rivas, Aquino and their friends kidnapped the Honorary British Consul, Charley Fortnum. At first their aim was to kidnap the American ambassador by obtaining information from Plarr, but they actually seized Fortnum by mistake. As they themselves called the attempt "entertainment" it was actually a kind of farce.

Plarr preferred not to be involved in the case, but he came to know Fortnum's wife, Clara, intimately. She used to be a prostitute and was still young. Plarr did not fall in love with her, he merely sought the pleasure of an affair but he became obsessed by her because of a gray birthmark she had in the centre of her forehead where Hindugirls wear scarlet signs. Although he was involved to this extent he did try to rescue Fortnum. He may have wanted Clara, whom he was treating medically, to feel relieved, but at the same time he was probably motivated to save Fortnum because of a strong resemblance to his father. Furthermore he did not want Rivas, his friend, to become a murderer. Another motive I would like to suggest is that a strange type of *machismo* also prompted him to go to the rescue of Fortnum. Strangely enough it is possible that the same motive drove Rivas towards the destructive action he took.

Clara was a woman who expressed no self-interest and thus both Plarr and Fortnum regained some human emotion through contact with her. She conceived Plarr's child, but he did not feel any affection for the unborn baby. Fortnum, however, was very happy. He already knew of their relations and he also knew the identity of the child.

The first thing Plarr had to do, to rescue Fortnum was to persuade Rivas and his group not to go ahead with the plan, but it was a little too late and Fortnum's fate was already in the hands of El Tigre. As suggested by Sir Henry Belfrage, the British ambassador to Argentina, Plarr made plans to form an Anglo-Argentinian Club for the purpose of disclosing the case in a newspaper. But he failed to gain consent either from Dr. Saavedra, a minor novelist (whose main theme was *machismo*) or from Dr. Humphries, an English teacher, and thus he could not establish the club. Dr. Saavedra, however, holding the idea of *machismo* in high esteem, volunteered to substitute himself for Fortnum.

Meanwhile Fortnum was shot in the leg as he tried to escape, and the planned exchange of Dr. Saavedra for the hostage turned out to be unsuccessful. Plarr did his best to put off Fortnum's last day, but, as one of the kidnapers was shot to death in town by Colonel Perez's group one day, the case suddenly escalated. The kidnapper's hide-away was finally discovered and here Greene's moment by moment description of the police persuading them, over a loudspeaker, to surrender unconditionally, was tremendously impressive. Aquino insisted

that Fortnum be shot to death, but Plarr believed he could change the situation favourably by asking Perez for help and so he left the hideout. The police immediately fired against him, as previously warned. No sooner did Rivas see Plarr fall than, quite unconsciously, he ran out of the hide-way and was also shot down. In the end, the kidnappers were shot dead and Fortnum was rescued.

The main characters are Plarr, Fortnum, Rivas, Aquino, Clara, Perez and Rivas's wife, Marta. Plarr's apathy and indifference remind me of Fowler, the protagonist in "The Quiet American" (1955), Querry, a famous architect in "A Burnt-Out Case" (1961) and Brown of "The Comedians" (1966). Plarr does not like to be involved in anything, and the only human feeling he has is towards his father, until he is told by Perez that his father has died in prison. Meanwhile he does gain some human emotion through his relationship with Clara, his efforts to rescue Fortnum and through his jealousy of Fortnum.

Charley Fortnum, a local Englishman, is quite tired of his leisurely post as honorary consul. His married life ends in failure and he begins to indulge in heavy drinking. His love for Clara, his second wife, is also a one-sided one. The diplomat in "The Comedians" has his wife stolen and later she comes back to him. In this respect, the diplomat is similar to Fortnum. But Fortnum finally begins to love both Clara, and also Plarr who sacrifices himself for him.

As for Rivas, he appears in the story as a priest who breaks the religious commandments like the "whisky priest." But Rivas has few human weaknesses and is more like the lieutenant who chases the whisky priest. Still believing in Catholicism, he is called "Father Rivas," but he has broken the commandment of obedience and that of chastity. Here, not in Mexico, a priest who has broken the commandments becomes a communist and is driven away by the dictatorial government. His other friend Aquino, is a communist who has failed to succeed as a poet and gives the impression of being always shadowed by death. Rivas's wife, Marta, is described as a pious believer despite her poverty in the story.

III

In this novel the idea of *machismo* is defined. When Plarr recollects his father, it reads as follows:

The Spanish language was Roman by origin, and the Romans were a simple people. *Machismo* — the sense of masculine pride — was the Spanish equivalent of virtue. It had little to do with English courage or stiff upper lip.⁽⁹⁾

According to this excerpt, "*machismo*" is the sense of masculine pride. Plarr's father is an Englishman, but setting high value on "*machismo*," he takes part in the revolutionary move-

ment as a communist. Jorge Julio Saavedra, one of the main characters, is Plarr's patient. "The Taciturn Heart" written by Saavedra is introduced in this novel, "The Honorary Consul" in order to explain the sense of *machismo*. In "The Taciturn Heart" the cuckold challenges the one who has stolen his woman to a knife duel and is killed, covered with blood, but he can retrieve his honour. Saavedra proposes to sacrifice himself for Fortnum. This is also his demonstration of *machismo*.

There is a word "*macho*" in Spanish. As an adjective it means "strong," "hard" or "terrible" and as a noun it means "male" or "male flower." *Machismo* is an abstract noun which seems to stem from "*macho*," and is thought to be dialect around the river Paraná. Mr. Noguchi Keiske says the following, referring to "*machismo*."

Besides, according to an Argentine, "*machismo*" also means a man with many children because he is supposed to have a lot of male qualities. One who keeps many mistresses is probably considered to be a man of ability, that is, *machismo*. In short, this "*machismo*" means showy men who dare to take their chances on a single venture, deny to behave cowardly, try to live with a strong will to save their honour and want to die after stubbornly accomplishing something to relieve themselves from disgrace. To put it in another way, this is something like chivalrous spirit.⁽¹⁰⁾

In other words, "*machismo*" generally means manliness. Yet this is a bit different from chivalry in the medieval ages. "*Machismo*" is simpler, more primitive and more passionate. Plarr's motive to go to the rescue of Fortnum comes from this spirit, and Rivas and his group of kidnapers are also motivated by this spirit.

After reading Saavedra's novel, Plarr said to himself,
Life isn't like that. Life isn't noble or dignified. Even Latin-American life. Nothing is ineluctable. Life has surprises. Life is absurd. Because it's absurd there is always hope. Why, one day we may even discover a cure for cancer and the common cold.⁽¹¹⁾

The present age is absurd and the existence of man itself is absurd. In Japan, too, there is a world view that "*Our world is the burning house of transiency; hence, all things are entirely empty and nonsense and not true.*"⁽¹²⁾ Particular, for those of us who live today, absurdity is inevitable. Can we find any other way than absurdness? Greene gives the protagonist something of the grace of God while describing the absurd world pessimistically as represented in "The Power and the Glory." The characters seem passive before God, but in "The Honorary Consul" Plarr takes a decided action with desperate courage in Greene's inner world; *Machismo* has appeared.

IV

Father Rivas, though not the hero, plays an important part and ventures to express a fearless view against conventional Catholicism. He begins to talk to Plarr, saying, "Christ was a man."⁽¹³⁾ And he goes on, "If I kill him it will be God's fault as much as mine." "He made me what I am now. He will have loaded the gun and steadied my hand."⁽¹⁴⁾ But Rivas does not attack God, for he says, "I don't blame Him. I pity Him."⁽¹⁵⁾I believe in the evil of God, but I believe in His evil too." The reason for this is "He made us in His image.Our evil is His evil too."⁽¹⁶⁾ He also shows God's day side and night side, and sees evolution in Him. He says, "I believe God is suffering the same evolution that we are, but perhaps with more pain."⁽¹⁷⁾The evolution of God depends on our evolution. Every evil act of ours strengthens His night side, and every good one helps His day side."⁽¹⁸⁾ According to Rivas, therefore, the appearance of monsters like Hitler and the Nazis is because "God when He is evil demands evil things." God and we are joined by a sort of blood transfusion. Rivas says that we can attain to a goodness like Christ's, though the road to it is terrible. Rivas believes that the reason why we can love and depend upon God is that God and people have something in common. Accordingly, if human virtue is elevated, the highest good of God will reach its perfection and the divine land will be revived.

Greene's world which has gained a positive element with the idea of *machismo* also produces a completely new idea as mentioned above. I do not know about the domain of theology, but I have never heard the theory of evolution being applied to God in the world of literature. If we thoroughly study the absurdity of man, we cannot but admit the absurdity of our Creator. Setting aside the medieval ages when God vividly existed, we must approach God in the present days where He is forgotten, in order to make it possible for God to exist much longer. Needless to say, this idea is introduced through a character in the novel, not in the form of Greene's confession. In spite of this, we cannot deny that the author greatly sympathizes with the idea. This is also his severe criticism of the Catholic church which forces catechism on the believers and always remains unchanged.

Greene's works have aroused much discussion in relation to his religious background. At first Greene was considered to be a Catholic, but ⁽¹⁹⁾ *these days his religion tends to be regarded as his own personal philosophy.* "The Honorary Consul" has given rise to more dispute on this point.

V

When we think of Graham Greene, we must also take T.S. Eliot and Henry James into

consideration. Eliot expresses his opinion in his “After Strange Gods” with regard to the blasphemy of God. The following is a summary of what he says.

Today is the age where we forget God. We do not blaspheme God any more. Those who are able to blaspheme God in the true sense of the word can be said to be religious. We cannot blaspheme God until we are deeply conscious of God. It is impossible to blaspheme God where there is no God.

Many characters in Greene’s land are deeply conscious of God and as a result they blaspheme Him. Father Rivas in “The Honorary Consul” exceedingly blasphemes God by seriously breaking the commandments, although not to the extent of the whisky priest in “The Power and the Glory.” The innocent and honest heart everybody used to have in his or her childhood is extremely distorted in our times and many begin to work evil. This is a kind of revenge upon modern society. This can be interpreted as a sort of severe criticism of the present church. Greene is really indignant with the hypocritical and bourgeois faith.

Greene says as follows with reference to Henry James in “The Lost Childhood & Other Essays” (1951),

After a death of Henry James a disaster overtook the English novel: For with the death of James the religious sense was lost to the English novel, and with the religious sense went with the sense of the importance of human act. ⁽²⁰⁾

Greene also deplores that even the characters created by such eminent writers as Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster are nothing but shadowy dolls. In the modern novel right and wrong can be described but not good and evil in the true sense of the term because it is only the real world that the contemporary novel treats. What I want to emphasize is that, when characters are also described from God’s point of view, the true world will be presented and the work will really be meritorious. In other words life can vividly be reproduced where the supernatural world and the natural world are mixed.

Greene has brought his world to perfection by adopting even popular ways such as cinema or thriller techniques. Despite this, most of his works radiate artistic skill. This ability undoubtedly comes from his deep regard of the weight of spiritual tradition.

“The Honorary Consul” is unmistakably counted among his masterpieces. The characters are not set up in extreme opposition; therefore he is successful in depicting them more realistically than in his previous works. In short he has presented a very realistic world which the reader does not always feel is fiction. In it Greene has introduced a new idea and a new theological point of view which can tide over the absurd world. In the past he had a tendency to seek his themes in Catholicism, but now they seem to have become more universal. When all is over, Fortnum feels a sense of immense relief; he begins to love even Plarr and feels a

sense of familiarity with Clara: his humanity is elevated. He may not yet feel the Grace of God, but he thinks of naming his coming child Eduardo, Plarr's first name. This shows that the author wants to extend a saving hand to Plarr. The same thing can be said of Rivas. Seeing his schoolmate, Plarr, shot, Rivas, the fighter, runs out of the hideway without carrying a gun and is shot dead. This is a suicidal act, but the author's love for Rivas is communicated to the heart of the reader. Greene's consideration for men deepens and he finally takes the side of humanitarianism. He seems to have settled his pending proposition in "The Honorary Consul" and in his previous work "The Comedians."

The only thing I regret is that "The Honorary Consul" seems to lack thrilling impact. The tense atmosphere created in the situation where the whisky priest is chased by an ominous and mysterious state power is lost in "The Honorary Consul." Besides, it seems to me that Chapter V in Part V is an unnecessary addition. This chapter treats Plarr's funeral scene, but the author actually aims at making it clear who shot Plarr; whether he was shot by Rivas or not. The other aspect of this chapter is to let the reader know that Fortnum indulged in drinking and a nihilistic life. It restores the touch of humanity. But the chapter tends to be dull and another thing I must mention is that a sort of darkness fills the whole. This darkness probably stems from Greene's own world. To put it in another way, the characters are all pessimistic and no joy which may come from faith can ever be expressed in the work. Can we expect the author to show us a brighter side of life?

We cannot read Greene's works without thinking of the sense of sin or guilt. Greene quotes Charles Péguy's words at the opening of "The Heart of the Matter." I don't know very well about Charles Péguy, but I am certain that Greene feels sympathy for Péguy,

Le pécheur est au coeur même de chrétienté..... Nul n'est aussi compétent que le pécheur en matière de chrétienté. Nul, si ce n'est.

The criminal is in the essence of Christianity. No one is more competent for its teachings than the criminal except the saint.

On the other hand there is a famous passage in Japan which reads as follows.

Even a good person is born in the Pure Land, how much more so is an evil person!⁽²¹⁾

I am only amazed at the close resemblance of the two thoughts despite the fact that they come from the two utterly different worlds. One is from Catholicism, and the other is from Shin Buddhism.

Notes

- (1) Greene was influenced by "The Craft of Fiction," Jonathan Cape, London, 1921. And Greene says the following in "Ways of Escape," Bodley Head Ltd, London, 1980, p.14,
....for I was paying a great deal of attention to unity and "the point of view" after studying Percy Lubbock's admirable primer, The Craft of Fiction, ...
- (2) The founder of Shin Buddhism which has the most believers in Japan.
- (3) Calder-Marshall, Arthur, Little Reviews Anthology, London: Allen & Unwin, 1943, pp.197-204.
- (4) F. N. Lees, "Graham Greene: A Comment." Scrutiny XIX (Oct.1952), pp.31-42.
- (5) Arnold Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel, (Vol. II), London, Hutchinson House, 1951.
- (6) Same as (3)
- (7) "On Catholic Writers" published by Hayakawa Shobo, Tokyo, 1954.
- (8) Mr. Shuichi Kato published an essay entitled "An Aspect of Graham Greene and Catholicism" in the "Sekai" for September 1957 and says in it that it is important to discuss the only part where his literature and the human and cultural phase of Catholicism overlap each other.
- (9) The Honorary Consul (Pocket bk), 1974, p.3-4.
- (10) A Study of Graham Greene I, edited & translated by K. Noguchi, Nanso-sha, Tokyo, 1966, pp.275-276
- (11) The Honorary Consul (Pocket bk), p.10
- (12) The Tanni Sho, translated by R. Fujiwara, Ryukoku University, Kyoto, 1962, p.81
- (13) The Honorary Consul (Pocket bk), p.251
- (14) Ibid. p.252
- (15) Ibid. p.253
- (16) Ibid. p.260
- (17) Ibid. p.261
- (18) Ibid. p.262
- (19) David Pryce-Jones: Graham Greene, Oliver and Boyd, 1963, p.100. The author says; "It should be plain that Greene's work is by no means an apologetic: it is rather a deterrent, unless one happens to accept Greene's personal God."
- (20) Graham Greene: The Lost Childhood & Other Essays (Penguin bk), 1964, p.76
- (21) The Tanni Sho, translated by R. Fujiwara, Ryukoku University, Kyoto, 1962, p.22