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Murat Jean-Christophe

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Jean-Christophe Murat

Jean-Christophe MURAT : A former E.N.S. student and a holder of the "Agrégation", Jean-Christophe Murat is the author of a Ph.D on *The Metamorphoses of London in the British Novel After 1945* (Université Paris 3, 1993). Since 1997 he has been a lecturer in English literature at the Université de Provence, Aix-Marseille 1. For the last nine years his academic research has mostly been devoted to the literature – prose fiction and essays – of the 1940s in Britain. Since 2004 he has written several articles on Cyril Connolly, two of which are shortly to be published in the academic journal *The Space Between: Literature in Transition 1914-1945* (Monmouth University, N.J.), and by Cambridge Scholars Publishing (in the acts of the conference on *Revolving Commitment: France and Britain 1929-1950*, held at the University of Birmingham, UK, in April 2006).
Université de Provence (Aix-Marseille 1)

« L'obscène, le dérisoire et le grotesque » ? On peut à juste titre s'interroger sur la manière dont rendre le terme « trivial » en français, et sur le calque commis par la traductrice du livre en 1948. Une réflexion préliminaire sur le sens à donner à ces trois notions – directement empruntées au texte du roman (p. 94) – nous conduit dans un premier temps à mettre en relation la faute sans conséquence et le concept catholique de péché véniel. La démarche de Greene consiste à désamorcer d'une part toute utilisation étroitement doctrinaire du « péché mortel » tel qu'il est défini par la Bible, et d'autre part à démystifier l'interprétation tragique que les êtres humains ont souvent tendance à donner à leur histoire personnelle, au fond insignifiante. Dans un deuxième temps, la célèbre définition du « réalisme sérieux » que propose E. Auerbach dans la postface de *Mimésis* établit des rapports complexes, d'abord entre la peinture du vulgaire ou du répugnant et celle d'une réalité plus noble, ensuite entre les niveaux stylistiques, que les tenants du réalisme refusent de hiérarchiser selon des critères éthiques et sociaux. Dans *The Power and the Glory*, la stylisation relative de la langue et des pensées des personnages n'est pas tant le signe d'un retour à une esthétique conservatrice que la résolution d'une tension entre réalité quotidienne et tragique sublime. Enfin, le goût de Greene pour le paradoxe ne s'exprime jamais aussi bien que dans la vision d'un péché mortel « nécessaire », dans la mesure où seul le caractère en apparence irrémédiable de la faute commise (l'adultère, ou ici l'enfant illégitime) nous place au plus près de l'amour du prochain… n'en déplaise au Vatican.

obscène, trivial, grotesque, péché originel, réalisme sérieux

It will no doubt have struck perceptive readers of *The Power and the Glory* that the title of this paper is an explicit reference to Part 2, chapter 1 of Graham Greene's novel, i.e. to the mestizo's decision to have the priest hear his confession, even though the latter, who still has not disclosed his true identity, is feigning incompetence or indifference:

> 'You can't deceive me. Listen. I've given money to boys – you know what I mean. And I've eaten meat on Fridays.' The awful jumble of the gross, the trivial, and the grotesque shot up between the two yellow fangs, and the hand on the priest's ankle shook and shook with the fever. (94)

Interestingly, Marcelle Sibon, the French translator of *The Power and the Glory*, renders this utterance as follows: "un horrible mélange du trivial, de l'obscène et du grotesque" (*La*

Puissance et la Gloire, 141). "Le trivial" turns out to be as a mistranslation here. In English, the substantivised adjective means "of no importance, not worth considering", whereas the French word – in its modern acceptation at least – is a synonym of "choquant, bas, vulgaire, grossier" (Robert). By rendering "the trivial" as "du trivial", Marcelle Sibon not only misunderstands the original, she also destroys the ternary rhythm that is so typical of Greene's novelistic prose[1]: the three words have been maintained, but only two concepts remain, "trivial" and "obscène" becoming somewhat pleonastic. The definition of "grossness" should take two types of representation into account. The first has to do with the concept of "Greeneland", which has been overused to the point of becoming a cliché of Greenean criticism; most studies on his novels and short stories feel compelled, at one point or another, to analyse the writer's insistence upon the "seediness" (another critical cliché) of the settings, the vulgarity of the protagnonists and the sickening details of the descriptions. One should be careful, however, not to make the adjective "gross" a mere equivalent of "obscene", "bestial" and "disgusting". It certainly did not escape the highest authorities of the Church that certain ideas conveyed by the book contravened the Catholic orthodoxy in a most offending way. If it was formally condemned by the Vatican, it was not so much for the graphic way in which it depicted certain scenes and characters as for the "gross" blasphemies it contained.

"Grotesque" is the most complex of the three concepts. In the Renaissance period the term came to designate paintings which intermingled human, animal and vegetable forms or themes, as was exemplified in the works of Hieronymus Bosch and Giuseppe Arcimboldo. In the eighteenth century it was commonly used to denote the bizarre, the freakish and the unnatural in something or someone, as opposed to the norms of harmony and proportion that prevailed in that Neo-Classical age. From the Middle Ages to the present, it has often been employed for comic and satirical purposes, such as caricature, parody, black comedy and the depiction of the absurd. The best-known practitioners of the grotesque in literature would include such disparate writers as Rabelais, Swift, Dickens, Kafka, Carson McCullers and Samuel Beckett. The statement on page 94 can be restricted to the half-caste's confession, or to himself as a character. It can also, of course, be extended to the whole aesthetic and moral frame of the novel.

But why "an awful jumble"? This phrase highlights a set of conflicting elements and realities lumped together in total disregard for established values and hierarchies. It seems, then, that the emphasis on a "jumble" rather than on a gradation of sin defuses the potentially tragic overtones, as well as consequences, of the characters' actions. In other words, "the gross, the trivial, and the grotesque" are not exactly on the same plane. The grotesque appears as an overarching concept which, besides denoting weird interactions, includes the constant interplay of the gross and the trivial.

The Trivial and the Venial

The distinction between venial and mortal sins is one of the fundamental tenets of the Catholic faith. Although the Church itself provides neither an explicit definition, nor a precise list of what belongs in one category or the other, the concept of mortal sin is mentioned - somewhat confusingly - in *I John* 5.16:

> If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. (1134)

A mortal sin ("a sin unto death") is a sin that seriously violates one of the Ten Commandments, and that must be committed with full knowledge of the gravity of the offence. By contrast, a venial sin is one that is relatively "trivial", in the sense that it

[1] See for example, a few lines further down: "a world of treachery, violence, and lust in which his shame was altogether insignificant."

constitutes a minor violation of God's laws, or that the perpetrator is unaware that he contravenes them. Venial and mortal sins are brought, or should we say lumped, together in the mestizo's confession: "giv[ing] money to boys – you know what I mean" refers to a form of deviant sexuality which, in period terms, would have been labelled pederasty. By the standards of the early twenty-first century, this admission constitutes a major penal offence carrying a heavy prison sentence, whereas its religious significance hardly matters any more. By the standards of 1935 Mexico, the mestizo's situation is diametrically opposed – no penal retribution is to follow the abuse, but the religious punishment is enormous: eternal damnation will be the price to pay.[2] In comparison, "eat[ing] meat on Fridays" is a relatively harmless sin, even though, at the time of the novel's publication, the Church probably thought otherwise. The juxtaposition of the two offences produces a burlesque, almost comic effect whose function is to debunk the character's vision of himself as a doomed, tragic figure:

> He had an immense self-importance; he was unable to picture a world of which he was only a typical part - a world of treachery, violence, and lust in which his shame was altogether insignificant. (94)

The mestizo's portentous litany of sins is a case in point, insofar as it may be read as a typically Greenean warning against the tendency of human beings to take themselves too seriously, i.e. to perceive their own predicament by the light of orthodox systems of thought. The character who comes to mind immediately in Greene's fiction is Major Scobie, the Catholic police officer of *The Heart of the Matter*. Scobie's suicide is not so much caused by an awareness that his marital infidelity and his indirect complicity in the murder of his servant Ali deserve only eternal damnation, as by his failure to see *beyond* a literal, restrictive and ultimately life-denying interpretation of Catholic theology. The final dialogue between Scobie's widow and Father Rank drives home the message in a most explicit way:

> 'He was a bad Catholic.'
> 'That's the silliest phrase in common use,' Father Rank said. 'And at the end this - horror. He must have known he was damning himself.' [...] Father Rank clapped the cover of the diary and said, furiously, 'For goodness' sake, Mrs Scobie, don't imagine you – or I – know a thing about God's mercy.' (*Heart of the Matter*, 333)

Louise Scobie, whose views comply so much with the Church's most rigid beliefs that she sounds like a mere mouthpiece of the *doxa*, is reminiscent of the self-righteous woman the Mexican priest meets in the prison cell:

> A woman's voice said, 'They took the child away from him.'
> 'Why?'
> 'It was a bastard. They acted quite correctly.' [...]
> He said, 'They had no business...'
> 'They were doing what was right, of course. It was a mortal sin.'
> 'No right to make her hate him.'
> 'They knew what's right.'
> He said, 'They were bad priests to do a thing like that. The sin was over. It was their duty to teach - well, love.'
> 'You don't know what's right. The priests know.' (122-123)

Ironically though, while the priest has the emotional and intellectual ability to distance himself from literal-minded bigotry (that distance reduces the self-righteous woman to a cardboard figure masquerading as a prophet), he repeatedly fails to perceive his own plight in more merciful terms than the grotesque depiction that follows:

> Evil ran like malaria in his veins. He remembered a dream he had had of a big grassy arena lined with the statues of the saints – but the saints were alive, they turned their eyes this way and that, waiting for something. [...] Then a marimba began to play, tinkly and repetitive, a firework exploded, and Christ danced into the arena - danced and postured with a bleeding painted face, up and down, up and

[2] "And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying [...] Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination." *Leviticus*, 18.22. (128).

> down, grimacing like a prostitute, smiling and suggestive. He woke with the sense of complete despair that a man might feel finding the only money he possessed was counterfeit. (173)

By the standards of the Catholic Church – and perhaps by the standards of every Christian church – this description of Christ is gross blasphemy. It makes a mockery of the apparition scene that hagiographers highlight as the founding experience of most saints' lives[3], by introducing suggestive details that mix up male and female genders, the redeeming mission of God's son and the damning role of the prostitute.[4] Not surprisingly, the recollection of the dream coincides with the nadir of the priest's spiritual journey through the mountains of Tabasco.

Low and High Literary Realities

As I studied the various methods of interpreting human events in the literature of Europe, I found my interest becoming more precise and focused. Some guiding ideas began to crystallize, and these I sought to pursue.

> The first of these ideas concerns the doctrine of the ancients regarding the several levels of literary representation – a doctrine which was taken up again by every later classicistic movement. I came to understand that modern realism in the form it reached in France in the early nineteenth century is, as an aesthetic phenomenon, characterized by complete emancipation from that doctrine. [...] When Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them the subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they broke the classical rule of distinct levels of style, for according to this rule, everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, as either grotesquely comic or pleasant, colorful, and elegant entertainment. [...] Before that time, both during the Middle Ages and on through the Renaissance, a serious realism had existed. [...] It was the story of Christ, with its ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy, which had conquered the classical rule of styles. (Auerbach, 554-555)

Erich Auerbach's Epilogue, or afterword, to *Mimesis* offers a definition of "serious realism" that is thought-provoking, but also raises more questions than it provides cut-and-dried certainties for *The Power and the Glory*. It is fairly easy to start analysing the issue by stating that *The Power and the Glory*, like most of Greene's novels (as opposed to his earlier "entertainments"?), pertains to modern realism - a realism in the direct line of descent from Stendhal and Balzac (both writers are mentioned by Auerbach). Consequently, the half-caste, one of the chief protagonists, is by no means a flat character or a mere laughing-stock despite his poverty and despised social (as well as racial) background. Greene treats him as a grotesque, yet *this* grotesque should not be seen as an avatar of the rustic clowns of Renaissance and classical comedies, nor of the single-minded ruffians of revenge tragedies. He is not a grotesque because he is a mere stereotype, but because he is a *borderlin*e case between humanity and animality ("He had only two teeth left, canines which stuck yellowly out at either end of his mouth like the teeth you find enclosed in clay which have belonged to long-extinct animals," [81]). Above all, his story is a "cross-breed" between the depiction of daily squalor and the evocation of religious sublimity. Greene spares the reader no sickening detail about the mestizo's fight for survival in a world of poverty:

[3] More often than not, it is the Virgin Mary who appears. A case in point is the famous Virgin of Guadalupe, whose apparition to a holy man in 1531 made her the patron saint of Mexico.

[4] The image of the prostitute is first introduced through Brigitta, the priest's unlawful daughter, in a context that renders her attitude not only shocking - due to her youth - but also gravely blasphemous: "She said, 'Tell me -', enticingly. She sat there on the trunk of the tree by the rubbish-tip with an effect of abandonment." (78) The man she is "enticing" is her own father.

> He [the priest] came to the last cell. It wasn't empty; a man lay back against the wall; the early sun just reached his feet. Flies buzzed around a mound of vomit on the floor. The eyes opened and watched the priest stooping over the pail: two fangs protruded... [...]
> 'You see,' the mestizo carefully explained, 'I'm comfortable here.' His yellow toes curled luxuriously beside the vomit. 'Good food, beer, company, and this roof doesn't leak. You don't have to tell me what'll happen after - they'll kick me out like a dog, like a dog.'(134-135)

This is the *ordinary* reality of a poor Mexican paeon, hungry, illiterate and in rags. But the priest's judgment on the man must finally be construed from another angle:

> [T]he priest thought, with an odd touch of contemptuous affection, of how much had happened to them both since that first encounter in a village of which he didn't even know the name - the half-caste lying there in the hot noonday rocking his hammock with one naked yellow foot. If he had been asleep at that moment, this wouldn't have happened. It was really shocking bad luck for the poor devil that he was to be burdened with a sin of such magnitude. The priest took a quick look back and saw the big toes protruding like slugs out of the dirty gym shoes. [...] Poor man, the priest thought, he isn't really bad enough... (181)

One cannot help smiling at the grim irony behind the fact that the mestizo, not the priest, is being pitied for his "shocking bad luck" – after all, he is not the one who is to die at the hands of the police lieutenant. The priest is in earnest however – it is terrible for the mestizo to have been "chosen" by fate to replay the part of the most despised character in the New Testament. The squalid tale of his life is therefore redoubled on a higher level by the *extraordinary* fate of Christ's betrayer ("He was in the presence of Judas", [88]).

The question, then, is whether this reading of the grotesque as narrative hybridity (half the adventure of an ordinary human being[5], half an adventure of biblical scope) is compatible with Greene's own definition of his novel:

> *The Power and the Glory* was like a seventeenth-century play in which the actors symbolise a virtue or a vice, pride, pity, etc. The priest and the lieutenant remained themselves to the end; the priest, for all his recollection of periods in his life when he was different, never changed. The action was contained within a short time-span. (Quoted by Bergonzi, 111)

Technically speaking, one may object that this simile is a little inaccurate. What Greene has in mind is the Morality Play, an allegorical drama that mostly developed in the Renaissance period, but that was already going out of fashion at the end of the sixteenth century. As a matter of fact, mixed stylistic levels are ruled out in such "mainstream" Morality Plays as *Everyman* (c. 1510), in which allegorical figures representing forces of good and evil within the human soul express themselves in consistently formal, stilted verse. Greene's reference to allegorical drama is far more convincing when one keeps in mind that his idea of "a seventeenth-century play" is not a clear-cut genre, but an all-purpose word containing many different kinds of drama: the Morality Play (of which one is reminded as one reads the conversation between the pious woman and the priest in the prison cell); the comedy of humours (certain characters, like the Jefe, the Governor's cousin, or a central figure like the police lieutenant, embody a particular "humour" or a particular obsession: hypochondria, money, puritan integrity...); and beyond a strictly genre-based and time-based definition, the novel of ideas in which the main characters stand for conflicting world-views. Owing to the ominous, then frankly disastrous, political and military context of the time, that kind of fiction became particularly fashionable in the late 1930s and 1940s; it is evidenced by such famous novels - to take only two examples - as Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, published in 1940 (like *The Power and the Glory*), where Rubashov, an old-guard Communist and genuine

[5] "The priest waved his hand; he bore no grudge because he expected nothing else of anything human and he had one cause at least for satisfaction – that yellow and unreliable face would be absent 'at the death'." (193-194)

revolutionist, falls victim to a Stalinist regime and its overzealous representative, Gletkin; and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), where Winston Smith, a political dissident, is eventually interrogated and tortured into submission by O'Brien, his so-called comrade-in-arms.

Many readers and critics of *The Power and the Glory* might query the validity of Auerbach's definition of serious realism, whose chief formal characteristic is the rejection of "the classical rule of distinct levels of style". As Bernard Bergonzi has strenuously emphasised, Greene's Mexican novel is not as convincing an artistic achievement as his previous works of fiction for language reasons. While Greene used to be – literally – at home with the slang and speech mannerisms of his earlier *English* characters, the life-like quality of the dialogues was seriously hampered by the non-English-speaking context of Mexico. In order to render conversations and trains of thought, most of which[6] are taking place in Spanish, the author had to restrain his stylistic levels and to adopt a plain style that sometimes verges on the unidiomatic (Bergonzi, 114-115). *My* objection to Bergonzi's strictures is that the opposite viewpoint is just as valid. It is by keeping away from fashionable phrases and period idioms that a writer is most likely to stand the test of time. Despite its gripping plot and eerily fascinating protagonist, *Brighton Rock*, which Bergonzi deems a better novel than *The Power and the Glory*, may be viewed from this critical angle:

> 'I don't need to marry a squirt to make her safe. How do we make you safe, Spicer?' His tongue came out between his teeth, licking the edges of his dry cracked lips. 'If carving'd do it...' 'It was just a joke,' Cubitt said. 'You don't need to take it so solemn. You want a sense of humour, Pinkie.' 'You think that funny, eh?' the Boy said. 'Me - marrying - that cheap polony.' He croaked 'Ha, ha,' at them, 'I'll learn. Come on, Dallow.' 'Wait till morning,' Cubitt said. 'Wait till some of the other boys come in.' 'You milky too?' (*Brighton Rock*, 54)

Seventy years on, the outward authenticity of this exchange between Pinkie and his gang has a "period" ring to it which makes the text dated and a little contrived. Such slang or colloquial terms as "squirt", "polony" and "milky" are no longer in use, so that the artistic quality of the passage has now been superseded by a "documentary" quality not originally intended. In comparison, the rather stylised – but not stilted – language of *The Power and the Glory* has a timelessness to it that does not contradict "serious realism" in any way, but conflates the "ruthless mixture of everyday reality and the highest and most sublime tragedy" (Auerbach, 555) of a Christ-like character.

Life as a tragi-comedy

The scene that best epitomises the mixture of comedy and tragedy, of the gross and the trivial in *The Power and the Glory* is probably the one (part 2, chapter 2) in which, shortly before his arrest for carrying liquor, the priest arrives in the state capital, in search of wine to celebrate mass. Having finally managed to purchase wine of sorts from the Governor's corrupt cousin, he helplessly watches the man and the Chief of Police drinking up his precious bottle in a hotel room (108-113). The scene's central theme is in itself a serious one: a priest gets cheated out of the wine he bought at considerable risk to his own safety, and leaves the hotel in a state of near-despair at the feeling that his task (to celebrate the Eucharist) is now impossible. Yet for all his Catholic faith, Greene is no Georges Bernanos. Instead of the solemn and tragic overtones one might expect, the scene is treated in a *comic* manner throughout:

> The jefe took his place upon the bed and drained the glass: then he took the bottle himself. He said, 'Its good beer. Very good beer. Is this the only bottle?' The

[6] There are a few exceptions in the novel: the Fellows, who are English, Mr Tench the dentist, who is also an Englishman, and the Lehrs, two German exiles who address the priest in guttural English.

man in drill watched him with frigid anxiety.
'I'm afraid the only bottle.'
'*Salud!*'
'And what,' the Governor's cousin said, 'were we talking about?'
'About the first thing you could remember,' the beggar said. 'The first thing I can remember,' the jefe began, with deliberation, - 'but this gentleman is not drinking.'
'I will have a little brandy.'
'*Salud!*'
'*Salud!*'
'The first thing I can remember with any distinctness is my first communion. Ah, the thrill of the soul, my parents round me...'
'How many parents then have you got?'
'Two, of course.'
'They could not have been around you - you would have needed at least four - ha, ha.' (110)

The silly dialogue between the four men is written in the manner of a light comedy, or of a scene of comic relief in a tragedy; Mexican *borrachones* confusing wine and beer are having a meaningless conversation and cracking pathetic jokes, as in the drunken scene between Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Feste the clown in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (Act II, scene 2). Pathos itself is debunked:

Then he [the jefe] stopped with the bottle held over the glass and said with astonishment, 'Why, man, you're crying.' All three watched the man in drill with their mouths a little open. He said, 'It always takes me like this - brandy. Forgive me, gentlemen. I get drunk very easily and then I see...'
'See what?'
'Oh, I don't know, all the hope of the world draining away. 'Man, you're a poet.' (111)

Once again, the heart of the matter is conveyed by the priest's statement: hope *is* draining away, as he feels that his mission has become not only impossible but useless as well. As he puts it later on, "it was as if man in all this state had been left to man" (149). But the circumstances - the need to conceal his true identity and to feign drunkenness - involve a strong irony of situation, which is itself reinforced by another form of irony:

'[T]he Governor's found there's still a priest, and you know what he feels about that.' [...]
'Where do you think he is?'
'You'd be surprised.'
'Why?'
'He's here – in this town, I mean. That's deduction.' (111-112)

Humour is of course produced by dramatic irony, i.e. the narrator's and the reader's shared knowledge with the priest ("the man in drill") that there is more to the Jefe's statement than meets *his* eye.

Needless to say, *The Power and the Glory* hardly lends itself to a Renaissance interpretation of "tragi-comedy", whereby the overall tragic dimension of the plot is transcended by a last-minute happy ending, as in Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well* for example. The main question about Greene's novel is whether the emphasis should be laid on the priest's execution, or on the arrival of the new priest in the very last page. In *The Fugitive*, John Ford's adaptation of *The Power and the Glory* ("an intolerable film"[7] according to Greene himself) the execution of the dignified, almost heroic priest - no longer the small, puppet-like figure of the novel, who must be "paddled across" to the wall (215) - is followed by the appearance of a new priest who, instead of coming by night and remaining anonymous, opens the church door, lets the sun shine in and gives out his name to the whole congregation. In a far more subtle way, Greene chooses to end his narrative positively yet in a *minor* key.

[7] *The Graham Greene Film Reader*, 543.

The unheroic, involuntarily "burlesque" circumstances of the priest's death are one of the novel's most enduring images.

In the preface to the 1950 edition of *The Third Man*, Greene sets out the modest ambitions of a story that was intended to be no more than a film script: "We had no desire to move people's political emotions; we wanted to entertain them, to frighten them a little, to make them laugh" (*The Third Man*, 11). It would be tempting to draw a sharp dividing line between this "entertainment", in which triviality and the burlesque take pride of place, and *The Power and the Glory*, an ostensibly more sombre narrative of persecution, tragic death and redemption. Paradoxically though – or should one rather say characteristically? – the author refuses to comply with a Church-bound interpretation of the gross, the trivial, and the grotesque:

> That was another mystery: it sometimes seemed to him that venial sins - impatience, an unimportant lie, pride, a neglected opportunity - cut you off from grace more completely than the worst sins of all. Then, in his innocence, he had felt no love for anyone; now in his corruption he had learned... (137)

To take Greene at his word (if the priest may be regarded as his mouthpiece here), mortal sin is nothing less than a prerequisite for proper compassion and proper Christian love.[8] In the final analysis, one may argue that the reason why many Catholics were shocked by *The Power and the Glory* is because it is a novel that vindicates the reality of "seediness" in human history (individual and collective), the triviality (the "veniality") of mortal sin when committed by men of good will, and the artistic seriousness of grotesque representation in prose fiction.

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[8] This is probably the way one should read between the lines of Greene's provocative statement in a letter to his mistress Catherine Walston, in June 1947: "It's odd how little I get out of Mass except when you're around. I'm a much better Catholic in mortal sin!" (quoted by Brennan, 261)