

# Darkest Greenland: *Brighton Rock*

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## On Greenland

The term “Greenland,” with an “e” before the “l,” was apparently coined by Arthur Calder-Marshall. In an issue of the magazine *Horizon* for June 1940, Calder-Marshall said that Graham Greene’s novels were characterised by a seedy terrain that should be called “Greenland.” I believe, however, that Greene, who enjoyed wordplay on his own surname, had virtually coined the term himself. In the 1936 novel, *A Gun for Sale*, a crooner sings a love song featuring a flower from Greenland. The song offers a flower; Greene offers a lyrical interlude. There the word has the normal geographical spelling, but the author is clearly being slyly self-referential. By 1972 Greenland had been granted the accolade of an entry in Volume 1 of the *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*. There the definition is this: “A term used to describe the world of depressed seediness reputedly typical of the setting[s] and characters of the novels of Graham Greene.” You may agree that in numerous works of fiction that he published, particularly between 1931 and 1951, whether the fictional location were ostensibly London or Liberia, Mexico or Brighton, the author

transformed it into Greenland: a distinctively blighted, oppressive, tainted landscape, in which sordid, seedy and smelly details are prominent, and populated by characters who include the corrupt, the failed, the vulgar, and the mediocre. In *Brighton Rock*, when the moon shines into Pinkie’s bedroom, it shines on “the open door where the jerry stood”: on the Jeremiah, the chamber-pot.<sup>1</sup> Later Dallow, standing in the street, puts his foot in “dog’s ordure”: an everyday event in Brighton but an innovatory detail in literature. So far, so familiar. But Greene characteristically resisted the term he had helped to create. In his autobiographical book, *Ways of Escape*, he writes:

Some critics have referred to a strange violent ‘seedy’ region of the mind (why did I ever popularize that last adjective?) which they call Greenland, and I have sometimes wondered whether they go round the world blinkered. ‘This is Indo-China,’ I want to exclaim, ‘this is Mexico, this is Sierra Leone carefully and accurately described. I have been a newspaper correspondent as well as a novelist. I assure you that the dead child lay in the ditch in just that attitude. In the canal of Phat Diem the bodies stuck out of the water . . .’ But I know that argument is useless. They won’t believe the world they haven’t noticed is like that.<sup>2</sup>

This passage offers a standard artistic defense of the strange. “I am simply being truthful,” says the artist; “I see more clearly than you.” But one objection to Greene’s defense is obvious. He has selected his world. He chose to go to exceptional regions: dangerous, violent, and sometimes sordid regions. He repeatedly sought what others

<sup>1</sup> The Jeremiah was widely used in England until the 1950s but was soon rendered extinct by central heating, by the elimination of the ‘outside’ lavatory, and perhaps by greater sensitivity or prudishness in such matters.

<sup>2</sup> *Ways of Escape*. London: Bodley Head, 1980, p. 77.

would choose to avoid: warfare, oppression, crisis, vice, and squalor. For instance, he had chosen to travel to Phat Diem in Vietnam during the war between the Vietnamese and the French. Greene's journal for 16 December 1951 records that child dead in the ditch and the canal "thick with bodies," while bombs and mortar shells exploded nearby. If you ask *why* he chose such regions, there are many answers. One is that such regions are newsworthy, so Greene was often paid by newspapers and magazines as a reporter.

Another answer is that such regions are sometimes politically important, so Greene might be paid by the British Secret Service for investigating them. He liked being paid several times for the same job, and once remarked that the British Secret Service was "the best travel agency in the world." He seems to have been involved with that travel agency from the 1930s until the 1980s. A third answer is that such regions provided exciting material for works of fiction. As in the case of two of Greene's literary heroes, Joseph Conrad and R. B. Cunninghame Graham, it sometimes looks as if the adventurous travels had literary motivation. The need to find material for subsequent literary creation was an incentive to roam.

A fourth answer is his imaginative responsiveness to literary works which described regions both blighted and perilous. Greenland is part of a vast territory that was explored by Dickens in *Bleak House*, by Baudelaire and by British decadent poets of the late 19th century, by Conrad in *The Secret Agent*, and by Eliot in "The Waste Land." In traveling and describing the world's surface, Greene was extending an imaginative and cultural empire. And a fifth answer is psychological. In his autobiographical works, Greene repeatedly claims that he found danger an

antidote to boredom, and by "boredom" he often seems to mean depression. One psychological explanation of Greenland, therefore, is that the vistas are partly those seen by a rather depressed person, and partly those seen by a person who is seeking danger as an antidote.

To explain, however, is not to explain away. Many people have been depressed, but only Graham Greene produced that abundant, brilliant and diverse array of literary work. In any case, in his later years, as his Catholicism evolved unevenly and inconsistently towards agnosticism, in 1978 he termed himself a "Catholic agnostic." Greenland gave way to a brighter, more cheerful, even comic landscape. One is reminded of the gentleman who told Dr. Johnson, "I have tried too in my time to be a philosopher, but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in." There are happy endings for the heroes of *Loser Takes All*, *The Potting Shed*, and *Our Man in Havana*. Some of the stage plays are replete with comedy, even farce at times: notably *The Complaisant Lover*, *The Return of A. J. Raffles*, and *For Whom the Bell Chimes*. Some of the later novels are not only light-hearted, but also revisit earlier themes and regions in a spirit of blithe picaresque regeneration: examples are *Travels with My Aunt* and *Monsignor Quixote*.

Arguably, one of the gods served by Greene was the Roman god Janus, the two-headed god who looks in opposite directions at the same time: the tutelary deity of January, janitors, thresholds and paradoxes. Greene loved paradoxes large and small. Whether as Catholic Communist, as British secret agent who aided Fidel Castro, as anti-Semite and pro-Israeli, as creator of Greenland and its mocker, he reveled in the paradoxical.<sup>3</sup> And no novel is more paradoxical than *Brighton*

*Rock*. But perhaps I should rather say, “No novel is more paradoxical than the novels called *Brighton Rock*.”

## The *Brighton Rock* Variations and the Vanishing Jews

The first *British* edition of *Brighton Rock* has a character called Prewitt and a range of anti-Semitic details. This Heinemann volume is the ancestor of the British Uniform and Library Editions of Greene’s work. The first *American* edition of *Brighton Rock* has a character called not Prewitt but Drewitt, and it lacks most of the anti-Semitic details. That Viking hardback volume is the ancestor of the Viking, early Penguin, and Bantam paperbacks. For the Collected Edition, published by Heinemann and Bodley Head in 1970, Greene revised the British text, removing various Jewish allusions. Later Penguin paperbacks follow the Collected Edition text. In my book *A Preface to Greene*, I always quoted the British first edition texts of his novels, because it is politically and critically important to quote the text that fits the attributed original date and the majority of its early reviews; but I often drew attention to significant textual differences which were to appear in later editions.<sup>4</sup> One general reflection is obvious. Graham Greene’s literary output is even larger and more varied than appears to be the case. A particular text may have very significant variations, silently entered by Greene over the years. Eventually, there will

be scholarly editions of his works, editions with endnotes, glossaries, and variant readings, and the significant differences will at once become apparent. At present, readers and critics may sometimes be at cross-purposes as one or another cites a phrase or passage which does not exist in the text that others have read.

For example, in the 1938 British text of *Brighton Rock*, Colleoni, the wealthy gang-boss, has “an old Semitic face;” in 1970 it becomes “an old Italian face.” In 1938 his gang was “a group of Jews;” in 1970 they were “a group of men.” In 1938, “Down the broad steps of the Cosmopolitan came a couple of Jewesses with bright brass hair and ermine coats and heads close together like parrots, exchanging metallic confidences;” in 1970, “Jewesses” became “women.” In 1938, while Pinkie waits to meet Colleoni at the Cosmopolitan, “A little Jewess sniffed at him bitchily and then talked him over with another little Jewess on a settee.” In 1970, the phrase “little Jewess” becomes “little bitch.” We can guess what is probably happening here. Probably the later Greene, writing long after Belsen and Dachau, is regretting the occasional anti-Semitism of his pre-war novels and is revising *Brighton Rock* accordingly.<sup>5</sup> The revision, however, was not thorough. In both 1938 and 1970, we are told that Crab “had been a Jew once, but a hairdresser and a surgeon had altered that,” presumably by dyeing his hair and reshaping his nose.

Anti-Semitism is evident in several of

<sup>3</sup> He visited and corresponded with the disgraced traitor, Kim Philby, who had betrayed numerous British agents, and described Philby as “a good and loyal friend;” but his correspondence with the traitor was “passed on to MI6 through his brother-in-law Rodney Dennys.” See *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters*, ed. Richard Greene. London: Little, Brown, 2007, p. 401.

<sup>4</sup> Textual variations are discussed in my *A Preface to Greene* (London: Longman, 1996), pp. vii, 118-21. Incidentally, around 1950 the Invincible Press, Sydney, Australia, published *Brighton Rock: An Entertainment* in an undated paperback edition which drastically condensed various parts, so that (for example) the final chapter was reduced to less than one page. The book gives no warning that the text is thus abridged. It seems virtually certain that the publishers and not the author bore the responsibility for these alterations.

Greene's early novels, notably *The Name of Action*, in which the villain, Kapper, is a Jew associated with sexual depravity, revolution, and hatred of the Madonna of the Roman Catholics. Greene later suppressed this novel, forbidding re-publication. In *A Gun for Sale*, the plot centers on a conspiracy by wealthy Jewish industrialists to start World War II so as to boost their profits. *Stamboul Train* is perhaps the oddest novel in this respect, for there the hero, a Jew called Myatt, repeatedly encounters anti-Semitic prejudice, which is depicted as brutal and harsh; yet Myatt himself eventually conforms to stereotype because he is a shrewd businessman who finally sacrifices love on the altar of cash profits. Thus, one of the darkest features of darkest Greenland is the anti-Semitic theme.

We are all sinners, and therefore I hesitate to cast a stone. Instead, I emphasize that in *The Confidential Agent*, 1939, the depiction of Forbes *alias* Furtstein is broadly favorable, and that after World War II, during the conflicts of Israelis versus Arabs in the 1960s and 1970s, Greene's sympathies lay mainly with the Israelis; and he was on friendly terms with General Moshe Dayan, who became the Israeli Defense Minister. In 1981 Greene was awarded the Jerusalem Prize, which included a sum of \$5000, in recognition of "an author who has contributed to the world's understanding of the freedom of the individual in society."

### **Brighton and Brighton Rock**

I think that *Brighton Rock* is not the best of Greene's novels, for *The Power and the Glory* deserves that accolade; but it is

probably the most striking, provocative, and extreme. It is corrosively negative, grotesquely nightmarish, and cynically black-comical. It is a thriller, a detective novel, and a moral-cum-theological paradox. It offers realism, expressionism, and satiric stylization. It is hauntingly memorable rather than fully convincing. But it takes us deeper into darkest Greenland than any other of Greene's novels. The real Brighton is repeatedly inflected into a Brighton which is a garish hell-gate.

Greene was remarkably accurate in his topographical details. Montpelier Road, Brighton, still stands. No. 56, a terraced house divided into flats, is where Pinkie lived. To this day there remains the tunnel beneath the race course. You can still drink in Dr. Brighton's pub, where Pinkie met Hale.

Brighton does indeed still offer a combination of the bright and the sleazy, the hedonistic and the violent, the exuberant and the sordid. Among other requests, Norman Sherry asked me to trace Black Boy, the race-horse that is crucially important in the novel. Ida has a bet on the horse at odds of ten to one against, and the horse wins, so she has enough money to stay in Brighton and pursue Pinkie. Without Black Boy, Pinkie might never have been caught; in a telling irony, Black Boy was the tip given to Ida by Hale, Pinkie's victim. I therefore spent many fruitless hours in Brighton Public Library reading the racing results in the local *Evening Argus* for the 1930s. But then I discovered that there was a horse called Blue Boy which won the Balcombe Stakes at ten to one in June 1936. At once you see that to compare is to contrast. To see sameness is to see difference. By changing the horse's name from Blue Boy to Black Boy, and then by letting Tate call it

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<sup>5</sup> Satan assumed the form of a black dog in the subsequent films entitled *The Omen*, which appeared in 1976 and 2006.

Black Dog, Greene plays a theological joke. A black dog may be the form assumed by the devil, according to old literary works such as *The Witch of Edmonton*, the play which supplies the novel's epigraph.<sup>6</sup> *Black Boy* was also a nickname for Satan: as Shakespeare reminds us (in *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, for instance), in the past the Devil was often depicted as black. In short, the change of the horse's name reveals the quality of sinister theological humor that runs through the novel. The horse backed by Spicer, which comes second, is called *Memento Mori*; Spicer doesn't know what that name means, but it foretells his own death at Pinkie's hands. The mordant theological humor is perhaps at its most blatant when Pinkie tells us his phone number: 666, the number of the evil Beast in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 13, verse 18. Pinkie comes from Paradise Piece. You might think that an unlikely address, too heavily ironic, but there was a real Paradise Street in the east Brighton slums in the 1930s.

Another task that Norman Sherry gave me was to find documentary proof that in the 1930s razor gangs operated at Brighton race course. I thought that would be easy. Older residents of Brighton assured me that such gangs had indeed operated there. But when I studied the pages of the *Evening Argus* for year after year, I found that those razor gangs, so well-remembered in Brighton, had apparently arrived not in a

car from Montpellier Road, not in a train from London, but by air: on a diverted flight of, or arranged by, Graham Greene's imagination. In that local newspaper, I found not a single account of a gang fight involving razors in Brighton in the 1930s. The battle which had prompted the fracas described in the book had actually taken place at Lewes race course, not Brighton, and Greene had transferred it. Not one of the real gang used a razor. The gangsters used a hatchet, a crowbar, an iron bar, and half a billiard cue. The police were waiting in ambush, and sixteen gang members were arrested and jailed; whereas in the novel, Colleoni's mob is *not* arrested. It serves Greene's purposes to suggest some collusion between Colleoni and the forces of law and order. On the other hand, what happened at Lewes was that the Hoxton Mob from London attacked two bookmakers allegedly controlled by Darby, or Derby, Sabini, a gangster based in Brighton; so there was some territorial similarity to what happened in the novel. Furthermore, the Hoxton Mob was seeking revenge because one of their members had had his throat cut by Sabini's gang at Liverpool Street Station: clearly a source for the murder of Pinkie's patron Kite, who also had his throat cut at a London station—in his case, St. Pancras. Kite's death had first been described in *A Gun for Sale*, 1936: the initiation of what is now called a "transtextual narrative."<sup>7</sup>

Pinkie is seventeen, and you may deem

6 Some years after I had written those words, a relevant letter appeared in *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters*, pp. 398-9. Greene in 1988 responds thus to an enquirer:

Yes, the changes in *Brighton Rock* and *Stamboul Train* and if there is one in *A Gun for Sale* were made by myself. After the holocaust one could not use the word Jew in the loose way one used it before the war. Myatt is in fact one of the nicest characters in *Stamboul Train*, both brave and sympathetic. In the case of Colleoni I think I was wrong to have made him a Jew in the first place with such an Italian name. The casual references to Jews at one particular hotel is a sign of those times when one regarded the word Jew as almost a synonym for capitalist. Big business seemed our enemy [. . .]. (Some readers may doubt that "casual" is the correct term for those references.)

7 Transtextual narratives (and covert plots) are defined and discussed in my book *The Deceptive Text: An Introduction to Covert Plots* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984).

that an implausibly early age for a gang boss. But I found an issue of the *Evening Argus* in 1936 which reported the arrest of a local gang leader, and his age was seventeen. Again and again, Greene, in *Brighton Rock*, has used actual events and locations, but the material is repeatedly inflected in distinctive ways. Consider this quotation:

Brighton in the red fusing light looked like a wonderful imagined place, and the lights on the sea just played about, and me, I played with them, and the wind ruffled the water back, and right up in the sky were two ruddy clouds flung together, and they were perfect, like two lovers at last met in a kiss.

This is wonderful: lyrical affirmative romanticism. And, of course, that quotation is not from Greene. It is from a letter that D. H. Lawrence wrote in 1909, describing the beauty of Brighton.<sup>8</sup> This, in contrast, is Greene in *Brighton Rock*:

The sun slid off the sea and like a cuttle fish shot into the sky the stain of agonies and endurances [. . .]. An old man went stooping down the shore, very slowly, turning the stones, picking among the dry seaweed for cigarette ends, scraps of food. The gulls which had stood like candles down the beach rose and cried under the promenade. The old man found a boot and stowed it in his sack and a gull dropped from the Parade and swept through the iron nave of the Palace Pier, white and purposeful in the obscurity: half-vulture and half-dove.<sup>9</sup>

Yes, that is Greene, offering a description

that's vivid, distinctive, somewhat nightmarish, observing the poverty behind Brighton's facade of fun. There is a touch of Metaphysical poetry in the conceit or odd simile. As a cuttlefish squirts its purple ink, so the setting sun squirts its redness, and that red resembles blood: it is the stain of "agonies and endurances;" therefore, subliminally, Christ's suffering is evoked. If some writer notes that there are seagulls around the Palace Pier at Brighton, that may be mere realism; but there is no mere realism about that gull noted at the end of this description: it is half-dove, suggesting the dove of peace and its biblical associations; but it is also half-vulture: like the old man, it is another scavenger, but this one seeks carrion. In such descriptions, Brighton becomes Greenland. And Greenland is an Eden blighted and polluted by fallen humanity.

## The Paradoxes of the Plot

In his early years as a novelist, Greene was constantly trying to square the circle. He was seeking to write novels which would approach in merit the works of authors he admired, notably Conrad and James; but he was also seeking commercial success. One result was his notion of producing not only relatively demanding works, each of which would bear the subtitle *A Novel*, but also relatively popular works, each of which would bear the subtitle *An Entertainment*. Eventually, he scrapped this distinction, which became unmanageable. And *Brighton Rock* shows why. There he had managed to put the two kinds of work together in one narrative. *Brighton Rock* was subtitled *An*

<sup>8</sup> *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, Vol. 1 (London: Heinemann, 1979), p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> *Brighton Rock* (London: Heinemann, 1938), pp. 187-8. Some subsequent editions misprinted "shot into the sky the stain" as "shot into the sky with the stain," thus making the evening sun soar upwards like a rocket when it should actually be vanishing below the horizon.

*Entertainment* in its first American edition but subtitled *A Novel* in its first British edition, a fact which nicely sums up its ambiguity and its dual appeal. It is a crime thriller and a detective story. It is also a theological melodrama of a very subversive kind.

Greene told his literary agent that in *Brighton Rock* the central thematic tension is between the ethical outlook and the religious outlook. The concepts of “right and wrong” are challenged by the concepts of “Good and Evil.” You can easily see how the secular, ethical plot works. Charles “Fred” Hale is murdered by Pinkie and his gang, though there is later a verdict of death by natural causes, because when the stick of rock is forced down his throat, as we may infer, he suffers a heart-attack.<sup>10</sup> Ida Arnold is suspicious of the circumstances and investigates. Trying to protect Rose from Pinkie, she pursues him, saves Rose from suicide, and brings about the destruction of Pinkie. Ida feels that a good job has been well done: a double killer has been punished. Right has prevailed over wrong. In this plot, the ethical outlook prevails.

Against Ida’s secular ethic, however, the novel obviously invokes a religious frame of reference. Here the novel’s appalling paradox is generated. Pinkie, the killer of Hale (and later of Spicer), has had a Roman Catholic indoctrination, and is still, in his perverse way, a believer. Thus, for all his evil, and indeed largely because of his sense of evil, he inhabits the religious dimension. As Pinkie puts it:

“These atheists, they don’t know nothing. Of course there’s Hell. Flames and damnation, [. . .] torments.”

“And Heaven too,” said Rose with anxiety, while the rain fell interminably on. “Oh, maybe,” the Boy said, “maybe.”<sup>11</sup>

In the characterization of Pinkie, Greene seems to be conducting a taxing literary experiment: to see whether the reader’s pity can be won for a person who seems to be irredeemably callous and ruthless. Pinkie’s cruelty is carried to almost ludicrous extremes: “She loves me, she loves me not,” he says, tearing the wings off a fly. He wields a razor, carries a vitriol bottle, and jests crudely about his victims. He is a Judas to Spicer, his accomplice, and even to Rose, who remains loyal to him even though she knows his wickedness. Yet, in various ways, Greene seeks to elicit some pity for him.

Firstly, Ida Arnold’s world of secular right and wrong is made to seem superficial. She’s an English Mae West with a blowsy appeal, a resilient courage, a hearty optimism; but she is associated with carnality and vulgarity. Pinkie’s Catholicism is warped: it’s partly Manichaeism, sometimes almost Satanism; ““Credo in unum Satanum,” the Boy said.”<sup>12</sup> Greene was fascinated by Manichaeism, by the notion that the world, particularly the material and carnal, is almost entirely the territory of Satan. He said he found in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* the “alluring taint” of the Manichee. Pinkie is an instinctive, intuitive Manichean. He

10 Greene loved covert plots: plot sequences that are so obliquely or elliptically presented that only on a second or subsequent reading of the novel are we able to fill the gap. One such gap is the mystery of what the gang tried to do to Hale in the rock shop under the Palace Pier. If we look carefully at the references to Brighton rock in the novel, we are able to solve the mystery. In *The Power and the Glory*, the manner of Coral Fellows’ death is another covert plot.

11 *Brighton Rock*. London: Heinemann, 1938, p. 71.

12 His Latin, though remarkable, is faulty: the last word should be “Satanam.”

is disgusted by the world and is attuned to the transcendental, to an eternity, even if an eternity of hell fires.

In 1930, in a notorious passage in an essay on Baudelaire, T. S. Eliot wrote

[T]he possibility of damnation is so immense a relief in a world of electoral reform, plebiscites, sex reform and dress reform, that damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation—of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living . . . Baudelaire was man enough for damnation.<sup>13</sup>

“I have always believed that there are two levels [of experience]:

One that of science and common sense, and another, terrifying, subterranean and chaotic, which in some sense holds more truth than the everyday view. You might describe this as a satanic mysticism. I have never been convinced of its truth, but in moments of intense emotion it overwhelms me.

That is Bertrand Russell, the eminent rationalist. So Pinkie, gripped by the paradox of the virtue of evil, is in very distinguished company.

In contrast to Pinkie’s sense that he may be hell-bound, Pinkie’s victim, Fred Hale, is cremated at an Anglican Service that is fiercely satirized for its wishy-washy theology; and what happens to poor Fred then? Presumably he does not deserve Hell, or even Purgatory<sup>14</sup>, for we are told that he becomes merely “part of the smoke nuisance over London.” Meanwhile, Pinkie resembles

a blighted candidate for priesthood: he recoils from alcohol, feels nostalgia for the Mass and the choir, and says that priests are quite right to avoid the horror of sexuality. “When I was a kid, I swore I’d be a priest,” he tells Dallow. The novel’s events unfold around the time of Pentecost; and in this case, it is Pinkie, a rather diabolical apostle, who receives “the gift of tongues” when praising the priesthood; the novel quotes the biblical phrase. He has at least elicited the selfless love of Rose, a fellow Catholic; whereas Ida Arnold’s love life is a matter of brief hedonistic encounters. Pinkie, furthermore, retains the notion that he might one day repent and gain salvation. He repeatedly half-recalls William Camden’s lines, “Betwixt the stirrup and the ground / Mercy I asked, mercy I found.” The manner of his death may seem designed to rule out any last-minute penitence. His own vitriol suddenly burning his face, Pinkie throws himself into the sea from the cliff-top at Telscombe Cliffs. Nevertheless, after his death, when Rose visits her Catholic church, the priest tells her: “You can’t conceive my child, nor can I or anyone—the . . . appalling . . . strangeness of the mercy of God.”

Thus, briefly, the text raises the truly appalling prospect that the villainous Pinkie may be granted salvation and eternal bliss. Greene here and elsewhere entertained the notion of a self-subverting Catholicism, that is to say, a Catholicism which, by stressing that God transcends human understanding, subverts official ecclesiastical attempts to legislate theologically on God’s behalf. Anyway, Rose is doubly consoled, thinking not only of Pinkie’s possible salvation but also that she may be pregnant and may therefore produce, as the priest says, “a saint—to pray for his

<sup>13</sup> Eliot, T.S. *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932), pp. 375, 377.

<sup>14</sup> Alighieri, Dante. *The Inferno*, III, 41-2.

father.” But she then proceeds towards “the worst horror of all”: the gramophone disc on which Pinkie has recorded the message “God damn you, you little bitch, why can’t you go home for ever and let me be?” It is one of the cruelest endings in literature. In the film, as we have seen, divine intervention, it seems, causes a crack in the record, so that she hears only an apparent message of love. We do not see whether she eventually moves the needle forward to the subsequent words “I hate you, you little slut.” Logically, she would.

To challenge a simple hostile verdict against Pinkie, Greene deploys not only a religious case, but also a secular case of the kind that would appeal to liberals and socialists. “Roman Catholics are working together with the Communists,” Greene assured the Russian leader Gorbachev in 1987, postulating a happy alliance of believers and atheists. But already, in *Brighton Rock*, you can see Greene’s attempt to blend the religious and the left-wing cases. Greene said later of Pinkie: “His actions arose out of the conditions to which he had been born.”<sup>15</sup> There is one world for the rich, and a harsher world for the poor. Along the coast at Roedean, the daughters of affluence play hockey on the grassy terraces overlooking the sea; but the novel stresses that Pinkie’s early years were blighted by harsh conditions in the slums. In the squalid setting of Paradise Piece, he shared the room in which, on every Saturday night, his parents brutally copulated; hence, in part, his recoil from sexuality. Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode” says “Heaven lies about us in our infancy;” in *Brighton Rock* this becomes “Hell lay about him in his infancy.” But it is largely a man-made Hell. Like the sixteen-year-old Rose, Pinkie is the child

of poverty: both have known the drabness and squalor of the Carlton Hill area of East Brighton. The novel notes the chaos of the slum-clearance work there; naturally, it does not describe the new council estates in which the former slum-dwellers gained decent houses with gardens.

There is, however, an additional case that Greene enlists in order to win a grain of sympathy for Pinkie. And that case is, alas, the anti-Semitic one that I mentioned earlier. Ranged against the two shabby young Brightonians are the rich and powerful and, according to the first British edition of the novel, the Jews. There is no room at the inn for Pinkie and Rose; or at least no room at the Cosmopolitan Hotel, where they are refused accommodation on their wedding night. The Cosmopolitan is the stronghold of Jews, it seems; particularly of the affluent gangster from London, Colleoni. He is at home there, in his luxurious suite; his henchmen are Jews, and in the hotel lobby the Jewesses sit at ease, sneering at the shabby local boy. The real Bedford Hotel becomes in the novel the Cosmopolitan, and the Cosmopolitan is true to its name: it has a Louis Seize writing room, a Pompadour boudoir, and an American Bar. The implication is that the aliens are invading Brighton. The shabby local Catholic is hopelessly outnumbered by wealthy and powerful Jews from the City; that is one of the themes.

In the battle to control the protection-racket in betting at Brighton, Colleoni, who already controls slot-machines, is bound to win. The forces of law and order purport to be neutral, but in practice side with Colleoni. The local police advise Pinkie to give way to the greater rogue: “He’s got the alibis.” And Colleoni is buying his way

<sup>15</sup> *The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene* (London: Bodley Head, 1983), p. 159.

to even greater power: he is set to become a Conservative MP. "He'll go in for politics one day," we are told. "The Conservatives think a lot of him—he's got contacts." Consequently, with "his old Semitic face,"

he looked as a man might look who owned the whole world, the whole visible world that is, the cash registers and policemen and prostitutes, Parliament and the laws which say, 'This is Right and this is Wrong'.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most insidious part of the special pleading on Pinkie's behalf is implicit in the narrator's descriptions. Pinkie's disgust at life often seems to be shared by the narrator in his repeated observations of the drabness, the tawdriness, and the sleaziness of the world. "Why, this is Hell, nor are we out of it," says Prewitt, misquoting slightly the words of Mephistopheles in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*; and the narrator gives potent support to that near-Manichaeic sense of the Hellish lurking beneath the superficial pleasures of Brighton. At Nelson Place, where Rose's parents live, the front door's pane is broken, the passage stinks "like a lavatory," and the staircase is carpeted with old newspapers which report rape and murder. The parents, sitting amid unwashed dishes by an unlighted stove, agree to sell Rose to Pinkie for fifteen guineas, whereas Judas required thirty pieces of silver for his act of betrayal. By repeatedly noting the sordid, the narrator evokes in us a distaste which overlaps Pinkie's.

The novel's title, *Brighton Rock*, refers to confectionery, the sticks of rock sold in the shops on the sea-front. It also refers to the

stick of rock used in the murder-attempt on Hale. And the title certainly refers to human nature. Ida Arnold says to Rose:

"Look at me. I've never changed. It's like those sticks of rock: bite it all the way down, you'll still read Brighton. That's human nature . . . 'Confession . . . repentance,' Rose whispered 'That's just religion,' the woman said. 'Believe me. It's the world we got to deal with.'"<sup>17</sup>

Human nature is reassuringly consistent in Ida's view and is tainted with original sin, according to the Catholic view. Confession and repentance may briefly clear that taint for the world at large, the corruption remains. After his secular, and therefore theologically sinful, marriage to Rose, Pinkie feels that he is capable of faint tenderness towards her: he feels "the prowling pressure of pity." In the car, driving with her towards death, he even has to ward off "an enormous emotion" which "beats on him like something trying to get in: the pressure of gigantic wings against the glass. *Dona nobis pacem*." "Yes, give us peace," he thinks, as the car drives towards the blighted landscape of Peacehaven, a township established after the Great War. He actually wards off, as though they were dangerous temptations, the intimations of pity and grace. But, for all his viciousness, at least he is aware of such intimations.

In such ways, Greene develops the central paradox of *Brighton Rock*. Ida's decency prevails and Pinkie dies; but Pinkie, though wicked, is attuned to the eternal. Near the end of the novel, the priest refers to a remarkable Frenchman.

<sup>16</sup> *Brighton Rock*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

“This man decided that if any soul was going to be damned, he would be damned too. He never took the sacraments, he never married his wife in church. I don’t know, my child, but some people think he was—well, a saint.”

The Frenchman was Charles Péguy (1875-1914), a poet who was killed in the Great War. It’s he who provides the French epigraph to *The Power and the Glory*, an epigraph which in English reads:

The sinner is at the very heart of Christianity. Nobody is as competent as the sinner in the matter of Christianity. Nobody, unless it is the saint.

In Greene’s work, the shocking and dangerous paradox of the sanctified sinner is hinted at in *Brighton Rock*, is developed splendidly in *The Power and the Glory*, and reaches its extreme in *The End of the Affair* when we discover that the adulterous Sarah has become a miracle-working candidate for canonization. And these are works by the author who later said on various occasions:

I dislike the word [God] with all its anthropomorphic associations. I don’t like the term “sin.” I don’t believe in hell. With the approach of death I care less and less about religious truth. With age [...] doubt seems to gain the upper hand. It is my own fault. I’ve never been much of a religious person.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is a play written around 1607 by Cyril Tourneur

or Thomas Middleton or both. Greene knew it well. The central character is Vindice, an avenger who becomes part of the corruption he excoriates. He moves amid a debased world, denouncing sexual vice and invoking the purity of death. Pinkie is a modern Vindice, part of what he detests; a deranged Puritan who, looking at Spicer, notes the stink of whisky, the eruption around the mouth, the corn on the yellowed foot; and who, when Sylvie awaits him open-legged in the back of a car, recoils, choking in nausea: “I’d rather hang,” he says.

Like a Jacobean revenge drama, a piece of Swiftian satire, or a lurid expressionist film, *Brighton Rock* is a minor masterpiece in a highly stylized mode. It is a well-paced melodramatic thriller with metaphysical ambitions; a vivid, intense, bizarre, sardonic crime novel. Considered in an appropriate context of rather stylized literary works, or in a context of intelligent thrillers, it succeeds. If you seek sober realism, you may be disappointed. An inquisitorial critic could argue that Pinkie is a rather artificial character, an auxiliary to a vile and striking thesis, rather than a fully plausible villain. The *dénouement* of the plot depends on coincidental meetings, lucky timings and unlikely sightings, not to mention a policeman who can throw his truncheon with amazing speed and accuracy. Through the garish and blighted landscapes move some grotesque, caricatured, and pathetic characters manipulated by a narrator who sometimes seems to be a connoisseur of nastiness. *Brighton Rock* remains Graham Greene’s most memorable exploration of darkest Greenland and of the appalling paradox of the virtue of evil.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *A Preface to Greene*, pp. 85-6.

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