

A Hint of the Eucharist: Desecration, Morality, and Faith in “The Hint of an Explanation”

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Infused as it is with spiritual and moral tensions, Graham Greene’s writing resonates heavily with medieval religious literature and particularly with the moral fable favored by medieval preachers. These often-simple narratives depict typological characters who struggle for control of their souls in a world where they are beset by vices and counseled by virtues before they are ultimately saved through God’s grace. Greene’s narratives, while they depict more complex moral dilemmas, are populated by characters whose psyches are battlegrounds (often between their own divided loyalties) and by the looming threat of damnation and the notable absence of God.¹ This apparent influence of medieval typological writing seems nowhere more obvious than in “The Hint of an Explanation,” a 1948 short story where the motif of the soul as battleground is vividly drawn and where faith is deepened through moral crisis. Yet as I will demonstrate, Greene here blurs the edges of good and evil, thereby overturning the moral binarism of this story’s antecedents.

¹ Cf. Frances McCormack, “The Later Greene: From Modernist to Moralist,” *Dangerous Edges of Graham Greene: Journeys with Saints and Sinners*, ed. Dermot Gilvary and Darren J. N. Middleton (New York: Continuum, 2011) in

In this tale Blacker, one of the town’s two bakers and a self-professed “free-thinker,” attempts to persuade the ten-year-old Catholic altar boy David to procure a consecrated Eucharistic Host—one that has, through the celebration of the Mass, been transformed into the body of Christ. Blacker’s interest in the communion wafer, he insists, will provide him with the opportunity to demonstrate his own skill (“I can bake the things you eat just as well as any Catholic can”)² and to conduct an empirical enquiry into the doctrine of transubstantiation by which the Eucharist is said to transform: “Do you think if I put the two of them under a microscope, you could tell the difference? ... How I’d like to get one of yours in my mouth—just to see ... want to see what your God tastes like.”³ David procures the Host but in so doing he desecrates it, depriving it of its sacred purpose and altering its form. In so doing he is converted from spiritless enactment of religious devotion and liturgical rites to a depth of faith that results in him, in later years, taking holy orders.

Greene’s story of the sacrilegious misuse of a sacred object is not wholly original. Host desecration narratives similar to this have abounded since the Middle Ages and were often used in an attempt to justify the persecution, expulsion, and murder of Jews. Folklorist Alan Dundes describes how such accusations may have arisen from “projective inversion”—a psychological process “in which A accuses B of carrying out an action which A really

which I discuss at length Greene and the medieval moral arts.

² Graham Greene, “The Hint of an Explanation,” *Twenty-One Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1954), 40.

³ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

wishes to carry out him or herself.”⁴ Dundes explains: “It is the underlying Christian guilt for orally incorporating the blood and flesh of their god, commonly perceived as the Christ child, which makes them project that guilt to the convenient Jewish scapegoat.”⁵ These Host desecration myths depicted Jews as opponents of Christianity, intent on defilement. Blood libel myths proliferated, and Jews were falsely accused of ritually murdering Christian children in order to consume their blood. In fact, stories of the murder of children and of the desecration of the Host were often linked by the trope of ritual consumption of bread; the blood libel myths that proliferated in the Middle Ages generally saw a young boy tortured in ways that echoed Christ’s Passion, killed, exsanguinated, and his blood used to make matzah for Passover.⁶

Given Greene’s interest in medieval drama,⁷ he may have taken as his inspiration one particular dramatic retelling of such desecration myths—the only extant English Host Miracle Play, *De Conversyon of Ser Jonathas de Jewe by Myracle of de Blyssed Sacrament*, also known as the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*. In this late fifteenth-century drama Aristorius, a Christian merchant, procures a consecrated Eucharistic Host for Jonathas, a Jewish man who wants

to use the bread to disprove the doctrine of transubstantiation. In order to test and undermine the Christian belief that the Eucharistic bread is the body of Christ, Jonathas and his companions enact a series of grisly tortures upon it, echoing Christ’s Passion: it receives five wounds; it is submerged into hot oil; it is nailed to a post and then plucked down. The Host bleeds throughout this process and, finally, as it is baked in an oven, it transforms into the Christ child who rebukes his assailants. Christ heals Jonathas, who has been wounded during the ordeal, and the play ends with a conversion and a promise of pilgrimage.⁸ Although in “The Hint of an Explanation” Blacker never acquires the consecrated host to inflict these ordeals upon it, both stories (and other such analogues) have in common the persuasion of a Christian to procure the communion bread, the desire to test empirically the doctrine of transubstantiation, and a desecration that either converts or deepens faith.

The anti-Semitism of the possible analogues for Greene’s story and the historical context of desecration myths cannot be erased, especially not for the reader who is familiar with medieval drama or with the history of persecution of the Jewish people. Blacker’s threat to bleed David with his cut-throat razor echoes blood libel narratives, and

⁴ Alan Dundes, “The Ritual Murder or Blood Libel Legend: A Study of Anti-Semitic Victimization through Projective Inversion,” *Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2007), 395.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁶ In fact, antisemitic blood libel persists in church art, on pilgrimage routes, and even more broadly on social media. See, for example, Richard Utz, “Deggendorf, and the Long History of its Destructive Myth,” *Race, Racism and the Middle Ages XXXI*, *The Public Medievalist*,

<https://www.publicmedievalist.com/deggendorf/>; See also Mark Gardner, “Facebook Deletes its ‘Jewish Ritual Murder’ Page—It’s the Least We Can Expect,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, 4 January 2018, <https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/facebook-deletes-its-jewish-ritual-murder-page-it-s-the-least-we-can-expect-1.451435>

⁷ See McCormack.

⁸ Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, ed. John T. Sebastian, TEAMS: Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2012).

David's unquestioning devotion calls to mind that of the *litel clergeon* of Chaucer's *Prioress' Tale* who is persecuted, in a blood ritual, for his piety, despite his lack of understanding of the *Alma Redemptoris* that he sings. David's faith before the desecration is also merely performative. He tells his interlocutor that "it may seem odd to you, but this was the first time that the idea of transubstantiation really lodged in my mind. I had learnt it all by rote; I had grown up with the idea. The Mass was as lifeless to me as the sentences in *De Bello Gallico*, communion a routine like drill in the schoolyard, but here suddenly I was in the presence of a man who took it seriously, as seriously as the priest whom naturally one didn't count—it was his job."⁹

Greene, however, manipulates his analogues in a variety of ways to distance his tale from the anti-Semitic desecration myths. First, Blacker is not Jewish. He is a free-thinker: a sceptic who believes that religious faith should be empirically tested. This designation is ironic, as David insists that Blacker's obsession constrains, rather than liberates, his thinking: "Can you hate something you don't believe in? And yet he called himself a free-thinker. What an impossible paradox, to be free and to be so obsessed. Day by day all through those holidays his obsession must have grown, but he kept a grip; he bided his time."¹⁰ Second, it is not Blacker himself who desecrates the Host, but David. Unsure of how to procure the Host, and operating without a plan, David seizes the opportunity when the communion wafer is placed in his mouth. Here the desecration is partly accidental, and partly borne out of confusion and

desperation—broadly symbolic of how uncomfortably divine mysteries fit into human hands:

I got up and made for the curtain to get the cruet that I had purposely left in the sacristy. When I was there I looked quickly round for a hiding-place and saw an old copy of the *Universe* lying on a chair. I took the Host from my mouth and inserted it between two sheets—a little damp mess of pulp. ... I tried to remove the Host, but it had stuck clammy between the pages and in desperation I tore out a piece of the newspaper and screwing the whole thing up, stuck it in my trouser pocket.¹¹

Third, unlike in the Host desecration myths from the Middle Ages, the Host of "The Hint of an Explanation" does not physically transform by, for example, bleeding. Nor is the Host here equated with Christ's body, but it is more broadly representative of a mystery of faith that David does not fully comprehend until he attempts to defile it. In this text, the focus of the story is not on proving the doctrine of transubstantiation, or even on thinking of the Eucharist in terms of Christ's body. Rather, it is on David's changing attitude towards the sacrament and on demonstrating how that faith itself is transubstantiated, with its substance of devotion coming to match its accidents of the celebration of the liturgy.

In the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, the torture of the Host paves the way for the conversion that results from its miracles—through which Aristorius repents his sins and becomes an exemplar for the audience as well as a sign of God's mercy made manifest. In

⁹ Greene, 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

“The Hint of an Explanation,” it is David who is converted, as he comes to meditate upon and understand the significance of the Eucharistic sacrament. When, undressing for bed, he finds the crumpled piece of newspaper that enfolds the sticky Host, he is “haunted by the presence of God there on the chair. ... I knew that this which I had beside my bed was something of infinite value—something a man would pay for with his whole peace of mind.”¹² The act of conversion is, paradoxically, through one final desecration as David swallows the wafer—newspaper and all—with the help of water from the ewer. The worldliness of this act—the paradoxically cleansing waters of the ewer and the consumption of a spiritual mystery wrapped inside the materiality of the universe—intensify the paradox of faith at the heart of the text as the reader becomes implicated into the binary encoding of good and evil, light and darkness, on which such moral fables rely and that Greene constantly seeks to deconstruct in this text.

The story is one of tensions, dualities, and contradictions, just like this conversion through desecration in which David’s recognition of the earthly value of the consecrated Host brings an awareness of its spiritual worth. Similar tensions exist, for instance, in David’s insistence that Blacker is defined by his hatred, despite the fact that he sees in him a “certain furtive love.”¹³ Blacker, too, is depicted as torn—hopeful at David’s procurement of the Eucharist, but also disappointed by it: “When I came back through the curtain carrying the cruet my eyes met Blacker’s. He gave me a grin of encouragement and

unhappiness—yes, I am sure, unhappiness. Was it perhaps that the poor man was all the time seeking something incorruptible?”¹⁴ These tensions are, in fact, essential to illustrating the mysteries of faith at which David attempts to hint throughout the text—mysteries that cannot be decoded by human knowledge and experience, especially when the parameters of both are so volatile and mutable, filtered through narration, memory, and time.

Greene’s own characters are not exempt from the interpretative riddles at the heart of the story. For instance, David speculates on what Blacker would have done with the Host after obtaining it from David (“‘I really believe,’ my companion said, ‘that he would first of all have put it under his microscope before he did all the other things I expect he had planned’”),¹⁵ and he interprets Blacker’s tears as disappointment in his failure to acquire the host. Yet David acknowledges the role that his own tender age played in his interpretations by claiming that his realizations are made despite his age—“even as a child”¹⁶—and the reader is haunted by the unreliability of the version of the story that is told. Here, David’s speculation is filtered not only through youthful inexperience but also through the capriciousness of memory and through layers of narration in which a travel companion recounts a conversation with a priest that draws on memories of his younger self and that self’s interpretation of events. As Coulthard notes:

The priest is as subjective as the narrator is objective, and herein lies

¹² Ibid., 44.

¹³ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the problem of a one-level interpretation. The cleric not only tells the story, but explains its meaning to his fellow traveler. If the reader accepts the priest's interpretation of his childhood experience, the story is elementary. Its theme is that God sends saving signs, or hints, to his chosen. These hints of God's power often come in the form of evil which, with God's help, the tempted resists and eventually thwarts. ... However, if the reader chooses to interpret for himself the meaning of the priest's story (as the traveling companion, an agnostic, seems tacitly to do), he might arrive at an explication quite different from that of the priest (and Greene himself?).¹⁷

In Greene's retelling of the Host desecration myth, the author takes a tale that originates in a child's morality fable and rearranges it so that the lines between good and evil become less clearly drawn. As "The Hint of an Explanation" develops, the chiaroscuro fades into shades of grey, where Blacker is not wholly evil and where David's interpretation of events is unreliable at best. "Our view is so limited,"¹⁸ the adult David notes to his travel companion, as though to warn readers of the unreliability of his narration before contradicting himself by authoritatively presenting an interpretation of Blacker's actions (as an attempt to "revenge himself on everything he hated").¹⁹ As David's story concludes with a

description of Blacker's hopeless tears, the narrator writes that "the points switched and we were tossed from one set of rails to another."²⁰ Brother Joseph, writing for *The Explicator*, reads these lines as describing the narrator's development in understanding of the problem of evil:

The train on which the Agnostic and the priest are riding is not like the train in Blacker's store, riding on its track in circles and never reaching a destination. The real train, passing through tunnels and towns, admitting and obscuring light, absorbing flashes and flickers, is a symbol of the journey of the mind of the Agnostic as it gradually admits the flashes of truth and becomes sufficiently educated to be switched to a new track of thought about God by the hint of an explanation.²¹

Yet given the many hints Greene makes toward the unreliability of David's narration and of the limits of human understanding of divine mysteries—and given that Blacker doesn't appear to be the wholly evil and irredeemable creature that David claims²²—this switch of tracks should, perhaps, be read not as a validation of David's version of events but rather a shift in perspective that challenges that version. This seems to be confirmed by the narrator's trite statement that "it's an interesting story"²³ and that he would have given to Blacker what he wanted. "I suppose you think you owe a lot to Blacker," concludes the narrator,

¹⁷ A. R. Coulthard, "Graham Greene's 'The Hint of an Explanation': A Reinterpretation," *Studies in Short Fiction* 8.4 (1971): 601-02.

¹⁸ Greene, 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

²¹ Brother Joseph, F.S.C., "Greene's 'The Hint of an Explanation'," *The Explicator* XIX (January 1961), 3.

²² For more on the interpretative problems of the text, see Coulthard, who notes that the text is not the simple moral fable that most readers have taken "Hint" to be.

²³ Greene, 46.

reminding us of David's subjectivity and casting doubt on his version of events.

This is a text that draws on the typology of medieval moral didacticism to force the reader to question the parameters of their interpretative framework. Greene seems to offer a clear-cut moral fable through the typological naming of his antagonist, by emphasising the protagonist's youth and innocence, and in the framing of the reminiscence that promises to present us with a hint of the explanation of the problem of evil. Yet he denies the same in the moral ambiguity of his characterization by attributing sacrilege to innocence and through intricate narration. While Coulthard reads the story's shades of grey as evidence that it is "an understated satire on a proud, complacent priest who deigns to believe that God, for all his infinite mercy, would lead him into the priesthood by having him trod down a helpless, pitiable creature such as Blacker,"²⁴ it seems, however, that it is not the priest who is held up to scrutiny but the nature of evil itself. In creating a tale that is rooted in medieval moral discourse but refuses the reader the binarism that such texts provide, Greene problematizes the tropes associated with such stories and the lessons that they have traditionally purported to teach. Here the author doesn't provide a hint of an explanation, but rather complicates the problem of evil, leaving it as nameless and faceless as "the thing"²⁵ that David refuses to anthropomorphise. In doing so, he reminds us that both redemption and faith can be found as readily in the shadows on the wall²⁶ as they can elsewhere.

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²⁴ Coulthard, 60.

²⁵ Greene, 36.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.