

Here, then, are some of the bases for judgment, for seeing in the theme of 'blasphemy' issues more complex than those who took part in the recent Cambridge controversy may have suspected. Any examples may be arbitrary, but the evidence is larger than the dimensions of a university dispute and the issue more enduring.



THE NEW ROMANTICISM

A Comment on 'The Living Room'

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THOSE critics who felt uneasy about the nature of Mr Graham Greene's achievement in *The End of the Affair* will not be reassured by his first excursion into drama. *The Living Room* raises in a particularly forceful way a problem that has always been attendant on his work—that of finding what Mr Eliot has termed a satisfactory objective correlative, or 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately invoked'. The same point might be expressed by saying that Mr Greene's work tends to lack artistic inevitability, so that the tale tends either to be arbitrarily controlled by the informing theological interest, or it is quite inadequate to convey the complexity of that interest. In *Brighton Rock*, for instance, the narrative pattern is obviously incapable of carrying the deeper meanings of the tale; the distinction between good and evil and right and wrong, with which the novel is so much concerned, cannot be said to arise

organically from the characters of Pinkie and Ida Arnold. The consequent effect on the reader is the reverse of the novelist's presumed intention—the theological interest giving the impression of being a device enabling the author to heighten and sustain the emotional pitch of his 'thriller'. Neither *The Heart of the Matter* nor *The End of the Affair* seem to be free from this criticism, in spite of their obviously greater range and maturity. Only in *The Power and the Glory* does the theological interest seem entirely organic, where the central character, a priest, combines in his own person the conflicting themes of fallen man and the operation of sanctifying grace. It is significant that *The Power and the Glory* offers least to those critics who see Mr Greene's novels as illustrated exercises in apologetics. It is a mark of the confusion in *The Living Room* between art and theology, that it satisfies neither the literary critic (within whose province the play may be said to fall) nor the apologist quarrying for suitable polemic material.

Watching the play, and later reading the text, one is made increasingly aware how the theological sanctions so insistently invoked do not *belong* to the texture of the narrative, they are manipulated from without. Beneath the corrugated surface of the argument lies a simple, Romantic conception of love, classically conceived in terms of the young innocent, ardent with life, thwarted and bewildered by sanctions she cannot understand, and which seem only relentless and inhuman. How unequivocally the young innocent is presented is suggested by this: 'Don't make me think. I don't know about things. They'll all get at me if they have a chance. They'll say "Did you ever consider this? Did you ever consider that?" Please don't do that to me too—not yet. Just tell me what to do.' The problems generated from such a naïvely presented outlook are unlikely to be either far-reaching or subtle, and yet Rose is by no means intended as simple value; for instance, the priest remarks in answer to Dennis's comment: 'She was young and simple', 'Do you really think you'd have loved her if she'd been as simple as that? . . . You loved the tension in her. Don't shake your head at me. You loved just because she was capable of despair. So did I. Some of us are too small to contain that

terrible side—she wasn't, and we loved her for that.'

There, focused sharply, is the gap in the play between the actual person presented and the 'value' she is intended to convey. It exists again here:

JAMES: When you say 'Father' you seem to lock my mouth. There are only hard things to say.

ROSE: I only wanted somebody to say 'Do this, do that', I only want somebody to say 'Go here, go there'. I don't want to think any more.

JAMES: And if I say, 'Leave him'—

ROSE: I couldn't bear the pain.

JAMES: Then you'd better go with him, if you're as weak as that.

ROSE: But I can't bear hers either.

JAMES: You're such a child. . . .

The words are there for Rose, but they remain 'lines', there is no pressure behind them, no weight of experience to justify their use. 'What a lot of growing up you've done in the last three weeks', the priest says to her, but the comment is not realised dramatically, it remains on the same level as the character direction in Act II (*Rose [enters] She has changed since we last saw her . . . she isn't quite as pretty as she was. Disappointments, decisions and frustrations have filled the weeks and she has had time to think.*) Rose's immaturity, so integral a part of her 'charm', is for Greene's artistic purpose disabling, in that it prevents him from exploring, through her, the real complexities that might reasonably be expected to accompany the situation in which she finds herself. As it is, exploration is limited to the assertion of 'spontaneity of feeling' which when checked becomes bewildered and finally dies. Rose's remark to the priest about Dennis—'I told him not to make me think. I warned him not to'—is all too indicative of the way in which the problem dissolves into the simple Romantic opposition between heart and head, with theology as décor.

The unsatisfactory creation of Rose is fatal to the organisation of the play as a whole; it helps to account for the impression that here one is watching the form of an argument, strenuously conducted, without the protagonists ever becoming actually engaged. Just as Rose remains outside the

area of the priest's discussion—words charged with meaning for him are empty formulae to her—so does her lover remain equally remote from the position maintained by the priest. There is no possibility of argument because there is a complete failure to appreciate the possibility of an alternative viewpoint; in such a context one can only assert and deny. Oscillating uneasily and selfconsciously between being a married man carrying on a hole-and-corner love affair and a rationalist psychologist combating the Catholicism of his mistress's family, Rose's lover exhibits a radical uncertainty in the organisation of the play. It betrays itself, for instance, in his reply to the priest's remark 'I thought Freud said there was no such thing as guilt'—'For God's sake, don't talk psychology at me today. Psychology wasn't any use to her. Books, lectures, analysis of dreams. Oh, I knew the hell of a lot about the human mind, didn't I . . .'. The repudiation is facile, not to say novelettish, and it has obvious affinities with the cult of 'simple feeling'. The symbolism of the living room itself seems heavily contrived, and in spite of the attention drawn to it, its effect remains primarily atmospheric; it is a symbol perhaps of the limitations of the play.