

stand him in the light of what he has written rather than on the basis of some incident from his past.

Finally, where does this leave the autobiography itself? If his life is so unimportant for his writing, what value can an account of it be? The answer is twofold. First, it is valuable because it demonstrates precisely how slight a part his life does play in his work. He points out noteworthy links and associations, most of his books get a mention at some stage, but that is all. As far as he is concerned, working from within and forgetful of his past, there is nothing else to tell. *A Sort of Life*, therefore, sets the perspective for interpreting the rest of his writings. And, secondly, it is valuable because it describes the one period of his life which he believes is genuinely influential, namely childhood. Thus the final judgment on his autobiography must be very favourable, for it makes it possible to understand Greene in the way that it is most vital for him to be understood, as a writer.

Fragment of an Autobiography by E. E. Evans-Pritchard

One has often been asked by incredulous, though well-meaning, people—and almost apologetically—‘Why did you become a Catholic?’ The suggestion being that there must be some explanation to account for such a strange, even a remarkable, lapse from rational behaviour on the part of one supposed to be some sort of scientist. The question is not well put. I suppose that none of us can say truthfully and certainly why we do anything. It would be better to ask not *why*, but *how*, did a man become a Catholic; and this is the question I shall attempt to answer, so that next time I am asked why I became a Catholic I can just hand over this number of *New Blackfriars*. Perhaps even more alarming and difficult to give a direct answer to is the question: ‘When were you converted?’ Perhaps I had better deal with that one first.

Some people, it would seem, have peculiar notions about what is called ‘conversion’, as though it were some sudden and dazzling experience (it may be with some people; I do not know). So, we are led to suppose, this is what happened on the road to Damascus, but if that dramatic incidence, that traumatic vision, occurred as described, we might recollect that Paul was a highly religious Jew, and so was Jesus, a Jew preaching unto Jews in the tradition of Jewish thought and expression. And we might also bear in mind that when we read that Augustine was converted by Ambrose that

Augustine was a Neo-Platonist and was already, so to speak, half-way there. So, if we may compare little things with big things, we come to me, which is embarrassing, but obviously I cannot talk about myself without some 'I's and 'me's.

I am the son of a clergyman of the Church of England, a simple, humble, pious man, with strong leanings towards the *Unam Sanctam*. If he had any bias it was against dissenters. He would say in a tone of charitable exasperation that so-and-so might be a drunkard, a poacher, and a wife-beater, but at least he wasn't a Methodist. Also, although he tried to conceal it, when he wasn't exercising his usual lovely discretion he could not approve of St Paul, who he felt had, in a magnificent way, it is true, somehow lost and won at the same time. My father died at 72. My mother lived till 97. She was a sentimental kind of Christian. She never mentioned it, but in sorting out my books recently I came across a printed book of her poems, dedicated to her mother, to whom she had a loving attachment to her last moments; and they were so sugary that they made me feel slightly sick. She must have changed a lot since then; perhaps that is why she never mentioned the poems. Anyhow, when I became a Catholic and had to face some personal difficulties, as many of us have had to do, she backed me up and said that no one in their senses would do anything else. She ran our home, though, I think, in some ways misguidedly, and I pay my respects, even now not without tears.

My father came from Caernarvonshire of farming stock, though I am not sure what his father did; nor do I know what his religious background was—it was probably Calvinist, but my father was brought up by an Anglican parson in Anglesea. My mother's family came from near Portarlington, some sixty miles west of Dublin. They were Anglo-Irish, having come to Ireland in Strongbow's invasion in the twelfth century; and they were strongly Fenian in sympathy and suffered thereby. We still have a castle, Lea Castle, a ruin, thanks to Cromwell. The Welsh and Irish meet in Liverpool—my maternal great grandfather was a prominent public figure in that city. I suppose my father and mother met there. And there my father, rather reluctantly, and after a slightly stormy career at Oxford—in which his son followed in his footsteps—became ordained and served as a curate in some parish in Liverpool, preaching in both English and Welsh, until, always having been in delicate health, he was advised to move to the South of England, to Crowborough, in Sussex, where I and my elder brother were born. I may as well complete the picture. My brother was an exceptionally brilliant classical scholar who, after Winchester, went to Jesus College, Oxford, where he began to show schizophrenic symptoms. He has been in a mental home ever since. I might add that I was a seven-months baby. The doctors said that I had not a chance of life; but I had a devoted mother and I am obstinate.

I mention just the barest facts about my family and only in order

to make it clear that 'conversion' is an ambiguous word which explains little, if anything. I was brought up in a religious home and at religious schools and college. It is true that the faith was often dim, but the light, though sometimes a flicker, never quite died out and at moments of crisis would flare again. I could not have faced the dangers I had to face in Africa and during the Second World War had I not known that I had divine support. During this period of crag and moorland, this period when the light was scarcely to be seen, I twice attempted unsuccessfully to be received into the Catholic Church. I was put off by the catechism and some of the arid scholastic, theological and tortuous arguments with which I was familiar (the God I had been taught to revere was not just a lot of attributes but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). I won't go into details, but looking back I can see what a deep unobtrusive influence on my life were two persons whose names I do not even know: a Russian Jesuit in the Tyrol and a secular priest in Trans-jordan. But I was not yet ready. The catechism was still more than I could stomach—it still is, but I have learnt, and so am able to tell younger men faced with the same obstacles and who, on occasions, have consulted me, that if you want the pearl of no price you have got to take the oyster with it (it would seem, however, that some people like oysters).

So there was nothing sudden or anything to write about my conversion, though that is what I am doing. It was a slow maturing; accumulating much sin, I regret to say, on the way to the final plunge. This came towards the end of the war, when I was liaison between the Military Administration of Cyrenaica and the Bedouin of that country (my Arabic at that time was fluent and Bedawi). I had been for a long camel journey through the desert and that gave me time for reflection, and with the encouragement of some Catholic friends (I am trying to keep away from names, but I must mention the present Prior of our one and only Carthusian Monastery) and the patience of the Catholic Chaplain, Fr Turner (I think the catechism bored him as much as it did me). Between us we made it and I was received into the Church in the Cathedral of Benghazi. To have made that final surrender was, of course, rapture: *Di un ciego y oscuro salto*. But rapture or no rapture, what I am trying to say is that I have always been a Catholic at heart (most of my friends have been Catholics or Jews) and that it took me thirty years to take that final dive; so 'conversion' can be a very confusing term. I have no regrets. Bad Catholic though I be, I would rather be a bad one than not one at all.