

PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/104314>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2021-10-20 and may be subject to change.

In the Valley of the Shadows

Since the publication of his autobiographical silhouette *A Sort of Life* in 1971, we have known that it was boredom bordering on disgust that made Graham Greene embark on that 'journey without maps' that writing is. He was able to repress boredom until his death by means of writing two hundred words a day, but also by means of one particular book. When he was fourteen, he borrowed Marjorie Bowen's historical novel *The Viper of Milan* from the library. And the book entered his public school world, coloured it and explained it. By discovering the picture of his own world, he discovered the creation of a world picture and, consequently, literature. But there was also the fictional character Visconti,

with his beauty, his patience, and his genius for evil, I had watched him pass by many a time in his black Sunday suit smelling of mothballs. His name was Carter. He exercised terror from a distance like a snowcloud over the young fields. Goodness has only once found a perfect incarnation in a human body and never will again, but evil can always find a home there. Human nature is not black and white but black and grey. I read that all in *The Viper of Milan* and I looked around and I saw it was so.

And that was the way the world was peopled. There is one figure, worse than evil, he says nothing about: the traitor. Next to Carter stands Watson (a henchman's name), whose real name was Wheeler. Carter, Watson, Greene, there we have the creation and immediate perception of the eternal triangle – the hunter, the snitch and the hunted, the power, the henchman and the oppressed: snitch and henchman the worst of the three since they are the most cowardly. His childhood devils – Greene saw their true nature in a novel and recreated them in numerous novels of his own, the products of the greatest obsession of his life: writing, which gives the hunted a moment of power as he seeks out evil and confronts it. The underworld is raised to the surface.

I have always been fascinated by Carter, the torturer and terrorist, who, with the support of an innocent authoress, managed to conjure up a picture of the world. The first part of Norman Sherry's biography of Greene, which appeared two years ago, provided hardly any new information about him. His full name was Lionel Arthur Carter, he was born in 1904 and died in 1971. He appears in a group photograph: Greene is looking at the camera from across his row, a rather shy boy in the background, with a defenceless smile. Carter is in the row in front of him, the only one with a somewhat mocking smile, a handsome little sixteen year old despot; Wheeler has a chubby face, and looks mainly very pliable. In a sports photo with seven others Carter wears a superior smile. He has the sharpest and most beautiful eyes of them all. The power of the youthful idol, admired and feared at the same time, is not difficult to recognise. Wheeler seems to be panting with his own obesity. As I look at the two heads I realise that they are responsible for the making of a writer. The boy in the background recognised *the man within* and saw through him.

In December 1951, Greene, by now famous all over the world, was in Kuala Lumpur. Having just returned from a three-day patrol in the area occupied by the communist guerillas, he found himself in a shop. He was tired of Malaysia. Next to him he heard a voice saying: 'You are Greene, aren't you?'. There was a man standing close to him. Watson, Greene writes: it was Wheeler. For a moment he could not remember the name and he realised how deeply the feelings of revenge which had once held him in their grip had sunk away. Wheeler ran into an old friend, Greene into an old enemy. I now quote from *A Sort of Life*:

I said, 'What are you doing now?'

'Customs and excise. Do you play polo?'

'No.'

'Come along and see me play one evening.'

'I'm just off to Malacca.'

'When you get back. Talk over old times. What inseparables we were — you and me and old Carter.' (...)

'What's happened to Carter?'

'He went into cables and died.'

That last sentence is masterly in its brevity. Nothing ever happened in Carter's life.

On his way back to the hotel Greene wondered if he would ever have written a single book if it had not been for Watson and dead Carter: 'if those years of humiliation had not given me an excessive desire to prove that I was good at something, how long the effort might prove.' It turns out that his only revenge was to consist of never phoning Watson back. He had easily forgotten him, as he had forgotten dead Carter (who was not really to die until many years later!).

This dialogue, of which I quoted a part, is, as always with Greene, admirable for its brevity, but at the same time horrifying because of the silence it suggests: this is a dialogue between strangers. Suspicion too can cause silence, especially when one speaker plays the part of interrogator, while the other one can always be a traitor. I know few writers who can write such ominous dialogues as Greene. This results in humour, which is often present, of a particularly grim kind. Silence is the space in which the characters' thoughts are described. (In the plays and in a film like *The Third Man*, these can only be guessed at). People and their words are enveloped by an atmosphere of discomfort. Clouds are gathering overhead, but lightning never strikes to release the tension. The last book that was published in his lifetime, *Reflections*, a collection of older, mostly journalistic pieces, opens with a piece on a visit to Dublin. The final paragraph runs like this:

But the most impressive thing about Dublin is its expectant, but apathetic air. Everyone is idle, but waiting. The stark ruins of the Four Courts and the Custom House, and a silent crowd of perhaps fifty people listening to a barrel-organ, or watching an officer giving orders to a sentry, are symbols of the Dublin of today. It is like that most nightmarish of dreams, when one finds oneself in some ordinary and accustomed place, yet with a constant fear at the heart that something terrible, unknown and unpreventable is about to happen.

This is remarkably like Belfast in 1991. Whether this is really what Dublin was like in 1923 does not actually matter. This is how Greene experienced the city. Wherever he went, the world was filled with threatening horrors. The signs he was so good at detecting spoke to him of doom and foreboding. He was a master at creating an atmosphere of tangible threat. When he lands at an airport we already know: something is brewing below the surface and in the air, and Carter and Watson are waiting for him in the arrival hall. Greene's words about the work of Mauriac are in many ways equally applicable to his own work:

When a door opens in a novel by Mauriac, even before one leaves the shadows to enter the well-lit room where the characters are assembled, one is aware of forces of Good and Evil that slide along the walls and press their fingers against the window-pane ready to crowd it.

Wartime and the tropics, in their half-developed state and with their exiles from the western world, were ideal material for him. In the threatening burden of heat and the kind of disorder in which anything is possible, he recognised his own world. He travelled widely, but only, one might say, to reach his native soil. He must have experienced the neutrality of the civilised world as a kind of formal hypocrisy. How happy he was to discover a conspiracy from his own place of residence, Antibes. On the azure coast, evil and treason were afoot, hunting for their victims. Perhaps this last word is a characteristic one: victims suggest compassion. Greene always stood up for the oppressed and the hunted, whether they were pauperised, tormented, spies or criminals.

The victim presupposes a hunter or an executioner, in any case: power. And power is evil. It is the only thing Greene condemns. He never condemns weakness, but he always condemns dominance, America's dominance, for instance, over Nicaragua, Cuba, Panama. The dominance of the existing moral order over the weak, over the whisky-priest from his best novel, *The Power and the Glory*, and over Scobie from *The Heart of the Matter*, his two greatest compassion-demanding characters. But supreme power rests with the Almighty, who makes demands which are

beyond human capacity and make life a torment. Greene became a Roman Catholic in the 1920s. He gradually loosened his ties with that church and he confessed that he belonged to its 'foreign legion'. His belief stopped at the portal of the church. He thought himself too weak to go any further. The Almighty can take on the demanding appearance of evil. The supreme good becomes supremely evil. In his essays and novels, Greene has often written impressively about the merciful nature of the church and its understanding of weakness, but it seems he did not consider himself worthy of it.

There was a further problem: belief and his perception of reality were diametrically opposed. Within the cool walls of the church, everything was logical and coherent. But outside even the most consecrated ground made him lose his religious footing. 'If the devil exists, there must be a God,' he wrote, and this is what he hinted at in his great novels. But in his later work the divine comedy became more and more diabolically humorous. Greene became more and more of an outsider.

How should we describe his picture of the world? He concluded a piece in *Reflections*, in which he describes a misunderstanding in Cuba, with the following sentence: 'There seems to have been a struggle somewhere in higher circles between the intention and the practice.' If I had to choose a motto for Greene's work, it would be this sentence. It indicates a suspicion, while the mystery remains, and there is no explanation. The 'the higher circles' can be interpreted in many different ways. In the meantime, people continue to be victimised.

That sentence is followed by a three-line rhyme:

Between the conception
 And the creation
 Falls the Shadow

Between dream and action, between intention and realisation, between idea and reality. The shadow of impotence, of darkness, of evil, if you like, for even profane everyday reality is full of diabolical tricks. Those lines must have been dear to him. In a different piece in the same book he quotes Eliot's original text:

Between the idea
 And the reality
 Between the motion
 And the act
 Falls the Shadow.

Throughout his work the shadow never ceases to fall, always between dream and action, and this is what makes human existence deeply humorous. The shadows take on many shapes: every human being casts his shadow on someone else, eternal light can only be perceived by the shadows it projects, relationships are mostly shadow plays, and the world is the well-known valley of the shadows and thereby of death. But the greatest shadow in Graham Greene's work may well be his own. Wherever he goes and looks around him, there is always the falling of the shadow, as we are afforded a glimpse of the true nature of things. And isn't the hunt for Harry Lime in *The Third Man* the hunt for a shadow, becoming reality in the gutters of Vienna?

Last Wednesday afternoon I came out of the London underground and I read the huge headlines in the *Evening Standard*: 'Graham Greene Dead'. I was shocked. The shadow was falling. But something else was happening at the same time: suddenly I was confronted with a once familiar picture of the world: the people, the cars, the activity that surrounded me took on a threatening and ominous appearance. There I was: a total stranger in a terrifying city. I found myself back in what has been called 'Greenland'. I was suddenly nearly forty years younger, and did not so much experience a different world picture as a different *Zeitgeist*: the spirit of the late Forties, early Fifties. It is that spirit, and with it the minds of many who were then alive, which Greene has reproduced so unforgettably, even in the work that was published before the war. He could scent danger, as great writers can, before the scent had actually spread. If Jesus was already betrayed in Judas' youth, then the world of evil and traitors, of threats and victims, of powermongers and the powerless, of fear and mercy, was already given shape around 1920 in an English boarding school. The days of Carter and Watson lasted well into the sixties. For Greene, they may now finally be over.

The final victim is bound to be Greene's biographer, the American Norman Sherry. Greene forced him to become his double (which somewhat made him a part of the great shadow). For his biography, he had to make every journey Greene had ever made. It took him fifteen years to write the first part, about the years between 1904 and 1939. He is hoping to publish the second part in two years' time. And then what? Having reached the final page, he will have to die himself. Greene will undoubtedly arrange that from the hereafter. Sherry's picture in front of me shows a good-humoured, middle-aged *bon vivant*. If I were Sherry, I would postpone the completion of the biography until I was eighty-six years old. By that time, the double will have completed the course of his life. The shadow will be free to fall.

According to Greene, the novelist is the victim of a passion. There, power comes in again. The choice to become a writer established a connection between Greene and another absolute power. He was a great and mostly exemplary victim, who, at the same time, had great power over language, over a world in which only detectives are happy, over his readers, who took over his picture of the world. And ultimately, this makes all his readers the victims of Carter and Watson, the tradesman and the swindler.

Translated by Odin Dekkers

Norman Sherry, *The life of Graham Greene*, vol. I, Jonathan Cape 1989.