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## **“NO, NOT A PIECE OF GRIT!”: GRAHAM GREENE’S FICTION IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LITERARY CRITICISM**

**С.Н. Филлюшкина. «Нет, не песчинка!». Размышления над романами Грэма Грина. Воронеж: Изд-во «Институт ИТОУР» 2010, 151 с.**

Graham Greene (1904–1991) is one of the best known twentieth-century British writers. During his long writing career, which started with the publication of his poems in 1925, Greene produced twenty-five novels, two collections of short stories, two travel books, seven plays, two biographies, two autobiographies, film scripts and film criticism, and numerous literary and journalistic essays. However, he received popular and literary acclaim first and foremost as a novelist. In his novels Greene created a highly distinctive fictional world, which critics called “Greeneland”. As described by Marc Bosco, “Greeneland” is a world of “constant anxiety, beset with criminals and conspirators, characterized by dark plots, ‘seedy’ locations and anguished, alienated characters”<sup>1</sup>. In his autobiography *A Sort of Life* (1971) Greene wrote that if he were to choose an epigraph for all the novels he had written, it would be from Robert Browning’s poem “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” (1855):

Our interest’s on the dangerous edge of things,  
The honest thief, the tender murderer,  
The superstitious atheist [...]

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<sup>1</sup> Bosco, Mark: *Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press 2005. P. 25–26.

These lines aptly summarize Greene's preoccupation with moral dilemmas and his interest in the exploration of extreme situations of faith, doubt, commitment and betrayal. Greene, who converted to Catholicism at the age of twenty-one, drew inspiration from his Catholic experience and belief and became a celebrated master of the genre of "Catholic novel" in twentieth-century literature<sup>2</sup>. As a "Catholic" author he stands in the company of other literary converts in England, such as T.S. Eliot, G.K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh and Muriel Spark<sup>3</sup>.

Another important source of inspiration for the writer was his travel. Throughout his life Greene travelled far from England, to the world's remote places (Liberia, Mexico, West Africa, Vietnam, Cuba, Haiti, Argentina). He was an eye witness to many dramatic events and made friends with such different people as the fellow Catholic writer Evelyn Waugh, the Spanish Catholic priest Father Leopoldo Durán, Charlie Chaplin, Fidel Castro and Kim Philby, who would later be revealed as a Soviet agent. As a novelist Greene wove the characters he met and the places where he lived into the fabric of his novels. Greene initially divided his fiction into serious works (his "Catholic" novels) and what he called "entertainments" – variations of popular forms (the thriller, the detective story) often combined with the genre of political novel. However, Greene later dropped this distinction, finding it problematic. In fact, Greene's novels undermine the traditional division into "high" and "popular" literature, which aligns them with much postmodern fiction.

Greene's works have been translated into many languages and received considerable critical attention. The monograph by Svetlana N. Filushkina, Professor of Voronezh State University (Russia), is distinguished by the manner in which it synthesizes twentieth-century Greene scholarship produced both in English (S. Hazard, W. Allen, A.A. Devitis, R. Hoskins, M. Sheldon, N. Sherry) and in Russian (V. Dneprov, N. Vladimirova, V. Ivasheva, N. Ayshyskina, S. Belza, A. Zverev)<sup>4</sup>. Filushkina's book offers a comprehensive and thoughtful analysis of Greene's major novels combining the perspectives of stylistics (tropological analysis), narratology and intertextual studies with thematic analysis of character types and recurrent motifs.

The title of Filushkina's book is an allusion to Greene's letter to a fellow writer, Elizabeth Bowen, in which he describes the role of a writer in contemporary society. Greene was convinced that a writer had "greater obligations" to society than other people; however, he expressed this idea in an ironic understatement saying

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<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 156. Cf. also Tarnawski, Wit. *Pisarze chrześcijańskiej rozpaczy*: Mauriac, Graham Greene, Bernanos. Londyn: Oficyna Poetów i Malarzy 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Pearce, Joseph: *Literary Converts*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Филишкіна, С. Н.: «Нет, не песчинка». Размышления над романами Грэма Грина. Воронеж: Изд-во «Институт ИТОУР» 2010.

that a writer should be like “a piece of grit in the state machinery”<sup>5</sup>. This demeaning metaphor, reflecting Greene’s characteristic pessimism, can also be understood as the writer’s self-assessment. Filushkina polemicizes with Greene’s skeptical view of his own work and in her book sets out to demonstrate the importance of Greene’s moral vision and his humanist message for contemporary readers.

Filushkina’s book consists of five parts. In her discussion of Greene’s novels, Filushkina does not follow the chronological principle; instead, she groups the novels according to their common thematic concerns. What emerges from this structure is a multidimensional portrait of the writer in all his complexity: Greene the moralist, Greene the philosopher, Greene the political writer and Greene the literary artist.

Part I entitled “By way of introduction” provides the relevant biographical information and introduces the reader to “Greeneland”. In this part Filushkina argues that the dominant theme of Greene’s works is the conflict in the protagonist’s soul caused by the imperfection of the world in which he lives. This imperfection stems, on the one hand, from uncontrollable and destructive forces at work both in the world and in the human heart, and on the other, from the non-rational and unjust organization of society, of which humans themselves are guilty. This argument is substantiated in the subsequent chapters of the book.

Filushkina concludes the introductory part by tracing the evolution of Greene as a novelist. She divides his work into four stages: 1) the early period (the first half of the 1930s) begins with the publication of the writer’s first novel, *The Man Within*, in 1929 and is influenced by the political climate of the Red Decade, which can be seen in Greene’s first attempts to combine moral and psychological issues with social themes; 2) the second period (the second half of the 1930s – the beginning of the 1950s) is characterized by the writer’s concern with moral, philosophical and religious problems; it is during this period that Greene creates his famous cycle of “Catholic” novels and divides his works into serious novels and “entertainments”; 3) during the third period (the mid-1950s – the mid-1960s) Greene writes novels which deal with current political issues and contain harsh political and social critique (*The Quiet American*, *Our Man in Havana*, *The Comedians*); his last great “Catholic” novel, *A Burnt-out Case*, also belongs to this period; 4) during the last three decades of his life the writer continues his exploration of familiar themes and genres adding new shades of meaning.

The useful introduction is followed by Part II entitled “In search of moral and spiritual reference points” which looks closely and subtly at Greene’s most famous “Catholic” novels: *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) and *The End of the Affair* (1951). Filushkina concentrates on the analysis of the opposition between “righteous” and “sinful” characters, which is

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<sup>5</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth et al. (eds): ‘Why Do I Write?’ (An Exchange of Views between Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene and V. S. Pritchett). London: Percival Marshall 1948. P. 48.

central to Greene's novels and which embodies the clash of two diametrically opposed moral stands: one position is exemplified by those characters who follow written laws and dogmatic formulae, whereas the other is represented by the protagonists who undergo extreme spiritual, psychological and physical trials and transgress commonly accepted laws, moral rules and norms of behaviour (for example, the lieutenant versus the whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory*; the believing Sarah versus the unbelieving Bendrix in *The End of the Affair*; Rose's Catholic world of good and evil versus Ida's utilitarian world of right and wrong in *Brighton Rock*; Scobie's tortured conscience in conflict with his own sense of responsibility and pity in *The Heart of the Matter*). Filushkina points out that Greene makes his readers sympathize with his "sinful" characters who seem to be closer to God for, according to Greene, salvation can only be achieved through sin and suffering.

In Part III, "The individual in relation to society and to the world of current politics", Filushkina turns her attention to those novels in which secular concerns predominate in themes and whose plots deal with real political conflicts of Greene's time. These novels are characterized by sharp political and social criticism; political struggles and moral commitments to political situations displace the extreme religious dilemmas typical of the writer's "Catholic" novels. This part – the longest one in the book – consists of five sections. In the first section, the author considers the problem of humanism, human action and responsibility in Greene's psychological detective fiction written in the 1930s–1940s (*A Gun for Sale*, *The Confidential Agent* and *The Ministry of Fear*). Although Greene classified these works as "entertainments", they vividly portray the topical problems of the day and show that the tragedy of the human condition is connected with concrete socio-political circumstances. The second section discusses the problem of moral choice in the novel *The Quiet American*, tracing the modification of the "sinful" and "righteous" character types which appeared earlier in the writer's "Catholic" novels. The third section deals with the problem of truth and appearance, faith and lack of faith in the novel *The Comedians*. The fourth section examines the artist in conflict with society and in struggle with himself (*A Burnt-out Case*). The fifth section closes Part III with a discussion concerning the individual in relation to state institutions in *Our Man in Havana*, *Travels with My Aunt* and *The Honorary Consul*.

In this part of her book Filushkina addresses the ambiguous relationship between Catholicism and Marxism in Greene's novels, which has been the subject of much debate in Greene scholarship. Some critics have argued that the prominence of Catholicism decreased in Greene's later novels. According to Ernest Mandel, the better Greene came to know the realities of the third world, the greater importance Marxist political critique assumed in his works; this change was reflected in his moving away from asserting the merciful function of religion in a context of human misery to public criticism of orthodox Catholic teaching<sup>6</sup>. By contrast, Mark Bosco

<sup>6</sup> Mandel, Ernest: *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*. London: Pluto 1984.

maintains that a constructive dialogue between Catholicism and Marxism is present in all of Greene's works; in his opinion, Greene's later novels testify to the development of the writer's Catholic imagination under the influence of Vatican Council II (1965) that offered a new and wider vision of the Church. According to Bosco, Greene combined Catholicism and Marxism as "interpretive discourses to understand the human factor in the struggle for liberation" because it enabled him to bring together two of his central concerns: "the question of faith and belief in an alienating bourgeois society and the experience of exploitation by the social, political, and even religious structures of nations"<sup>7</sup>. Filushkina offers a well-balanced discussion of the influence of Greene's faith on his writing without ignoring the contradictions in Greene's Catholicism or the evolution of his belief. In her opinion, Greene, who witnessed the disastrous effects that the dominance of "great" ideologies produced in the twentieth century, finds the notion of "ideological convictions" problematic because such convictions often reduce the complexity of human relationships to ready-made political, moral or religious frameworks. According to Filushkina, Greene criticizes both the abstract moral rules of Marxism and the self-satisfied religious pietism of orthodox Catholicism. She illustrates Greene's critique of stereotypical ideological thinking by a subtle analysis of Pyle in *The Quiet American* quoting the writer's memorable description of this character:

He had no more of a notion than any of you what the whole affair's about [...] He never saw anything he hadn't heard in a lecture-hall, and his writers and his lecturers made a fool of him. When he saw a dead body he couldn't see the wounds. A Red menace, a soldier of democracy<sup>8</sup>.

As Filushkina argues, Greene's novels provide a critical vision of any system of belief that makes the individual think and behave according to dogmatic formulae.

Part IV, "The writer in the context of world literature", examines Greene's engagement with European culture at large and successfully highlights Greene's intertextual links with Dickens, Dostoevsky and Cervantes by focusing on the novels *England Made Me* (1935), *Doctor Fischer of Geneva or The Bomb Party* (1980) and *Monsignor Quixote* (1982). Filushkina convincingly demonstrates an affinity between Greene and Dickens, especially in the way Greene continues the Dickensian tradition of the grotesque in character delineation (for example, in the depiction of Doctor Fischer's guests or the crooked tycoon Krogh in *England Made Me*). With Dostoevsky Greene shares typological similarity: both writers are concerned with "eternal" problems (the sense of human life, suffering, loneliness, good and evil); both use suspense, elements of detective fiction and both have an acute sense of social injustice. In a very interesting fashion, Filushkina relates Greene's "Catholic" novels to Dostoevsky's work and compares "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" from *The Brothers Karamazov* with the protagonist's dream in *Monsignor Quixote*. As to

<sup>7</sup> Bosco, M.: *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination*. P. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Greene, Graham.: *The Quiet American*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House 1959. P. 44.

Greene's intertextual dialogue with Cervantes, Filushkina explains how Greene's direct references and allusions to the work of the Spanish author become the source of reflection and polemic in his novel *Monsignor Quixote*.

Part V entitled "The writer's craft" offers an illuminating focus on Greene's literary aesthetic and his contribution to the development of twentieth-century psychological fiction. Filushkina discusses Greene's skilful use of subtext as a means of narrators' and characters' (self-) characterization and analyses the symbolism of artistic detail in his writing. In her examination of literary allusions and quotations used in Greene's works she identifies their main function as that of generalization, which means that intertextual borrowings in Greene's novels primarily serve the aim of underscoring some typical features of the situations and psychological states described by the writer. Filushkina also deals with the role of the unconscious in Greene's creativity and discusses the difference between the real author and the implied author in Greene's works.

Filushkina's book is remarkable for its scope and clarity of exposition. Intellectually profound and erudite, it does justice to the range and depth of Greene's works. Most importantly, Filushkina's reading of Greene's novels emphasizes the writer's humanism and anti-dogmatism.

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