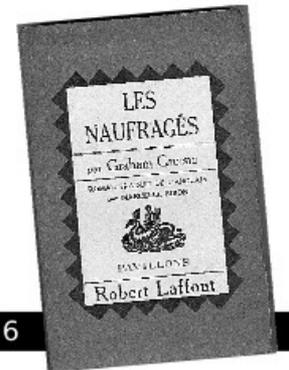


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SURVIVAL TREATY IN A MODERN ENVIRONMENT

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England Made Me by GRAHAM GREENE

One is led to believe that by now, everything has been said about Graham Greene. Certainly everything has been written; files have been closed for years, wearing out the publicity enthusiasts themselves, having been read so many times. His dull childhood at Berkhamstead School; his suicidal adolescence (helped by Russian roulette). His years at the Foreign Office; his position in at the English Catholic Writers' club (between Evelyn Waugh and Victor S. Pritchett). All that is missing to fill the bill is a reputation of being a womaniser and manic depressive. In the centre of all this bric à brac reigns an image of the owner (face swollen and red from alcohol, mouth mangled by dentists and extraordinary blue eyes as though lurking below the prow of a ship) but also and above all, his work; twenty or so novels, five collections of short stories, tales of his journeys, his essays, not to mention his autobiography in two volumes.- itself preceded in the tradition of Henry James, by a quantity of introductions to novels published by Robert Laffont in France – without doubt to discourage over zealous readers from confusing the writer's reality with the fiction's logic.

However, despite this incredible wealth, both written and in real life, we believe there is little we don't know about Graham Greene. We would do well to leave him to rest in our grandmother's and our parents' bookcases along with his fellow writers John Buchan and Somerset Maugham. Why should we be interested in this English novel which dates back to the 1930s and 50s, cramped into a hackneyed form, full of outdated ideas, isolated by an outdated style (a style in which the "literature writing" is banished and deliberately taken over by the metaphor, and where – the biggest scandal of all – the irony is only second grade !)?

What can Greene teach us about the era of auto-fiction and the introspective contemplation of one's tummy button; isn't such obscure analysis more to do with business than the spiritual ethos of writing?

In reality the number of different labels that the critics have stuck on Greene for so long (now they have decided quite simply to ignore him, to imagine that without him the image of the modern novel hasn't changed) is a sign of embarrassment. Author not only of catholic novels, detective novels and spy stories, (even though as we shall see, these distinctions are arbitrary), a tireless traveller, English to the bone and a patriot, a staunch supporter of Castro (before he invaded Havana), and an astonished spectator of Padre Pio's stigmata. Author of *Power and Glory*, *J'accuse* (*The Dark Side of Nice*) a pamphlet on the under-hand political machinations on the French Riviera and which made the medecin family clan tremble (and another family with a capital F). Our country, which prefers to dabble in literature in a French-garden style does not appreciate what they consider to be a permanent contradiction.

Attracted at one time by the solid construction of Greene's novels, by the familiar atmosphere, that stood out a mile, it wasn't long before the critics perceived that these same novels no longer fitted into these predetermined structures. As a result they reshuffled them and took to categorizing him within topics of current events: When *A Gun for Sale* was published he was labelled a detective author. During this period his novels were predominantly influenced by religious concerns (*Power and Glory*, *Brighton Rock*, *The Heart of the Matter* and *The end of the Affair*) and he was classed as a catholic author. In the following decade with *Our Man in Havana* and *The Human Factor*, he became the espionage novelist, akin to John le Carré All these different "labels" were of course carefully separated from each other like different categories of employees working in the same office.

Regardless of this radical treatment the discomfort persists – the same discomfort that is causing Greene's works to find themselves on the shelf, despite the recent film adaptations (*The End of the Affair*¹, *The Quiet American*²) and a few rather ineffective reprints of the collection 10/18.

It goes without saying that this systematic labelling of Greene's work has no logic to it. As a skilful technician Greene uses his techniques to perfect a succession of different ideologies that only he could succeed in doing. The detective element finds itself associated within the hard and fast psychological novel. A spy intrigue could almost always be coupled with a moral observation, both very sardonic and subtle in respect of the characters, and their actions. Fatality which animates the hero's slightest movements can, at the drop of a hat, take on the apparent appearance of God, before being submerged once again by the quirks of everyday life. Then there is of course, the humour, which pervades everything, always present, with a cruelty that, as the moments pass leaves our laughter stuck in our throats. Of course Greene gives the impression he knows how to distinguish between the "genre" novels and the morally and more stylishly ambitious books. But deep down he must scorn the "entertaining novel" a distinction which so tortured the critics of his time. The animated action in *A Gun for Sale* can reverberate into a spin on a discussion of psycho-analysis and the character of Raven, the methodical killer, who finds himself endowed with an element of Christianity, (his first name is Christian) which furthermore bothers his conscience in the sense of only doing his "job". The same goes for Our agent in Havana, a spy parody ("James Bond in Wonderland" affirms Greene) in which the secret agents are unable to detect an ultra-secret invention in a vacuum cleaner, and where they conceal strangely tragic episodes (the death of the dog Max). Other "entertainments" rather more serious like *The Confidential Agent* or *The Ministry of Fear*, contain their share of absurd characters and aberrant situations. One has to be reminded of the opening of *The Ministry*, quite a chase around a simple cake which provides us with quite bewildering scenes with variations between their methods of appropriation and the ridicule of the stakes (it was only later that we find that there was a microfilm in the cake).

BETWEEN TRAGEDY AND HUMOUR

It goes without saying that these skilful mixes, these interactions of style and of disguises, originate from the enthusiasm of a novelist who is conscious of his talent. If Greene alternates between tragedy and humour, thriller and theology, the "hard" novel and entertainment, it is because these multiple aspects are one and the same preoccupation: an understanding of the modern world – or to be more precise, man's position in this world. That is what Greene talks to us about – with the lucidity of a man free of any bias, capable of evoking, complete impartiality - the dictatorship of Batista in Cuba³, London bombarded in the 1940s⁴, the insane Haiti of Papa Doc⁵, or Switzerland, its banks and the idle rich with their dubious distractions⁶. A setting in which grandeur and mediocrity go hand in hand, where the feeling of the value of life contends with a universe where death is going cheap.

Greene also examines the extremely contrasted strata of society; he is capable of conjuring up a picture of a business circle just as easily as he is of the everyday life of the police in London, bank employees and South American dictators; as if the most contradictory aspects that he encounters when travelling around the world were objects of a simple belief, the supreme power he has over himself. Domination through fascination, but also a lassitude. *The end of the Affair* (1999) a film by Neil Jordan, with Ralph Fiennes, Julianne Moore, Stephen Rea and Jan Hart.

The Quiet American (2003) a film by Philip Noyce, with Michael Caine and Brendan Fraser. This film took an age to be released because of the White House who were very sensitive about the critics on their attitude towards Vietnam. Caine had to put his foot down... Our man in Havana The Honorary Consulate, but also The End of the Affair The Comedians Doctor Fisher from Geneva which stems from this power and domination. Greene never ceases to pack his novels full of powerful figures at every level. Industrialists, arms dealers, political activists, alcoholic consuls, chiefs of police. He also uses more mediocre types, heads of departments, patronesses, inspectors, or the more marginal, murderers, layabouts. They all gave the same impression of enjoying the use of their influence, throwing their weight around, yet they all seem to hope, either consciously or subconsciously, that someone would stop them. They use their power, but at the same time dread that this same power would force them out of the human zone and reduce them to the state of monsters. In fact Greene remained intransigent: behind his apparent contradictions he illustrates the process of human degradation in a world where destiny becomes more and more political and economical, and flows more and more readily into the systems of influence where man is losing his human quality to take on that – much less risky quality - of a simple machine. Today, where we can see the failure of this system, where meaninglessness and blindness stare us in the face, re-reading Greene has perhaps allowed us to find our sense of responsibility again – and even “a sense of reality”.

IT'S WHO RUNS THE FASTEST AND KNOWS HOW TO SWIM

England Made Me dates back to 1935. It is one of Greene's less well-known works and for which, in Ways of Escape, he admits to have always had “a soft spot”- and one can see why.

At this period the intentions of the author of The Third Man were to reflect the economic, social and moral reality of the period (with Europe in an uncomfortable position sandwiched between the menace of Hitler, the growing influence of communism and a triumphant American capitalism). However, while doing this, he discovered the already prevailing absurdity of a certain modernity that we today can but confirm as the ravaging effect it has had on human liberty. There is no optimism in his description of this world (as he says in his preceding novel It's a Battlefield), but he does have a certain sympathy for those who live in it, who fight against this aggressive modernity where they either blend-in or submit. “It is who runs the fastest and knows how to swim” states Kate Farrant at the end of the book, but how many would give anything to stop swimming, - or, even more, to be stopped before they went too far?

On the grounds that the powerful enjoy a relationship of dominance in which they can at any desired moment check the extent of their power, England Made Me is built on a match of fascinations; right at the start, he takes a handful of characters and sets them up against each other. Greene

uses his skill here by not pre-determining these relationships into a classic representation – a temptation to which he gave way in *It's a Battlefield* where he introduced a number of improbabilities into the plot. Here, he launches several parallel micro-plots hopping from one group of characters to another, and it's the dosage of the humanity in the characters that make the action move on.

By structuring the book into episodes, with each episode introducing a new protagonist, it adds fresh attraction and appeal to the book. After which (just to warn you) one gets the impression everything disperses, right up to the final denouement where everything comes together. The foggy, vaguely menacing environment of Stockholm, dotted here and there with little islands of pleasure and hope, helped to unravel the plot by unifying the various intrigues and pushing them all in the same direction.

The introduction of the novel starts with an incestuous attraction: that of Kate Farrant for her twin brother Anthony, who is as unstable and charming as she is modest and practical. Kate encourages her brother to apply for a job as a body guard to her lover, the industrialist Krough, to whom she is personal secretary. From this moment on, the whole play on fantasy takes effect, including the irruption of Anthony at a moment when the characters are either at a turning point of their lives, or feeling they are missing out on something.

CAPITALISM AND JOURNALISM

The second part of the novel introduces two characters who are completely the opposite of each other: Krough and Minty, the capitalist and the journalist, the man at the height of his glory but cut off from reality, and the failure, who can't stop debating this reality while at the same time dreaming of the past as a schoolboy at Harrow . Anthony, the angel of disorder seduces both of them; Krough because he can't place himself in his own success and in need of human contact; Minty as an expatriate far from his "motherland, England" accepts him as a compatriot. However, these "liaisons" seem adulterated, especially in Anthony's manner of imposture. Krough sees in him the body of a young agile man always at ease, something that he had never been, and he forgets that this instability could play against him; Minty is seduced by all that Anthony's past represented (England, the Harrow school tie that he wore) and doesn't question the fact that this ideal picture might all be a lie.

When Anthony's imposture suddenly became apparent, when they realize that he is nothing but an impostor, immoral, capable of using blackmail against them when he realizes that his charm no longer works, the two men realize what their essential differences are. Krough, master of an empire now menaced by disorder, wants to eliminate Anthony; Minty, however, who despite his friend's lies, remains strangely loyal - two failures who have clearly identified each other, who make it a point of honour to help each other, because, after all, "there is a code of honour between thieves".

In the following episodes other sorts of attraction emerge, less rich, but which show two very

noticeable influences, that of Krough and of Anthony. The latter seems to draw into his orbit not only failures like Minty, but the other expatriates, such as the naïve Lou Davidge who becomes his lover, and the workmen from Krough's factory with whom he has become friendly: this zone extends to include Kate (who hasn't stopped "protecting" him, but at the same time doesn't manage to blame him for his instability) and partially to Krough (when he is at his most vulnerable, both economically and morally). This network of fascinations that organises itself around Krough, is in itself a wholly social composition: the man turns out to be, in fact, completely inhuman, hiding behind his figures, with the mentality of a spectator on the stock exchange, he sees the world like a game of dominoes, only his power can be envied, by his little swindlers like "Professor" Hammarsten (perhaps the pre-figuration of an aging Anthony?), by the fashionable circles of the Swedish society, by the prince himself, by Kate whose practicality makes her marvel at her lover's smart strategies, by his workmen and by his right hand man Fred Hall (who worships him). The theme of incest is palpable as soon as Kate and Anthony meet, and remained so until they found themselves in Kate's office, but petered out in favour of Anthony's opportunism and Krough's doubts about himself, before finding their fundamental antagonism.

Anthony and Krough, are the "shipwrecked" and the "survivor", or even "feeble" and "strong". If the feeble didn't have their moments of force (Anthony's sudden cries of honesty) and if the strong didn't, from time to time let themselves be taken in by the weak (when Krough lets himself get dragged into an environment that he doesn't like – or worse, : a dance hall, a building site... and always at night; as if each night revealed his own deceit and the impossibility of getting out of it). Two different worlds find themselves face to face – the one in which the failures or the expatriates prevail, nostalgic for a provincial loyal England, taken over bit by bit by the modern capitalist's values, and the other in which this same capitalism develops, and becomes the only master aboard.

As if to make us aware of this unknown, secret combat, that even the characters themselves don't know about (the reason for a hidden resorting to monologue in the book).

Greene fills his novel with purely economical episodes, which, however, take on a meaning when he wants to illustrate a change. The Krough relationship in America, announced in the last third of the book signifies that the power has changed hands: England, Europe, the old world that they represented is no longer the centre of the economic market, or even that of purely simple modernity. Anthony, Minty, Lou and all those "shipwrecked", present or future, have things to worry overt, and, in conclusion, Anthony dies, and Minty goes back to his dreary journalist job. The only way Lou gets by is by claiming an artificial modernity (lipstick and open sexuality) which goes as wonky as his unbelievable hat that astonished Anthony every time they met. Even Anthony's funeral was sanctioned by the sign of the triumphant world, with the planes "leaving behind them in Stockholm's sky a feathery furrow, a thin trellis of smoke, out of which came the name Krough, the K disappearing just as the H was being written".

England Made Me is perhaps the most complete picture that I know of, a humanity sandwiched between its desire for liberty and economic necessities, made to choose between voluntary failure and sterilizing success, always tempted to demonstrate desires other than its own. At the close of the book the play on fascinations functioned perfectly, and all those who gave signs of not adapting to the modern world were dead or dispersed. Anthony's camp, which Greene never presented to

us as an ideal, seeing the abundant number of pitiful, morose or stupidly envious beings, was empty. The end of the novel is no more than “a battlefield”, where the aggressive flags of capitalism fly, and where the survivors (Kate Minty, Lou) are forced to silence or disappearance.

It's a Battlefield, England Made Me, A Gun for Sale : Three novels that succeed each other (1934, 1945, 1936) comprise three facets (political with It's a Battlefield, economic with England Made Me, confrontational with the “entertainment” of A Gun for Sale of a transformation that we can still feel as an irritant under our skin. A transformation that has distanced us from our liberty, leaving no place for the unstable, the lovers – in short for the Anthony Farrants, whose funeral brings the book to a significant end. Such is Graham Greene's pessimistic assertion, an assertion that we can't ignore today. However it is also the author's strong point not to speculate, but to depict the introduction to the human disaster by acting as if he were discovering them along with his reader.

During the telephone conversation which prompted the writing of this article, Thierry Cazon was surprised that the novel as a whole only took on a meaning with Anthony's death. It is true that throughout the book the author advances, blindfold - on the theme of incest - in fact a “false guide” to the credibility of the world he describes and assesses in the fundamental distress apparent in all the characters, overwhelmingly powerful, or impulsively crushed.

England Made Me is, above all, a pure Greene style novel, constructed with more skill than his previous novels, filled with thriller-like action, in a style always seeking to bring out the reality in the characters, the environment and the situations, despite the few rather weighty comparisons. But the concern he generates in us seems to get bigger every time we read the book. For behind the historic reality, it is us he is talking about, of our vexations, our problematic survival in this modern environment. One last bit of evidence of his actuality: it is 1935 and he already mentions the television; Yes. And do me a favour – would those who don't believe me go and look in the book, and don't stop there, because better than any other, this book exposes what were the real stakes of a modern novel before it perished under the anaemia and the boasting of today's zealots.

Last edition of England Made Me in France : Les Naufragés, Livre de Poche n° 764 1996
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Translations PJC