

Shades of Greene in Catholic Literary Modernism

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Whether one sees modernism as an artistic revival that reached across national boundaries to pose fundamental questions about art and culture, or as the emergence of a supposedly new genre of “Catholic” novel that peaked at the end of the mid-twentieth century, one finds a cultural confluence between three unlikely terms: Catholicism, literature, and modernism. In my argument I will, first, map out some implicit Catholic assumptions—its ontological poetics, for example—that offer a parallel narrative of engagement during the rise of high modernist theory and artistic practice. Secondly, I will trace the path of this development in the author Graham Greene as an exemplar of a unique shade of Catholic literary modernism.

“Christianity does not make art easy. It deprives it of many facile means, it bars its course at many places, but in order to raise its level.”

Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*

An implicit historical assumption in the narrative of Western culture is that the modern age witnessed the death of God and the waning influence of Christianity. Modernist writers of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, among those most aware of their own “modernity,” did much eulogizing of religious faith, relegating it to an outmoded cultural nostalgia or a reactionary maneuver that tethered art to traditional categories of cultural power such as the church or the state. The challenge to religious faith is one

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of many ways modernism defined itself by what it attempts to cast off. In 1918, Edwin Muir titled an essay “What is Modern?” His answer was intimately bound up with the demise of religion. “We see outside our field of conflict a region of Christian calm, but never, never, never can we return there, for our instincts as well as our intellect are averse to it,” he writes. “We refuse to escape by reactionary backdoors—Christianity and the like ... religion has dried up.”¹ For Muir and his contemporaries, the challenge of modernity was making meaning without resorting to worn-out religious traditions. And yet the success of this modernist project is complicated by the persistence of Catholic modes of cultural expression informed by and responding to the theoretical and artistic underpinnings of modernist formulae. Indeed, twentieth-century Catholicism, as a globalized, philosophical, and artistic tradition, often mapped out alternative visions and fictions of reality in dialogue with the rise of modernist aesthetics. Whether understood as an artistic revival that reached across national boundaries to pose fundamental questions about art and culture, or whether understood solely as the emergence of a supposedly new genre of “Catholic” novel that peaked at the end of the mid-twentieth century, one finds a cultural confluence between three unlikely terms: Catholicism, literature, and modernism.

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Putting these terms into conversation seems, at first glance, a difficult task. If part of the literary avant-garde’s agenda had been to dismiss religion’s ability to enlighten what is considered modern, then Roman Catholicism certainly attempted to dismiss the avant-garde as misguided as well. The papacy, suspicious of those attempting to study Catholic belief with the rationalist tools of modern science and historical-critical methodologies, deployed the word modernism as a catchall for the errors of the age. The infamous modernist crisis appeared within the official texts of the Catholic Church between 1907 and 1910, after the papacy had already lost control of the Papal States in Italy (1870) but before the traumatic events of the Great War. Pope Pius X’s condemnation of the sins of modernism focused around historical criticism in biblical scholarship and contemporary rationalist philosophy (*Pascendi Dominici Gregis*). Within the same year, Pius condemned a list of 65 propositions as modernist heresies (*Lamentabili Sane Exitu*). Finally, two years later, he mandated an oath against modernism that all Catholic

¹ Edwin Muir, *We Moderns: Enigmas and Guesses* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1918) 91–92. Muir published this, his first work, under the pseudonym Edward Moore.

clergy and seminary professors had to forswear (*Motu Proprio Sacrorum Antistitum*).² To be identified as a Catholic intellectual through the first decades of the century was, by its very nature, an anti-modern pose. Such an appraisal would not seem to bode well in discussing a growing Catholic artistic community that understood itself in conversation with the theoretical claims of literary modernism.

Cultural critics also contest the term “modernism.” What Baudelaire could refer to in 1863 as “that indefinable something we may be allowed to call ‘modernity,’”³ has, since then, become a complicated, self-conscious debate that involves a diverse canon of artists, literary and otherwise. Once understood as the rupture of epistemological concerns from metaphysical categories, modernism quickly broadened to refer to a set of aesthetic movements united in the practice of destabilizing accepted formal, social, and cultural conventions. Modernist aesthetics assumed that the anxious dislocations and traumas of modernity could only find their coherence in the artist’s creative act, through one’s encounter with the artwork itself. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* became, for many artists, a defining work, poetically reaching for an experience beyond dualisms, a search for “a pinpoint in time” or, at the very least, a gathering of the “fragments shored up against [our] ruin.” In the assessment of one critic, the conceptualization of “modernism continues to reveal its oppositional and subversive powers through various shapes of its new figurations.”⁴ And yet as modernist studies continue to be re-contextualized in various cultural environments, there is little discussion of its Catholic figurations.⁵ There is no little irony that the success of the modernist “project” is complicated by the persistence of religious tropes and topics throughout modernist literature. Artists keenly focused on the dialectics of modernist aesthetics include Georges Bernanos, Francois Mauriac, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Walker Percy, and Flannery O’Connor. For them, Christian faith was not only source material, but also a necessary response to the modern world. Thus we find ourselves at a moment in literary studies when this modernist assertion as anti-religious or anti-Catholic is very much in doubt as an important claim or even a true picture of modernism. Indeed, for many twentieth-century artists and intellectuals, being Catholic was a possible way to be modern.⁶

2 The oath against modernism (1910) was in effect until 1967, near the end of the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council.

3 Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature* (Viking, 1972) 395.

4 Astradur Eysteinnsson, *Modernism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007), 1.

5 The survey of recent international symposia and new essays in the field verify its marginalization. In the two-volume work *Modernism*, edited by Eysteinnsson and published in 2007, over 50 essays extend the conversation about historical and aesthetic developments in literary modernism, yet no title deals with religious conversion or Catholic impulses so prevalent during the twentieth-century period. Very little, for instance, expounds upon Eliot’s and Auden’s religious turn in poetry and there is no mention of Catholic novelists.

6 Four recent studies of the last decade offer a truer picture of modernism as each grapples with various modernist authors, thinkers, and cultural critics in their quest to reimagine the relationship between

My aim in this essay, then, is to trace the development of a particularly Catholic configuration of modernism, from its roots in nineteenth-century France through its evolution in England, and end with a sustained meditation on the British writer and Catholic convert Graham Greene. I will suggest that in Greene's most important fiction one grasps that the Catholic literary revival is actually a kind of Catholic literary modernism. To cover this all in one paper is probably too ambitious a goal, but I hope that I can at least express some of the context and the theological contours of the Catholic revival, primarily focusing on France and England, so important to Greene's own development as an artist.

The Genesis of Literary Modernism

In order to understand the genesis of literary modernism and its Catholic configurations, we must first return to the French and the English Enlightenment and the concomitant revolutions that marked what is called "the modern"—the modern consciousness, the modern state, and modern philosophy. These categories developed from initial stirrings in eighteenth-century French culture, fostering a belief, often enshrined in the term "philosophical positivism," that science and natural evolution would progressively remake the world into a better place. Fast forward a century to Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859), and there was an emerging consensus among Western philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals that the human person was biologically and socially determined, and that reality was merely the empirical phenomena seen, the scientific observations recorded and interpreted.

The legacy of philosophical positivism in Western culture was the subsequent elevation of anthropology, psychology, and sociology as the *de facto* discourses that best explained human life and offered the best solutions to improve it. One of the consequences of this belief was the relegation of religion to the past, as something that would be abandoned over time for the more certain truths of modern science. Religion, if it were discussed at all, would more and more be understood as the realm of the ignorant at worst, or the work of the imagination at best. It would be only a matter of time, so the logic went, that reason would subordinate the flights of religious fancy to scientific constructions of human life and development. This legacy continued to bifurcate faith and science, religion and modern society—mutually exclusive terms—if not categorically antagonistic to one another.

Christianity and culture. Stephen Schloesser's *Jazz Age Catholicism: Postwar Paris 1919-1933* (Toronto, 2005), Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge, 2010), Elizabeth Anderson's *H.D. and the Modernist Religious Imagination* (Bloomsbury, 2013), and Erik Tønning's *Modernism and Christianity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) all offer diverse notions of the perceived crisis of Western civilization, yet each draws on the idea that a revival of elements of (Catholic) Christian tradition had provided either a solution to or some negotiation of that crisis. These critics insightfully argue that contrary to common perception, religion played a large part in the aesthetics of our secular age, an argument that the philosopher Charles Taylor would readily accept. Taylor's revision of the relationship between religion and secularization theories has opened a door for scholars to see the centrality of Catholic aesthetics at work in a variety of modernist impulses.

One can envision the intellectual salons of France and England during the last years of the nineteenth century: Charles Darwin has just proposed that all of life—not just human life—is a violent competition between species. Karl Marx has theorized that all of human life is a violent struggle between social classes. Nietzsche has just proclaimed that the weakest links—especially those burdened by religion—would die out while the *Übermensch* would survive and build a brave new world. Freud was just beginning to develop his theory of the mind whereby the unconscious sway of the id, ego, and superego were said to control and determine our actions and our sanity. And yet the cultural effect of this triumph of science and secularization brought a feeling of disenchantment for many, especially in a highly industrialized and impersonal world. As Charles Taylor suggests, there existed a strange ambiguous tension in cultural discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: on the one hand, the positivist belief in inevitable progress; on the other hand, a dark deterministic world devoid of the possibility of human freedom, let alone any providential intervention.⁷

This disconnect first found its literary roots in the stark realism of French naturalists like Honoré de Balzac and Emile Zola. They portrayed in almost photographic detail the contemporary afflictions affecting society. Their outlook was informed by two basic principles of positivism: biological heritage and social setting. The human person is merely the sum total of genetic inheritance and social environment. The sordid and revolting aspects of life were now literary subjects, usually centered on the social upheavals wrought by the rampant industrialization of the period. Whether in the seedy, drab life of a Paris boarding house in Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* (1835) or the miserable portrayal of Zola's coal miners in *Germinal* (1885), these novels eschewed any romantic escape into sentimentality. Rather, the aim of this aesthetic attempted to expose both human nature and society as they *really* were. Its artistic goal was to lift the veil of ignorance through acute observation, forcing readers to understand the brutal reality behind the comforting facades of modern life.⁸

Part of Catholicism's reappearance on the cultural and intellectual stage began as an aesthetic reaction against this "reign of science" that inundated the intellectual and political discourses of culture. Indeed, there is a flurry of famous French artists and intellectuals converted or re-converted to the Catholic faith during this period, and their texts are filled with conversions as well. In this literary turn to Catholicism, they found a way to narrate what the critic Ellis Hanson calls "the odd disruption, the hysterical symptom, the mystical effusion, the medieval spectacle ... in an age of Victorian Puritanism, enlightenment rationalism, and bourgeois materialism."⁹ By returning to Catholic belief and themes as the material for their work, these artists created a specific vision

7 See Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 412–419, for his account of this tension, especially in France.

8 See Schloesser's *Jazz Age Catholicism* (18–26) for a fuller exposition of Balzac, Zola, and others of the French Realist-Naturalist School of the late nineteenth century.

9 Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 26.

of French Catholicism, one that was prophetic in denouncing both the rationalism of the state as well as the bourgeois Christianity that made a too easy concourse with industrial society. Many of these artists gained the attention of a wider French audience because Catholicism was never served up with triumphant, epistemological certainty or as morally uplifting drama; rather, Catholicism was inscribed in the midst of fallen, poor humanity, a place of constant struggle where the mysterious irruptions of grace might shine forth or manifest in profound ways in the lives of characters.

Catholicism offered both a critique of the modern state and also a powerful philosophical and artistic alternative.

Nowhere was this revival more in evidence than in French literature. Beginning with such figures as Joris-Karl Huysmans, León Bloy, and Charles Péguy in the late nineteenth century and continuing on in Paul Claudel, Georges Bernanos, and François Mauriac into the mid-twentieth, these artists made Catholic literature and drama into an accomplished literary form that defended the spiritual reality of human life. With an emphasis on aesthetic considerations over rational modes of discourse, their literary works served to address and critique the reigning manners of bourgeois, materialist French society. Catholicism offered both a critique of the modern state and also a powerful philosophical and artistic alternative. As Hanson again suggests, an alternative Catholic vision of the world was more creative; an artistic matrix that allowed the rational and irrational phenomena of life to coincide. The aesthetic and historical heritage of Catholicism—its theology, its cathedrals, its communion of saints, its rituals and sacraments, its music and art—spoke more powerfully of the full range of human experience. Hanson provocatively remarks, “Catholicism is itself an elaborate paradox ... The Church is at once modern and yet medieval, ascetic and yet sumptuous, spiritual and yet sensual, chaste and yet erotic, homophobic and yet homoerotic, suspicious of aestheticism and yet an elaborate work of art.”¹⁰ Hanson proposes that it is these lived paradoxes that made Catholicism such a powerful alternative to the rationalized, bourgeois state: to be Catholic—to have a Catholic vision of life—was to make of one’s life an artistic adventure, to understand one’s life as a work of art. Catholic faith became a cultural container and conceptual signifier for the paradoxes within the “modern” individual. Ironically, Catholicism becomes for these artists not so much a reaction *against* the modern but a new way to consciously negotiate the discourses of modernity.

As noted, modernism, in its earliest iterations in the literary arts, also negotiated a paradox: for all the desire to rupture the epistemological from the metaphysical

¹⁰ Hanson 7.

categories of aesthetics and meaning, modernism still yearned for something unitive behind or beyond the dualisms of scientific positivism. If their aesthetics assumed that the anxious dislocations of post-World War I trauma could only find their coherence in the artist's creative act, or through the encounter with the artwork itself, then the sacramental system of Catholic faith suggested an analogous journey. By this I mean that if, theologically, a sacrament is an ontological encounter with something outside the mode of rationalization, then the early modernists—whether T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or William Carlos Williams (with his famous dictate “No idea but in things”)—implicitly present a reconfiguration of Catholic thought on sacramentality. It is the orthodoxy of Thomas Aquinas, especially writ large in the neo-Thomism of Jacques Maritain. The artwork, like a sacrament, is an encounter with mystery, with a form of knowledge that is not utilitarian, nor conceptual. Modernist aesthetics and Catholicism, as an aesthetic or sacramental vision, echoed and paralleled one another. One might call this Thomistic objectivism—that the object or the form in front of a person is a dramatic unfolding of some felt knowledge. This is certainly the case with Maritain's dialogue with avant-garde artists, and it is definitely true of the New Criticism that became such a force in literary theory in the United States of the 1940s and 1950s.

Catholic artists learned from the French naturalism of Balzac and Zola that bourgeois faith was often held hostage to religious sentimentality, what we might describe as Catholic kitsch today. Hagiographic and pious artistic productions proliferated within institutional Catholicism as a way to counteract what was perceived as the deadening effects of modern life. Poetry, fiction, drama, and painting imagined a transcendent world at work in the world despite reality. But there was also an intellectual and artistic counter-narrative of faith where Catholic writers, imbued with the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of modernism, created art that eschews any form of religious feeling as sentimental or melodramatic. There might be a melodramatic tinge to the stories of Mauriac or Greene, but the Catholic turn or religious insight in their works is never sentimental but hard won and often arduous. As Flannery O'Connor noted, “A faith that just accepts is a child's faith and all right for children, but eventually you have to grow religiously as every other way, though some never do. What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe.”¹¹

Features of Catholic Literary Modernism

In a perceptive essay, the novelist and critic David Lodge suggests four key features of a literary aesthetic as variously employed by Catholic modernist authors of the early twentieth century, especially in the manner that French novelists and poets of the first decades of the twentieth century employed it.¹² Lodge succinctly describes them as the

11 Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), 254.

12 Some scholars note that 1913 was the beginning of a consciously French modernism with the publication of Proust's *Living with Swann*, Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, and a sensational exhibition

idea of the sinner at the heart of Christianity, the doctrine of “mystical substitution,” the implied criticism of materialism, and the tireless pursuit of the erring soul by God, the ‘Hound of Heaven’ motif in Francis Thompson’s famous metaphor.¹³ I want to offer a fifth ingredient to Lodge’s summary, one especially germane to Graham Greene: the heightened tension of the narrative and plot in the conflict between the corrupt flesh and the transcendent spirit, usually devised as sexual tension between male and female protagonists ascending to a spiritual suffering that finds its reference in Christ’s crucifixion. I will engage this element in more detail later when we look at Greene’s *The End of the Affair*.

Lodge takes Charles Péguy’s famous phrase, the “sinner at the heart of Christianity” as the premier attribute of a modernist, Catholic literary strategy. Far from the moralism and sentimental pieties of what might attract a Catholic bourgeoisie, these novelists dramatized the story of great sinners—thieves, prostitutes, drunks, derelicts, and apostates. Mauriac’s novel *Thérèse* (1927), for instance, valorizes his title character, a woman married to a boorish husband. Discovered to be slowly poisoning her husband with arsenic, she is quickly locked up by the two families in order to save face. After much suffering, she is told to give up her daughter, and banished to Paris. Though she stands as a criminal and outcast, Mauriac’s sympathy—and the reader’s—is with Thérèse, making the novel’s condemnation rest firmly on her family. Thérèse is thus one of Mauriac’s tragic studies of a woman who risks all to get out of her engaged life, becoming in the end a sort of saint. Mauriac subverts orthodox notions of saintliness in order to offer a kind of Catholic vision that fulfills Péguy’s axiom that the sinner—not the righteous believer—is the heart of Christianity, the reason why Christ came to save. This is where the real drama is to be found.

The second property of a Catholic modernist strategy is the notion of “mystical substitution,” an idea perfected by the French writer Georges Bernanos. Bernanos denounced the distortion of Christianity into respectable and genteel mediocrity, protesting in his works the collusion of the French Catholic hierarchy with the rich and powerful. Works such as *Under Satan’s Sun* and *Diary of a Country Priest* illustrate what Bernanos thought Christian life was like literally when lived “under Satan’s sun.” His protagonists are often saint-heroes whose virtues lie not in super-heroic, conventional saintliness but in their human frailty. Bernanos’s concept of mystical substitution is dramatized in the way his heroes willingly participate in Christ’s agony on the cross by giving up their lives for others. In *The Diary of a Country Priest*, the priest cries out impulsively, “I’ll answer for your soul with mine.”¹⁴ In theological language, this

by Marcel Duchamp. It was also the year that saw the publication of Catholic writers: León Bloy’s *On Huysman’s Tomb*, Charles Péguy’s collection of poems, *The Money Suite*, and François Mauriac’s first novel, *Young Man in Chains*.

13 David Lodge, “Introduction,” *The Viper’s Tangle* by François Mauriac (New York: Carroll & Graff, 1987), 7.

14 Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. Pamela Morris (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 255.

articulates the doctrine of *kenosis*, an act of self-sacrifice made out of love for another as rehearsed in Paul's hymnic proclamation that Jesus "emptied himself and became a slave" (Philippians 2:7). This trope is a constant theme of Catholic literary modernism, perfected in Bernanos's works, and very much a key dramatic movement in the novels of Graham Greene.

The third property of a Catholic literary aesthetic shared with secular modernist strategies of art concerns a suspicion of crass materialism and the bourgeois and buffered classes it engendered. This trope was often embodied in the drama of a fourth and crucial element, an understanding of a God that "hounds" us "with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace," in the words of Thompson's celebrated poem.¹⁵ The "Hound of Heaven" vividly illustrates the soul fleeing from a God it both fears and rejects, desperately hiding itself only to feel at the end a final despairing turn toward this divine presence. What seems like crisis and anxiety in a character's ability to master oneself dramatically becomes another form of *kenosis*, an unmastering of the self's importance, not so much a defeat as much as a new awareness and acceptance of a deeper reality at work. There is this paradoxical sense that even in our freedom to disavow God, God continues to play checkmate with our souls. If the French Catholic modernists helped to give this theme pride of place in the modern novel, it was Graham Greene who perfected it. A story of pursuit and chase is, of course, central to Greene's literary imagination and he takes the modernist techniques of the thriller and puts them at the service of a metaphysical, cosmic chase.

Catholic Modernism in England

The expression of modernist aesthetics in French Catholic artists and intellectuals began during the first thirty years of the twentieth century but quickly crossed the English Channel into the British Isles in various ways.¹⁶ English Catholicism, a minority tradition in predominantly Protestant England, gained greater legal status in the 1840s. Following from this legal victory and aided by John Henry Newman, a convert from Anglicanism's own religious revival, the Oxford Movement, a small but effective Catholic revival flourished in England for over a century. From the beginning it was dominated by English converts who shared a vision of the world as fallen, or in Newman's words, "implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity." English Catholicism, and especially those who converted to the faith in the early twentieth century, involved a decidedly intellectual constituency: writers, poets, artisans, theologians, and clergy who had found the Anglican dispensation either intellectually untenable or too compromised by political collusion with the state. This era's diversity of Catholic converts and their works—the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, G.K. Chesterton, the novelist Ford Maddox Ford,

15 Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven," verses 10–11. The poem was first published in 1893 and included in the *Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* in 1917.

16 Modernism as a conscious trope in Anglo-American literature arrived with the imagist movement, founded by Ezra Pound in 1912, but it was T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, both published in 1922, which shaped the broader discourse of British literary modernism.

the poets Siegfried Sassoon and Edith Sitwell, and the priest-scholar Ronald Knox, to name just a few—allowed Catholicism a distinct voice in the intellectual life of England at the time.¹⁷ Yet even here converts treaded difficult terrain within both the Catholic Church and within Protestant elite society. Because these converts were educated or well-known individuals, they were suspected by fellow Catholics of having liberal or modernist tendencies; at the same time, they had to defend to their Protestant peers that religious and intellectual freedom was an essential element of their new-found faith.

A difference between the status of French Catholicism and that of Protestant England concerned who owned the language of faith. One can find a latent religious discourse threaded through such writers as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, George Eliot, and Matthew Arnold, but their work describes the trajectory of faith in literature in terms of a *Deus absconditus*, of religion evermore eclipsed by Enlightenment rationalism, science, and philosophical positivism. What is left of the “religious sense” in late nineteenth-century British literature is expressed in either the moral melodramas of a Charles Dickens novel or in the philosophical displacement of religious feeling in many of the English poets. The impression that religion had lost its power within British culture only gained force in the Victorian elegies that mourned the loss of meaning in bourgeois culture and the implicit loss of religious belief. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) expressed the disillusionment, confusion, and seeming chaos that afflicted the generation of artists still reeling from the First World War. Many intellectuals in England during the 1930s and 1940s turned to orthodox religious belief in the Anglican Church as well, most notably T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, and W.H. Auden. Just as in France but from a different route, organized religion had regained some cultural prestige, a fashionable alternative for many British intellectuals. Like France in the early decades of the twentieth century, Catholic Christianity in Britain found a place at the cultural table of intellectual debate.¹⁸

With the novels of Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, the Catholic revival found a popular preeminence in England in the 1930s through the 1950s. Waugh’s conversion was anchored in his belief that the essential truths of Catholicism had been dissipated by an English society uprooted from its Catholic birthright. His early satires exposed modern society as a vacuous spectacle adrift from its roots. Beginning with the novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1944), he attempted to use Catholicism not only to frame the issues

17 There were also well-known British Catholics who were not converts, among them two caught up in the Catholic “modernist crisis”: George Tyrell (1861–1909), expelled from the Jesuits in 1906, and the lay theologian and apologist Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852–1925).

18 For a fuller investigation of British conversion in the twentieth century, see Patrick Allit’s *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Cornell, 2000). For an excellent discussion of the Catholic intellectuals’ response to World War I, see *Roman Catholic Modernists Confront the Great War*, edited by C.J.T. Talar and Lawrence F. Barmann (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). For an incisive chapter on the conversion of Ford Maddox Ford and how it altered his stance on the aesthetics of literary modernism, see Timothy J. Sutton’s *Catholic Modernists, English Nationalists* (University of Delaware Press, 2010).

of modernity, but to offer Catholicism's vision and doctrine as an antidote to the present crisis in Western, and specifically English, civilization. Waugh's later books, true to the author's own religious conversion to Catholicism, portrayed characters searching for the certainty and the triumph of a creedal faith that had been obscured or eclipsed by the mores and values of modern European society.

For Graham Greene, the spiritual life of the sinner has the privileged status of experiencing “the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.”

Graham Greene and the Mercy of God

Graham Greene, also a convert, shares with Waugh much of the same Catholic concerns and issues in his writing, but, in many ways, comes closer than Waugh to dramatizing modernist themes as embodied by his French contemporaries. The classic ingredients elucidated by David Lodge concerning François Mauriac's Catholic vision—the sinner at the heart of Christianity, mystical substitution, a critique of materialism, and God as the Hound of Heaven—can be found in many of Greene's most celebrated works. These novels—*Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1947), and *The End of the Affair* (1951)—illustrate Greene's own absorption in the French modernist strategies of the Catholic revival. Greene takes Péguy's famous text “The sinner is at the heart of Christianity,” as the epigraph of *The Heart of the Matter*, but it could be the epigraph and the theological lens for all of his novels from this period: the spiritual life of the sinner has the privileged status of experiencing “the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.”¹⁹ Greene's novels of the thirties, forties, and fifties were constantly discussed in terms of the dialectical nature of counter-Reformation Catholicism, texts that stood against both Protestant religious discourse and the materialism and secular ideologies of the modern age.

Let me conclude by giving a rather extended example of Greene's shade of Catholic literary modernism from one of his most celebrated novels, *The End of the Affair* (1951). In the earlier novel, *Brighton Rock*, Greene makes reference to the “appalling strangeness of the mercy of God.” It seems that in *The End of the Affair* this strange mercy of God becomes Greene's very subject, for Greene attempted to embody this strangeness in the adulterous affair between two people who stand ostensibly outside of Catholicism. I chose this novel over Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, what is justifiably his greatest novel, because I wanted to expose that fifth property of Catholic modernist aesthetics—the way

19 Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (Penguin, 1938, 2004), 268. At the end of the novel, the character Rose confesses to a priest that if her dead husband, the gangster Pinkie, must be damned in hell, then she wants to be with him because she is still in love with him. The priest replies, “There was a man, a Frenchman ... who had the same idea as you,” explicitly referring to Charles Péguy.

in which sex and sexuality becomes a “way to God.”²⁰ In *The End of the Affair*, Greene heightens the conflict between the flesh and the spirit through the sexual tension between his male and female protagonists so that they ascend to a spiritual suffering and a spiritual exaltation that finds its reference in Christ’s crucifixion.²¹

Set in London during World War II and immediately afterwards, the story is told by a novelist, Maurice Bendrix, who had begun a passionate love affair with Sarah, the wife of a senior civil servant named Henry. Four years into the affair they are together in his apartment during an air raid. Bendrix goes downstairs and is buried under the front door in a bomb explosion. Sarah rushes down, believing him to be dead. When Bendrix recovers consciousness and goes back upstairs to their bedroom, he finds Sarah on her knees. Unbeknownst to him, she is vowing to “anything that existed” that if Bendrix is restored to life, she will give him up as her lover and return to her husband, Henry. She sticks to her vow, but Bendrix assumes that she has ended their affair only to begin another. Eighteen months later and still in a jealous rage from being dropped by Sarah, Bendrix hires a private detective, reporting on her movements and procuring her private journal from her house. Reading the journal, Bendrix finds out about Sarah’s vow, and is relieved to know that she is still in love with him. From the journal we learn that, though first hating and resentful of the God she now believes in, she slowly comes to a deeply felt peace. In a late journal entry she begs God to *take her peace and give it instead to her ex-lover*, a kind of mystical substitution. Bendrix, on the other hand, is convinced that he can compete against an illusory God and tries to confront her. Sarah avoids him, runs away in the rain, and dies from pneumonia a week later. Bendrix and Sarah’s husband, Henry, both in mourning, find out that Sarah was under religious instruction with a Father Crompton, yet Bendrix bitterly advises Henry not to give Sarah a Christian burial. At her cremation, he discovers from Sarah’s mother that she was secretly baptized a Catholic at age two. After this revelation, the coincidences keep piling up. In the end, Bendrix moves in with Henry at his invitation, yet still hateful and jealous of Sarah’s God, in whom he too has reluctantly come to believe. Forced to confront Sarah’s convictions in her diary, and these semi-miraculous coincidences, Bendrix is reluctantly and defiantly led to the same place as Sarah. The provocative point here is this: Sarah’s adulterous encounter with Bendrix becomes the occasion for her religious encounter with God, and Sarah becomes the touchstone, the encounter, for Bendrix’s own belief in God.

One can see in this short plot summary the Catholic tropes of Greene’s modernist novel:²² the adulterous Sarah at the heart of Christianity; a “mystical substitution” in her willingness to give up her love affair for Bendrix’s life; the upended rationalist ideologies of the cynical secularist, Bendrix; and of course, the amorous God who hounds Sarah

20 Greene shares this deployment of sexual decadence as a crucible of faith with François Mauriac.

21 This exploration into Greene’s novel is a summation of my own work. See Mark Bosco, *Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination* (Oxford, 2005), 58–69.

22 Interestingly, Greene critics argue that *The End of the Affair* has many modernist affinities, especially in the play of diachronic and synchronic time and in the shift of narrative consciousness.

and, at the end of the novel, hounds the unwilling Bendrix. Because Sarah has neither belief nor any rudimentary religious instruction, she is only convinced of her belief in God through the miraculous restoration of her lover. It is a vow made in an extreme moment, dialectical in its intensity to commit her to an “all or nothing” decision, which over time becomes an undeniable conviction of her belief. Only later does she develop any sense of faith, fostered precisely in the realization of her sexual longing for Bendrix as a spiritual form of suffering. We might put it this way: Sarah begins her journey without the benefit of any material signs of God, except one: the body of her lover. She is led by her abandonment of this body to put her faith in signs of divine presence in another body, the suffering body on the crucifix.

*If God has become human flesh, then every finite
body is a possible conduit of God's grace.*

This is the most provocative aspect of the novel—the human body as the fundamental sign of God's presence, whether it be bodies in pain, bodies disfigured, or bodies in erotic intimacy. Greene proposes to place the doctrine of the Incarnation at the center of this realistic novel, thereby pushing the ramifications of the doctrine to extreme moments of sexual ecstasy and of intense suffering because of the loss of the beloved's body. If God has become human flesh, then every finite body is a possible conduit of God's grace. It is the strongest claim of Catholic sacramentality in any of Greene's oeuvre, making “the appalling strangeness” of God's presence stand out in the profound realism of both Bendrix's critical, rationalist narration of events and Sarah's sometimes hysterical meditations in her diary. Sarah's hysteria swings from savage hatred of a God she only slightly believes in to momentary glimpses into a spiritual peace.

Bendrix, too, always recalls the physicality of his and Sarah's love-making in vivid, concrete, visceral terms, so intense that he begins to use religious, mystical vocabulary: “Eternity is said not to be an extension of time but an absence of time, and sometimes it seemed to me that her abandonment touched that strange mathematical point of endlessness, a point with no width, occupying no space.”²³ Sexual love becomes the still point in time, a kind of death experience that is extraordinary and ineffable, a moment of “absolute trust and absolute pleasure, the moment when it was impossible to quarrel because it was impossible to think” (71). Sex with Sarah is so ecstatic that Bendrix is forced to consider it in terms of prayer, meditation, and contemplation as the nearest comparable experiences.

Sarah is one of the few women characters in Greene's vast repertoire who is actually described as beautiful. Indeed, she is very comfortable in her beauty, aware of the power

23 Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (Penguin, 1951, 1975), 51. All further pages referenced parenthetically in the text.

of her body as the source of her charisma. Distraught about her vow to break up with Bendrix, she wonders, “Why shouldn’t I escape from this desert if only for half an hour? I haven’t promised anything about strangers, only about Maurice. I can’t be alone for the rest of my life with Henry, nobody admiring me, nobody excited by me” (98). Yet it is Sarah’s meditations in which God is identified with the finite world of bodies that is central to the theological vision Greene constructs. God first becomes real for Sarah as another suffering, naked body sharing every human attribute. The centrality of the body as divine signifier comes to its apex in her long diary entry of 2 October 1945, written after having paused in a Catholic church to get out of the rain:

[The church] was full of plaster statues and bad art, realistic art. I hated the statues, the crucifix, all the emphasis on the human body. I was trying to escape from the human body and all it needed. I thought I could believe in some kind of a God that bore no relation to ourselves, something vague, amorphous, cosmic, to which I had promised something and which had given me something in return ... like a powerful vapor moving among the chairs and walls.

[I saw] the hideous plaster statues with the complacent faces, and I remembered that they believed in the resurrection of the body, the body I wanted destroyed forever. I had done so much injury to this body ... [I thought] of my own body, of Maurice’s. I thought of certain lines life had put on his face as personal as a line of his writing: I thought of a new scar on his shoulder that wouldn’t have been there if once he hadn’t tried to protect another man’s body from a falling wall. ... And so I thought, do I want that body to be vapor (mine yes, but his?), and I knew I wanted that scar to exist through all eternity. But could my vapor love that scar? Then I began to want my body that I hated, but only because it could love that scar. We can love with our minds, but can we long only with our minds?

And of course on the altar there was a body too—such a familiar body, more familiar than Maurice’s, that it had never struck me before as a body with all the parts of a body, even the parts the loin-cloth concealed ... So today I looked at that material body on that material cross, and I wondered, how could the world have nailed a vapor there? A vapor of course felt no pain and no pleasure ... I looked up at that over-familiar body, stretched in imaginary pain, the head drooping like a man asleep. I thought, sometimes I’ve hated Maurice, but would I have hated him if I hadn’t loved him too? Oh God, if I could really hate you, what would that mean? ... I walked out of the church in a flaming rage, and in defiance of Henry and all the reasonable and the detached I did what I had seen people do in Spanish churches: I dipped my finger in the so-called holy water and made a kind of cross on my forehead. (109–112)

Sarah’s reflections move from wanting to flee the body, to looking at the crucified body, to a consideration of Maurice’s body, and then to a final insight into the importance of the human body to God. An impersonal, vaporous, disembodied spirit seems less believable to Sarah in this world of flesh. Sarah submits to a person—the person on

the cross—even if this person is never addressed directly, only observed. The theological aesthetic is most pronounced here, for in discovering what is at stake in believing in this incarnated God, she becomes a more willing participant in the form of Christ, of identifying herself with the suffering Christ. The diary entry ends with her defiant baptismal gesture, crossing herself with holy water as she leaves the church. It is the transformative moment, the spiritual key to unlocking a mystical, even erotic identification with God.

Sarah's diary continues to swing from a willing surrender to an intense desire for escape with Bendrix. That the experience of God and of Bendrix have become conflated in her mind is illustrated in the way she addresses God as "You," a term always used in addressing Bendrix: "I remembered the time when I had stuck my nails into my palms, and I didn't know it but You moved in the pain. I said, 'Let him be alive,' not believing in You, and my disbelief made no difference to You. You took it into Your love and accepted it like an offering ... I wasn't afraid of the desert any longer because You were there" (113). Yet a month later she writes, "I'm not at peace any more. I just want him like I used to in the old days ... I'm tired and I don't want any more pain. I want Maurice. I want ordinary corrupt human love." In Augustinian fashion she ends the entry, "Dear God, you know I want your pain, but I don't want it now. Take it away for a while and give it me another time" (89). In her final letter to Bendrix, informing him that she will not break her vow and go away with him, she writes, "I've caught belief like a disease. I've fallen into belief like I fell in love. I've never loved before as I love you, and I've never believed in anything before as I believe now. I'm sure. I've never been sure before about anything" (147). Even religious belief, Greene suggests, subversively carries with it bodily significance, a virus inscribed in Sarah's ailing body. But Greene poses another bodily image of religious belief that subverts Sarah's metaphor: her mother tells Bendrix after the cremation ceremony that Sarah was actually a Catholic. She confides that she had her daughter secretly baptized at the age of two, claiming, "I always had a wish that it would take. Like a vaccination" (164). Sarah's body becomes the primary site for the totalizing love of an incarnate God. Belief is both like a disease that consumes her in a mystical annihilation and abandonment of self as well as a vaccine that has silently inoculated her from taking any simple and easy route in her struggle with her vow to God.

The revelation of Sarah's secret baptism is an important factor in illustrating Greene's Catholic imagination. Greene once again wants to emphasize the mystery of sacramental grace in ontological terms, a visible marker of God's mediation in the life of a human person. Sarah's baptism stresses the vertical relationship with the divine, a work of God by the Church that marks indelibly the soul of the baptized. The news of the baptism betrays Greene's enchantment with Catholic scholastic discourse on *ex opere operato* notions of grace so prevalent in this time period of Catholic culture.²⁴ But it does so in order to magnify the struggle in the text for any clarity about where

24 The phrase *ex opere operato*, "from the work worked," refers to God's grace freely bestowed in the sacramental symbol, regardless of the worthiness of the person upon whom it is bestowed.

truth lies—whether in mere coincidences or in a personal destiny. Bendrix has tried to write a novel of this love affair based on his claim to interpret what is happening to him and Sarah. The fact of the baptism places in doubt his claims, becoming Bendrix’s final “crack” in his perception of events. He is forced to wonder if he too is becoming hysterical. The narrative of his thoughts is strikingly similar to Sarah’s own changing attitudes in her diary: “I’m a man of hate. But I don’t feel much hatred; I had called other people hysterical, but my own words were overcharged. I could detect their insincerity. What I chiefly felt was less hate than fear” (190). From the moment that the baptism is revealed, Bendrix reluctantly finds himself addressing a God he hates, afraid that he will “leap” as Sarah has leapt into religious belief. The form of Sarah’s leap is theologically framed more in terms of *kenosis* than of existential choice: “I might have taken a lifetime spending a little love at a time, eking it out here and there ... You were there, teaching us to squander, like You taught the rich man, so that one day we might have nothing left but this love of You” (89). If Sarah is portrayed as “spent” but renewed in God’s love through the accumulation of miraculous occurrences that populate the last pages of the novel, the text implies that Bendrix is actually not far behind her. Yet Sarah’s baptismal “inoculation” keeps her from any simple and easy accommodation with her vow and growing religious belief; Bendrix is given no such assistance. Feeling spent and tired, he prays: “O God, You’ve done enough, You’ve robbed me of enough, I’m too tired and old to learn to love, leave me alone for ever” (192). The novel ends with Bendrix *in medias res*, struggling with his belief in God. His hatred and fear is similar to Sarah’s moments of hatred and fear, an early expression of love in a spiritual desert. God is still hounding Bendrix, the reluctant believer.

*It is the artist’s work that coheres in a
world of chaos and dislocation.*

One final point that echoes modernist aesthetics: it is the artist’s work that coheres in a world of chaos and dislocation. Bendrix, the comfortable atheist, who thinks religious faith is irrelevant to modern life, begins the novel by stating that, at best, God is a mathematical entity: “I find it hard to conceive of any God who is not as simple as a perfect equation, as clear as air” (11). Bendrix emphasizes that his way of love is “ordinary human love,” understood as an uncomplicated consequence of biology: “Hatred seems to operate the same glands as love: it even produces the same actions” (27). He notes that Sarah’s love for him is different, more difficult to reduce to such formulations, lacking the jealousy that is always surfacing in his longing. Emotions are all part of an equation for Bendrix, something quantifiable and open to precise formulation. Love, hatred, and jealousy are mathematical fractions of biological drives, forever trying to cancel each

other out. Sarah continually takes him into a world where the equation founders. It is a new territory in which there is no escape. He thinks that his profession as a writer is one that conveys the truth of life, and his inability to control the ending of his own story makes him question the very ability to make any totalizing claims on reality. And yet he notes that just as an author succeeds in bringing to life only certain of his characters, so too might God succeed only with the saints:

Always I find when I begin to write there is one character who obstinately will not come alive. There is nothing psychologically false about him, but he sticks, he has to be pushed around, words have to be found for him ... he never does the unexpected thing, he never surprises me, he never takes charge. Every other character helps, he only hinders. And yet one cannot do without him. I can imagine a God feeling in just that way about some of us. The saints, one would suppose, in a sense create themselves. They come alive. They are capable of the surprising act or word. They stand outside the plot, unconditioned by it. But we have to be pushed around. ... We are inextricably bound to the plot, and wearily God forces us, here and there, according to his intention, characters without poetry, without free will, whose only importance is that somewhere, at some time, we help to furnish the scene in which a living character moves and speaks, providing perhaps the saints with the opportunities for their free will. (185–86)

Being a saint, in Bendrix's estimation, makes one free, and thus more alive, because saints have a different perspective and relationship to a society conditioned to drag one into a complacent and agnostic irrelevancy. Greene is subtly distinguishing in this text the Catholic difference in understanding contemporary secular and materialist culture: faith in God grants a poetry to one's life. The reader realizes that Bendrix is comparing himself to Sarah, she who "takes charge," who has that poetry in her to become more fully human. Sarah is drawn in an ascent to the beautiful form of Christ on the cross still hidden from Bendrix's spiritual perception. She leaps out of her bourgeois state of affairs, reflected in both her easy-going agnosticism as well as in an explicitly institutionalized Catholic observance. In the process she is made a thing of poetic beauty, taking on that form which becomes for Bendrix another sign of God's presence, however difficult a sign that might be for him.

The End of the Affair, then, is, in many ways, Greene's most persistently theological novel. Closer to the modernist strategies of French Catholic authors, Greene attempts to convey the complexities of the appalling strangeness of God's grace. A writer immersed in the political and religious events of the twentieth century, he came of age during the height of literary modernism. In this regard, he stands in the company of other modernists—Eliot, Sitwell, Waugh, Auden—to name just a few artists who found in Catholic and Anglo-Catholic faith a literary way to negotiate modernity. The Greene shade of Catholic literary modernism is, in the end, a palette very much woven into the pattern of faith and belief today.