THE AMBIVALENT CATHOLIC MODERNITY OF GRAHAM GREENE’S

BRIGHTON ROCK AND THE POWER AND THE GLORY

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
In English

By

Karl O’Hanlon, B.A.

Washington D.C.
28th April, 2010
This thesis argues that the “religious sense” which emerged from Graham Greene’s Catholicism provides the basis for the critique of the ethics of modernity in his novels *Brighton Rock* (1938) and *The Power and the Glory* (1940). In his depiction of the self-righteous Ida Arnold in *Brighton Rock*, Greene elicits some problems inherent in modern ethical theory, comparing secular “right and wrong” unfavourably with a religious sense of “good and evil.” I suggest that the antimodern aspects of Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* are ultimately renounced by Greene as potentially dangerous, and in *The Power and the Glory* his critique of modernity evolves to a more ambivalent dialectic, in which facets of modernity are affirmed as well as rejected. I argue that this evolution in stance constitutes Greene’s search for a new philosophical and literary idiom – a “Catholic modernity.”
With sincere thanks to John Pfordresher, for the great conversations about Greene, encouragement, careful reading, and patience in waiting for new chapter drafts, without which this thesis would have been much the poorer. Many thanks also to Henry Schwarz, for his suggestions for further reading, sound advice and support.

Dedicated to my mother, with love and thanks for putting me on to Graham Greene.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction........................................................................................................... 1

Chapter I: Graham Greene’s Critique of Modernity in *Brighton Rock*..............4

Chapter II: Antimodernism and Ambivalent Modernity in *Brighton Rock*........25

Chapter III: The Ambivalent Catholic Modernity of Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*..............................................................50

Conclusion..........................................................................................................66

Works Cited.........................................................................................................69
Introduction

After the death of Henry James a disaster overtook the English novel . . . For with [his] death the religious sense was lost to the English novel, and with the religious sense went the importance of the human act. It was as if the world of fiction had lost a dimension, the characters of such distinguished writers as Mrs. Virginia Woolf and Mr. E.M. Forster wandered like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper thin (G. Greene, “Francois Mauriac,” *Collected Essays*, 91).

Despite continual identification as one of the most celebrated and successful Catholic writers of the twentieth century, Graham Greene was uncomfortable with the designation, preferring the circumlocutory phrase “a writer who happens to be Catholic” (*Ways of Escape*, 58). Nevertheless, as Mark Bosco has persuasively argued in his recent study of Greene’s fiction, Catholicism is the “thread that helps to bind his literary preoccupations into a recognisable pattern,” and that Greene’s religious sense “stands as the imaginative ground of the text[s]” (Bosco, 3; 11). In this thesis I argue that “the religious sense” which Greene explores in two of his most famous novels, *Brighton Rock* (1938) and *The Power and the Glory* (1940), provides not only the “imaginative ground” of his fiction, but the basis of the ethical drama which his readers encounter, “the importance of the human act.” I will contend that Greene begins a critique of modernity in *Brighton Rock*, an investigation of the predominant modes of moral outlook available to moderns that is more self-critical
and evolving than it is substantial. I will elucidate how his juxtaposition of a secular order of right and wrong with a religious sublime of good and evil forms Greene’s most scathing assault upon the ethics of modernity.

However, despite the “antimodern” animus of the novel, I argue that it is ultimately ambivalence rather than antipathy that Greene feels towards modernity, and that the charge of reactionary tendencies from certain critics is unfounded. Greene’s critique of modernity continues to evolve in *The Power and the Glory*, exploring more fully the ambivalence of his “religious sense” towards secular ethics, and in the whisky priest protagonist of the novel he partially realizes an emblem of the “Catholic modernity” that was to obsess him both personally and professionally the rest of his life.

In the first chapter, I will examine scholarly appraisals of Greene’s *Brighton Rock*, arguing that a considerable number of critics have failed to engage with “the religious sense” that informs the novel’s critique of modernity. Combining close reading of the text with contemporary moral philosophy (particularly that of Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre), I will argue that Greene’s depiction of the avenging Ida Arnold and her subjectivist epistemology of “right and wrong” represents Greene’s rejection of the utilitarian and deontological strains of modern ethical theory.

In the second chapter I delineate the way in which Greene’s “religious sense” charts a shadowlands of “good and evil” navigated by the Catholic characters Pinkie and Rose, a kind-of religious ethical sublime that provides an extremely problematic and yet potentially rich alternative to the bourgeois subjectivism of Ida. With critical
attention to the character of Pinkie, I will explore the dangers of the antimodern pull of religious tradition, the way in which Greene’s novel both embodies and implicitly admonishes the potential for an uncompromising rejection of modernity. I will finally turn to ways in which Greene’s ambivalence rather than antipathy towards modernity breaks through in Brighton Rock, pointing towards his struggle to recalibrate his position towards modernity, and in the process realise a new imaginative idiom strikingly different to the antimodern elements of the novel.

In chapter three, I will turn to Greene’s later novel, The Power and the Glory, assessing how Greene’s “religious sense” evolves from Brighton Rock to a much more nuanced and ambivalent stance towards modernity. I will examine his juxtaposition of Catholicism and Communism in the novel, drawing out his ambiguous treatment of both. I argue that the theological contours of Greene’s imaginative vision become more invested in a sense of the incarnational and the human being as the image of God (Imago Dei). Ultimately, I conclude that Greene’s “religious sense” evolves towards a “Catholic modernity,” a dialectical space in which aspects of modernity are affirmed as well as rejected.
Chapter I

Graham Greene’s Critique of the Ethics of Modernity in *Brighton Rock*


Most readers will be aware of the basic outline of Greene’s crime thriller, *Brighton Rock*, if only from the splendid 1947 film version by British filmmakers, the Boulting brothers, starring Richard Attenborough as Pinkie. Criminal gangs wage a violent campaign against each other in pre-war Brighton: a press-man is murdered by Pinkie, the vicious teenage heir-apparent of one of the factions. His blood spree continues as he attempts to shore up his position, and he is forced to marry a naïve waitress, Rose, so that legally she cannot be made to testify against him. He is pursued (a classic Greene *leitmotif*) by the implacable Ida Arnold, who is determined to bring him to justice.

While the thriller element of *Brighton Rock* as with many of Graham Greene’s novels is expertly executed and engaging, the plot summarized exclusively in such a way fails to take account of the operations of “the religious sense” that pervade the novel, and which heightens the drama of Pinkie’s flight from justice by including a eschatological aspect – a flight from divine justice. To describe the novel as a mere thriller is similar to describing *Moby Dick* as a romp about a whale hunt. As Graham Greene wrote in *Ways of Escape*:
Brighton Rock I began in 1937 as a detective story and continued, I am sometimes tempted to think, as an error of judgment . . . how was it that a book which I had intended to be a simple detective story should have involved a discussion, too obvious and open for a novel, of the distinction between good-and-evil and right-and-wrong and the mystery of ‘the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God’ – a mystery that was to be the subject of three more of my novels? The first fifty pages of Brighton Rock are all that remain of the detective story (58-60).

Yet Greene’s own understanding of his novel is not necessarily shared by critics, or even by contemporary publishers; the difficulty of blurb-writing notwithstanding, the Vintage Classics edition published on the centenary of Greene’s birth presents the plot as a straightforward crime thriller: “Believing he can escape retribution, [Pinkie] is unprepared for the courageous, life-embracing Ida Arnold, who is determined to avenge Hale’s death” (Brighton Rock, 2004 ed.). Not only is the story completely expurgated of its religious themes in the blurb, but the secular Ida Arnold and the religious fanatic Pinkie are recast for contemporary sensibilities in the oversimplified roles of hero and villain. The same angle is taken by South-African author J.M. Coetzee in his short introduction to the same edition, where he begrudgingly acknowledges the religious aspects of the novel only to glibly dismiss them: “Pinkie may do his best to elevate his acts to the sphere of sin and damnation, but to the doughty Ida Arnold they are simply crimes that deserve punishment of the
law, and in this world, which is the only world we have, it is Ida’s view that prevails”
(Brighton Rock, xii).

This misinterpretation is not a new problem: in a letter to theatre director Laurence Pollinger, dated 4th March, 1943, Greene complains about additional lines of dialogue added to the script in a stage production of the novel which “destroy the whole point of the play. . . The idea is that Pinkie and Rose belong to a real world in which good & evil exist but that the interfering Ida belongs to a kind, artificial surface world in which there is no such thing as good & evil but only right & wrong” (in R. Greene, A Life in Letters, 125). As Georg Gaston writes, the theological exploration of the novel was not understood by its first reviewers, “and as a result they by and large directed their attention toward the melodrama of [sic] undeniably a sensational story” (18).

In the decades since the novel first emerged, a host of distinguished critics have acknowledged its religious aspects only in order to savage it. Harold Bloom refers to the novel’s “theological tendentiousness,” and dismisses Greene from the “canon” to take his proper place as a considerable but ultimately minor acolyte of adventure writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson (1-8). Giving lie to Greene’s statements about “the importance of the human act” in relation to “the religious sense,” Frank Kermode insists that his oeuvre is actually a tortured rebellion against religion, where it is practically impossible for humans to act without alienating a merciless God: “Mr. Greene is of the Devil’s party and comes near to knowing it” (33-42). Similarly, Allan Warren Friedman concludes that Greene presents a world where “all human action and appearance are devoid of worth” (131-155). John Atkins
virtually denounces Greene’s work as papist propaganda – of Ida Arnold, he writes, “Her Ouija board and the spirit messages . . . are tawdry and contemptible, unlike the rite of the Eucharist. Greene calls the tune and he has the power to make one appear silly and the other deeply significant” (95). Even when critics get Greene’s point, as Coetzee clearly does, they subscribe to Orwell’s famous denunciation, “He [Greene] appears to share the idea, which has been floating around ever since Baudelaire, that there is something rather distinguee in being damned” (441).

What I want to suggest is that these negative responses to the religious aspects of the novel, whether merely minimising it in preference to the generic properties of the thriller or derogating it as melodramatic religiosity, crucially fail to engage with the critique of the ethics of modernity which emerges from Greene’s religious convictions, and constitute an a priori, unwarranted rejection of his “religious sense” as reactionary. But Graham Greene’s investigations of the ethical and spiritual state of modernity were much more nuanced than this view allows. In this chapter, with close analysis of the character of Ida Arnold, I will examine how Greene engages with the ethics of modernity from his Catholic weltanschauung, and in doing so elicits the philosophical limits of the bourgeois liberalism that she encapsulates.

2. “No More Love for Anyone”: The Shift Away from Agape in the Ethics of Modernity

Her friends – they were everywhere under the bright, glittering Brighton air. . .

. She had only to appeal to any of them, for Ida Arnold was on the right side.
She was cheery, she was healthy, she could get a bit lit with the best of them. She liked a good time, her big breasts bore their carnality frankly down the Old Steyne, but you had only to look at her to know that you could rely on her. She wouldn’t tell tales to your wife, she wouldn’t remind you next morning of what you wanted to forget, she was honest, she was kindly, she belonged to the great middle law-abiding class, her amusements were their amusements, her superstitions their superstitions. . . she had no more love for anyone than they had (G. Greene, *Brighton Rock*, 84: all subsequent quotations from the novel given as *BR*).

Ida Arnold is a brilliantly-drawn composite of all the inconsistencies and delusions of modern British society that Greene wanted to critique. She is a figure of Dickensian grossness, *and* humanity, which makes it understandable that Coetzee et al. believe her to be the novel’s heroine. In a letter to V.S. Pritchett in 1948, Greene states: “The novelist’s task is to draw his own likeness to any human being, the guilty as much as the innocent. Isn’t our attitude to all our characters more or less – There, and may God forgive me, goes myself?” Perhaps with Ida in mind, he added that this went not only for his evil characters but the “smug, complacent, successful” ones, too (*A Life in Letters*, 153).

Yet even a cursory reading of the passage above would obliterate the conviction that Ida Arnold is the heroine of the novel in any *conventional* sense. The passage begins with “her friends” scattered ubiquitously under Brighton’s “bright, glittering… air,” the adjectives effortlessly conjuring up the sterile garishness of
Brighton and by association, Ida. We are quickly made aware that these friends are in fact married lovers, whose loyalty is the quid pro quo for Ida’s qualities as a mistress, which include discretion and lenience. The narrative voice keeps a slight ironic distance from the character: “She had only to appeal to any of them, for Ida Arnold was on the right side.” Greene leaves “the right side” intentionally vague to illustrate the arbitrary solipsism of Ida’s morality.

The ironic stance of the narrative borders on satire in the litany of flaws which bind Ida to her lovers in membership of one clique, “the great middle law-abiding class.” Greene, the son of a schoolmaster himself, is scathing of bourgeois morality in so far as it paradoxically combines an intense individualism with a cliquish disdain for the squalor and criminality of the “lower classes.” A notorious philanderer all his life (Norman Sherry’s tri-volume biography lingers yearningly on the details), he is uncomfortable with the downgrading of adultery from mortal sin to “amusements” of the flesh (indeed, much of Greene’s critique of the ethics of modernity is self-analysis, which undermines claims of self-righteousness).

Greene’s narrative is most unforgiving, however, of Ida’s kindness and honesty, sentimental virtues that he sees as infinitely inferior to the Christian concept of agape or selfless-love: “she had no more love for anyone than they had.” As Charles Taylor argues in A Secular Age, the fashioning of the modern moral order and the rise of exclusive humanism (i.e. humanism without reference to a transcendent Being) “had to include the active capacity to shape and fashion our world, natural and social; and it had to be actuated by some drive to human beneficence. To put this second requirement in a way which refers back to the
religious tradition, modern humanism, in addition to being activist and interventionist, had to produce some substitute for \textit{agape}” (Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age}, 27). In \textit{Brighton Rock}, Graham Greene explores the way in which Christian \textit{agape} is substituted in modernity by, on the one hand, dutiful adherence to abstract, rational law ("the great middle law-abiding class"), and on the other a subjectivist ethics based upon sensibility ("she was kindly"). This dialectic, between the disembodied abstraction of social contract theory and the hedonist empiricism of utilitarianism, is at the heart of Ida Arnold’s modern ethics of Right and Wrong.

3. Right and Wrong

As R.W.B. Lewis argues, \textit{Brighton Rock} is a novel set in the no-man’s land between “two kinds of reality: a relation between incommensurable and hostile forces; between incompatible worlds. . . It is, in short, the relation Greene had formed for himself in Liberia, between the ‘sinless empty graceless chromium world’ of modern Western urban civilization and the supernaturally infested jungle with its purer terrors and its keener pleasures” (9). Though this dichotomy exists on the formal level (detective story or “religious” novel) and on the political (as I will investigate further in Chapter Two), the most fundamental difference exists on the moral plane – between Ida’s secular Right and Wrong and Pinkie and Rose’s religious Good and Evil. These moral worlds clash in Ida’s attempt to persuade Rose to testify against Pinkie:
‘You’re young. You don’t know things like I do.’

‘There’s things you don’t know.’ [Rose] brooded darkly by the bed, while the woman argued on. A God wept in a garden, and cried out upon a cross . . . .

‘I know one thing you don’t. I know the difference between Right and Wrong. They didn’t teach you that at school.’

Rose didn’t answer; the woman was quite right. The two words meant nothing to her. Their taste was extinguished by stronger foods – Good and Evil. The woman could tell her nothing she didn’t know about these – she knew by tests as clear as mathematics that Pinkie was evil – what did it matter in that case whether he was right or wrong? (BR, 217).

Ida petitions Rose to leave Pinkie based upon the assumption of her greater, more valid experience: “You don’t know things like I do.” The experiential is a crucial facet of the ethics of modernity, enshrining the sense-perceptions of the individual. This ethics of sensibility emerges in the 18th century, with the body as the centre of moral knowledge: “the body . . . is wiser (than the mind) in its own plain way,” comments Edmund Burke (qtd. in Eagleton, Trouble With Strangers, 39).

As Terry Eagleton notes, this is the bourgeois ethics par excellence: “In the domain of ideas, a militant empiricism sought to discredit rationalist systems with too little blood in their veins, embracing instead the raw stuff of subjective sensation. Concepts were to be rooted in the rough ground of lived experience, where the honest burgher felt rather more at home than on the pure ice of metaphysical speculation” (Ibid., 16). While this had the salutary effect of redeeming the embodied nature of
epistemology from the ethereal Descartian rationality of the preceding century, it involved its own alienations from the other. If individual perception is the totality of knowledge rather than a prerequisite for attaining it, rationality is, contra Jürgen Habermas, non-communicative. In the ethics of sensibility, rationality is merely that which is commensurate with your individual sensory experience, which is inaccessible to others without appeal to some non-sensory quality (scientific consensus, Humean sympathy, G.E. Moore’s “intuitions”; I will return to this later).

Moreover, Ida’s sensory experience has a hedonistic emphasis on pleasure, as Brian Diemart delineates:

[Ida has a total] inability to see beneath the surface of things. Brighton for her is a place of fun and excitement, and life, though she takes it with “deadly seriousness” . . . is always “good”. . . made up as it is of various physical sensations and corporeal pleasures: “Life was sunlight on the brass bedposts, Ruby port, the leap of the heart when the outsider you have backed passes the post and the colours go bobbing up. Life was poor Fred’s mouth pressed down on hers in the taxi, vibrating with the engine along the parade” . . . (134-5).

In one sense, Ida’s pleasure principle has a salubrious quality, certainly compared to the twisted Jansenist attitude to sex that Pinkie has (I will return to this in Chapter Two). Displaying his ambivalence towards modernity, Greene does not whitewash the puritanical abhorrence of sex that often creeps into Catholicism, even as he endeavors to critique the self-righteous bohemianism of Ida, who “[bears] the
same relation to passion as a peepshow” (BR, 159). Therefore, it is not Ida’s corporeality or sensuality that Greene is critiquing from a religious perspective: the Incarnation in Catholic theology precludes such Gnostic immaterialism or puritanical nausea at sex. Rather, it is as Terry Eagleton has astutely observed, the fact that “knowledge is simply one moment or aspect of our bodily collusion in reality, a moment which modernity falsely abstracts and enshrines ...” (Reason, Faith and Revolution, 78-9). Her egregious faith in pleasure comes at the expense of denying suffering and agony, realities Rose and Pinkie are intimately acquainted with: “A God wept in a garden, and cried out upon a cross. . .” A slave to her senses, Ida is imprisoned in her own world-view and can only browbeat Rose into agreeing that “Ida knows best.”

The ethics of sensibility are also the ethics of sentimentality. Hearing the news of the press-man’s death, Ida allows herself the indulgence of maudlin thoughts: “she was back at Brighton on Whit Monday, thinking how while she waited there, he must have been dying, walking along the front to Hove, dying, and the cheap drama of the thought weakened her heart towards him. She was of the people, she cried in cinemas at David Copperfield, when she was drunk all the old ballads her mother had known came easily to her lips, her homely heart was touched by the word ‘tragedy’” (BR, 31). As Eagleton writes, “Sentimentalists . . . are self-conscious consumers of tender feelings, chewing the cud of their own congenial emotions” (Trouble With Strangers, 25). Ida’s sentimentalism suggests that she is not as spontaneous as she imagines herself to be: like her mantra, “I’ve always been on the side of Right,” even her
feelings are expressed in a gamut of stock expressions, cloying tenderness and
mawkish tears.

There is something sinister about the tears, in particular, as Milan Kundera has
expressed in his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. An American senator and
his Czech émigrée lover are watching children running through a sunny field and the
senator remarks, “Now that’s what I call happiness”:

How did the senator know that children meant happiness? . . . The senator had
only one argument in his favour: his feeling. . . In the realm of kitsch, the
dictatorship of the heart rules supreme. . . Kitsch causes two tears to flow in
quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running through
the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all
mankind, by children running through the grass! (Kundera, 251).

Kundera implicitly links sentimentality with fascist tendencies, both in the
sense that it disguises authoritarian motives as affection, and that it comprises the
nostalgic desire to protect some ideal of innocence or purity by manufacturing a giant
collective fraternity or *volk*: “she was of the people, she cried in cinemas at *David
Copperfield*.”

Greene analyses the vice of pity, that corrupt parody of love and compassion which is
so insidious and deadly for sensitive natures. . . Behind pity for another lies self-pity,
and behind self-pity lies cruelty” (93-94). While in the passage quoted previously Ida
dismisses Rose as ignorant and inexperienced, in other encounters Ida’s sentimentalism provides a phantom limb with which to probe at Rose in an effort to convince her to deliver Pinkie to the law: “You see we can get along all right when we are together. I’ve never had a child of my own and somehow I’ve taken to you. You’re a sweet little thing.” She suddenly barked, “Come away from the wall and act sensible. He doesn’t love you” (BR, 131). Initially cajoling, she manipulatively appeals to their affinities based upon sex, and her ersatz-maternal feelings, yet behind the cloying sentimentality (“You’re a sweet little thing”) lies the vicious authoritarian impulse: “Come away from the wall and act sensible. He doesn’t love you.”

As Alasdair MacIntyre has demonstrated in his piercing history of moral philosophy, *After Virtue*, the ethics of empiricism and sentimentalism (exemplified by Ida Arnold) occupy an awkward yet central position in modernity. Utilitarianism is the generic form of such an ethics, in which the maximization of pleasure and the avoidance of pain for the greatest number are the motivations for moral living. As MacIntyre argues, utilitarianism evolves from Bentham’s confident assessment in which happiness is conceived monolithically and empirically, via J.S. Mill’s recognition that pleasure is “polymorphous” to Sidgwick’s unhappy conclusion that “our basic moral beliefs have two characteristics. . . they do not form any kind of unity, they are irreducibly heterogeneous; and their acceptance is and must be unargued” (MacIntyre, 62).

MacIntyre wryly notes that Sidgwick’s pessimistic admission, which amounted to the failure of utilitarianism to provide a rational account of morality (“where he had looked for Cosmos, he had in fact found only Chaos”), was adopted
by G.E. Moore as “an enlightening and liberating discovery” (63). Founding the basis for the human pursuit of the good on a mysterious Intuitionism independent of reason, as did Moore so beloved of the Gnostic and exclusive Bloomsbury set loathed by Greene, involves “a kind of spontaneous divination” between right and wrong, which his 18th century forerunner Francis Hutcheson called “an occult quality” (qtd. In Eagleton, *Trouble With Strangers*, 22). Indeed, it is no mere coincidence that Ida Arnold, having spurned formal religion, dabbles in New Age divination with the shady character Old Crowe to ascertain the cause of Hale’s death (*BR*, 42-3).

As I have already intimated, the location of the moral sense in the sentimental and subjective realm emerged in the 18th century as a buffer against the bloodless automaton of instrumental reason, which was part of the machine of empire-building in the post-Enlightenment world. However, in doing so it also “[risked] surrendering [moral imperatives] to the vagaries of chance, caprice, habit, fancy and prejudice” (Eagleton, *Trouble with Strangers*, 23).

Given this propensity for the arbitrary in her ethical passions, Ida Arnold not surprisingly searches for something more solid to ground them in than the gossamer web of fancy that forms them. This she locates in a dubious self-abnegation before “Right”: “‘Right and wrong,’” she said, “‘I believe in right and wrong’ (*BR*, 43). Just as the ethics of sensibility emerges from 18th century sentimentalists and benevolentists such as Burke and David Hume, the latter is a rival strain of ethical theory that owes much to the sage of Konigsberg, Immanuel Kant.

“Central to Kant’s moral philosophy are two deceptively simple theses: if the rules of morality are rational, they must be the same for all rational beings, in just the
way that the rules of arithmetic are and if the rules of morality are *binding* on all rational beings, then the contingent ability of such beings to carry them out must be unimportant – what is important is their will to carry them out” (MacIntyre, 42). Kant works out a justification for the morality of the Enlightenment that is universally applicable and binding. This categorical, deontological ethics manifests itself in an adherence to the immutable moral law. In Ida Arnold, the Kantian facet to her personality is seen in her subjection before the impersonal forces of Right and Wrong, and her implacable will to do Right and punish Wrong. “Right and wrong,” Rose laments to Pinkie about their persecutor; “That’s what she talks about. I’ve heard her at the table. Right and wrong. As if she knew” (*BR*, 121).

As I mentioned earlier on in this chapter, Right as a concept of Ida’s morality has a stubbornly indeterminate vagueness. In Kant, “the sheer inscrutability of freedom . . . in *The Critique of Judgement* . . . precludes all positive presentation. It is a purely noumenal phenomenon [sic], which can only be known practically, not captured in a sensory image” (Eagleton, *Trouble With Strangers*, 113). The major difference, however, between Kantian deontological ethics and Ida’s version of it is that this vagueness serves her ulterior motives: in other words, what is unconditional and universal in Kant is utilitarian in Ida. She violates Kant’s most fundamental law by treating others as means to an end, saving Rose and avenging Hale’s death by punishing Pinkie as the means to her own *jouissance*. Whereas Kant would have no dealings with an ethics of sensation (“melting sympathy,” he contemptuously labeled it in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*), Ida elides her subjective, sentimentalist moral sense into Kant’s framework of universality.
As I intimated with reference to Ida’s bourgeois traits, this ideological maneuver may also have made its way into the text via Greene’s own self-analysis. In a magnificent, yet unforgiving piece of close reading, Michelle Orange delineates how in his correspondence Graham Greene “tends to dissolve behind the impersonal ‘one’ when uncomfortable, lest an errant ‘I’ pin him too firmly, or revealingly, to the wall”:

In 1943, deep into a wartime affair with a woman named Dorothy Glover, Greene writes emotionally, drunkenly and somewhat manipulatively to his wife: “My darling, in vino veritas. You are the best, the most dear person I’ve ever known. Life is sometimes so beastly that one wishes one were dead.” As [Richard Greene, the editor of the letters] notes, in this case Greene originally ended the last sentence with “I wish I were dead,” before opening his favorite syntactical booby hatch and slipping away, leaving a sort of holographically hedged version of himself – as it seems he did in the actuality of his marriage as well – in the place where a husband should be. (Orange, ‘Not Easy Being Greene,’ The Nation).

Ida Arnold’s use of “Right” is just such a “syntactical booby hatch,” allowing the fun-loving hedonist to virtually disappear into the role of disinterested avenger.

Thus there is a striking paradox at the kernel of both Ida Arnold’s identity and her ethics as a quintessential modern. In one sense, she glorifies sensual, empirical experience, so much so that sex comes to stand for the very founta...
knowledge: “‘I’m not a Puritan, mind. I’ve done a thing or two in my time – that’s natural. Why,’ she said, extending towards the child her plump and patronising paw, ‘it’s in my hand: the girdle of Venus” (BR, 131). Knowledge is localised to the sense-perception of her “patronising paw.” Mutatis mutandis, access to morality is simultaneously universalized into an abstract and impersonal totality, so that all individuals are subject to it: “[Ida] dug down into her deepest mind, the plane of memories, instincts, hopes, and brought up from them the only philosophy she lived by. ‘I like fair play,’ she said. She felt better when she’d said that and added with a terrible lightheartedness, ‘An eye for an eye, Phil. Will you stick by me?’” (BR, 80).

While I have suggested that this melding of empiricism and the moral law is an ideological maneuver by Ida with utilitarian motives, I think that she is, in Greene’s presentation of the character, never more than remotely conscious of those same motives. One underestimates the power of ideology to say that, like Iago, Ida’s actions are premeditated and Machiavellian, making a net to enmesh Rose out of her own goodness. Ida believes in Right, and responds at least in part with the austere duty of any good Kantian. Indeed, ideology runs so deep that the moral law seems as powerful as a God, while remaining resolutely impersonal. It towers over the irrepressible Ida, the malevolent Pinkie, and the mousey Rose alike, and doesn’t pander like a merciful deity. This is the sense of Coetzee’s comment that Pinkie’s “sins” are “simply crimes that deserve punishment of the law.”

There is, it goes without saying, something extremely satisfying about the blind justice, the equality of individuals which the modern system of social contract theory presupposes; yet there remains a critique to be made. Firstly, in its repudiation
of empiricism and the cult of feeling, Kant’s moral law risks abstraction to the point of tautology: “we should be moral because it is moral to be so” (Eagleton, Trouble With Strangers, 113). Secondly, it follows from this that the law, with its emphasis on obligation and procedural justice, “at its most brutally sadistic... reduces us by its senseless terrorism to non-beings” (Ibid., 111). This is effectively what Ida’s brandishing of “Right” does to Rose, reducing her to an almost animalistic state: “Driven to her hole the small animal peered out at the bright and breezy world...” (BR, 131). In his exasperation at what he sees as Greene’s theological caprices, Coetzee fails to recognise that along with its levelling parity the law-governed society has constructed at its anaemic heart Bentham’s Panopticon, which “produces homogenous effects of power” (Foucault, 99). The scaffold, pyre and rack of the premoderns have been simultaneously phased out in actuality and extended massively in psychological terms, and as a result we do not struggle to find modern analogues – the gas chambers, gulags, refugee camps and “detention centres.” The rise of modern states, as Charles Taylor has argued, entailed the rise of the disciplinary society in which “intervention was driven by fear, and ambition; to head off disorder, and to increase power” (Taylor, A Secular Age, 103).

4. “Merciless Compassion”: Oxymoron, or Modern Necessity?

‘I’m going to work on that kid every hour of the day until I get something.’ She rose formidably and moved across the restaurant, like a warship going into action, a warship on the right side in a war to end all wars, the signal flags
proclaiming that every man would do his duty. Her big breasts, which had never suckled a child of her own, felt a merciless compassion. (*BR*, 129)

Over the course of this chapter I have been developing the idea that Ida is an oxymoronic hybrid of two modern ethical positions: the Kantian subject of universal morality and the subjective sentimentalist with a utilitarian bent. She is simultaneously atheist and occultist; interventionist and bohemian; cunningly instrumentalising and egotistical, and at the same time thoroughly beholden to an inflexible sense of duty. Indeed, oxymoron is the chief rhetorical device used to characterise Ida: “When allusion is made to Ida’s ‘remorseless optimism’ or her ‘merciless compassion,’ the aim is to negate the familiar human attributes – in this case, cheerfulness and pity – by stressing their remoteness from the theological virtues – in this case, penitent humility and mercy” (Lewis, 16). Terry Eagleton, failing to recognise the centrality of oxymoron to Greene’s critique of modernity, concludes that this is an aesthetic failure on his part: “The novel, in fact, has some difficulty in squaring these disparate aspects of Ida: in endowing her at once with a breezy hedonism and an adequate motivation in her remorseless quest for justice” (Eagleton, ‘Reluctant Heroes,’ 117-8). Is the clash between hedonism and justice in the text really such an insoluble paradox, and therefore unconvincing?

Ida’s hangdog lover, the affable Phil Corkery, plucks up the courage to point out her ethical schizophrenia:

‘It’s not our business now.’
[Singing] ‘Lord Rothschild said to me…’ She broke off to set him gently right. You couldn’t let a friend have wrong ideas. ‘It’s the business of anyone who knows the difference between right and wrong.’

‘But you’re so terribly certain about things, Ida. You go busting in . . . Oh and you mean well, but how do we know the reasons he may have had… and besides,’ he accused her, ‘you’re only doing it because it’s fun. Fred wasn’t anyone you cared about’ (my italics).

She switched towards him her large and lit up eyes. ‘Why,’ she said, ‘I don’t say it hasn’t been – exciting.’ She felt quite sorry it was all over now. ‘What’s the harm in that? I like doing what’s right, that’s all.’ (BR, 243).

A fundamental problem in interpreting this apparent contradiction between “doing what’s right” and the obscene, self-regarding jouissance with which Ida pursues her cause is the problem of Kant’s insistence upon the disentanglement of the individual moral arbiter from his or her desires, which are seen as pathological. But is there really the possibility of such a totally aloof, cool reason in reality? Surveying the horrors of the Holocaust, Theodor Adorno recognized that there is a plane on which Kantian ethical disinterestedness, far from precluding the kind-of violent subjective pleasure that Ida pursues, is in actuality commensurate with it. Sadism may flicker as a kind-of doppelganger to Kantian law. As Slavoj Žižek writes:

The Sadean move from Kantian Respect-to-Blasphemy, i.e. from respecting the Other (fellow being), his freedom and autonomy, and always treating him
also as an end-in-itself, to reducing all Others precisely to mere dispensable instruments to be ruthlessly exploited, is strictly correlative to the fact that the “subject of the enunciation” of the Moral Injunction, invisible in Kant, assumes the concrete features of the Sadean executioner (Žižek, ‘Kant and Sade,’ 2). ⁶

That is to say, rather than a sadistic utilitarianism being at odds with Kantian universality, it is, so Adorno and the Lacanians argue, the concrete realisation of deontological abstraction. In the modern move from agape, the coherent rationale for Kant’s categorical imperative to treat the other as an end-in-itself is lost, while the universality is retained. Whereas vengeance in the premodern scheme was claimed exclusively by Yahweh, in modernity it belongs to individuals: “Somebody had made Fred unhappy, and somebody was going to be made unhappy in return. An eye for an eye. If you believed in God, you might leave vengeance to him, but you couldn’t trust the One, the universal spirit. Vengeance was Ida’s, just as much as reward was Ida’s, the soft gluey mouth affixed in taxis, the warm handclasp in cinemas, the only reward there was. And vengeance and reward — they were both fun (my italics)” (BR, 41-2). That reward inevitably comes in sexual dereliction:

While Mr. Corkery was gone she made her preparations for the carnival, the taste of the sweet cake between her teeth. The idea of Fred Hale dodged backwards like a figure on a platform when the train goes out . . . . She gazed round the big padded pleasure dome of a bedroom with bloodshot and
experienced eyes: the long mirror and the wardrobe and the enormous bed . . .

If someone had said to her then ‘Fred Hale,’ she would hardly have recognized the name: there was another interest: for the next hour let the police have him (BR, 158-9).

Thus, Ida shares the sentiments of the French playwright and proponent of la sensibilité, Marivaux: “Yes! Sensual pleasure, that is what I call the flattering testimony one gives of oneself after a virtuous action” (qtd. in Taylor, A Secular Age, 249).

Ida Arnold’s “merciless compassion” is only superficially an oxymoron: in the narrative presentation of the character, her actions, and the insights of the characters around her, particularly Pinkie and Rose, Greene depicts the oscillation of the ethics of modernity between abstract universality and the co-opting sadistic authority of utilitarianism. The perceptiveness of this ethical insight is felt in the fact that Greene writes in 1938, when modernity was about to enter its nadir in the rationalised, mechanised genocide of Jews by the Nazis. It is Greene’s most antimodern novel, but the light it sheds on problems within anthropocentric humanist ethics is utterly compelling.
Chapter II: Antimodernism and Ambivalent Modernity in *Brighton Rock*

1. “This is Hell, nor are we out of it”: Modernity and Good & Evil

   After his conversion to Catholicism in 1926, Graham Greene began to write less sporadically, and his first novel, *The Man Within*, was published in 1929. He was productive in the pre-war years, writing six novels in the thriller vein before taking up “the religious sense” as his theme in *Brighton Rock*. Britain had been utterly changed by the First World War, which in the literature of the period was largely registered as an experience of loss and chaos where order and tradition had held sway. Writers of the inter-war years responded to this sense of loss in multifarious ways: E.M. Forster dedicated himself to a classical liberal humanism both genteel and gentle, not to mention Moorean mysticism – ‘Always Connect!’ Lawrence sought a new morality in primitivism and amoral vitalism; Joyce exploded consciousness in his exuberant, neo-scholastic modernism; “Macspaunday” embraced the political Left. Many, however, saw in Catholicism the resources, both ethical and imaginative, to stay the confusion and moral emptiness threatened by the disenchantment of modernity.

   Conversion was not always popular with the literati; Virginia Woolf, in particular, had an aversion to Christianity: “I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me
more credible than he is. I mean, there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God” (qtd. in Schwartz, 11).

Yet converts such as Greene, Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, and Muriel Spark were just as likely to criticize what they saw as the shallow materialism of Bloomsbury, which ceded supernaturalism for the comforting powers of aesthetics, personal relations and the subjective mind. As we have seen, Greene denounced the “paper-thin” modern world of Forster and Woolf as inhibiting to the true nature of will and moral choice, the cosmic “importance of the human act.” As Bernard Blackstone notes apropos of Woolf’s antipathy for religion, “[it] springs first . . . from her hatred of hypocrisy. It springs also from her sensitiveness to unpleasantness and pain. These things are, artistically, outside her scope. She knows they are there; and . . . she is ever too acutely conscious of them. They contradict her vision of beauty and significance” (qtd. in DeVitis, Graham Greene, 2).

In one sense, bourgeois materialism, which contradicts the existence of a supernatural realm of good & evil, is only materialist up to a point before it becomes hopelessly idealistic: it must shut its mind to the agony and suffering of humanity, the dispossession of the many in relation to the few. Its ebullient optimism also struggles to countenance Nazi genocide and Stalinist purges, the arms-race and Western neo-imperialism, except to dismiss these horrifying modern phenomena as regressions to barbarism, false notes in the ascending arpeggio of history. It is not without significance that Woolf’s complaint against “poor dear Tom Eliot” finds Christians slightly less credible than corpses: both give witness to a fallen world. In Brighton
Rock, Greene’s assault on the bourgeois ethics of Right and Wrong came as a rebuke to this naïve Hegelian optimism:

It was 1938. A time when we all needed painful truths that would stick. Did not want easy answers that would fade after they had jogged us along a little. . . Needed to realize, and more important to feel, something deeper than just right and wrong, good guys and rotten eggs. The world of that big – both hearted and breasted – decent, sensible, no-nonsense woman, Ida Arnold, was not going to be enough. . . The realization that jog-along decency, human justice, right or wrong as being enough, just couldn’t satisfy was . . . a moment of truth all the stronger because Ida was so real (Angus Wilson, ‘Greene: Four Score Years and Then?’ The Times, 7\textsuperscript{th} December, 1984).

Graham Greene’s “religious sense” and its concomitant ethics of Good and Evil in Brighton Rock are his response to the crisis of modernity: he understood that not only could an ethics of right and wrong and “jog-along decency” fail to take account of and struggle against modern totalitarianism, but also that such bourgeois rationality was not completely alien to the bureaucratic monstrosities of pogrom and purge. The French Thomist, Jacques Maritain, who married a Jewish philosopher, Raïssa Oumansoff, was keenly aware of this causality:

The irrationalist tidal wave [of Nazism] is in reality the tragic catastrophe of rationalist humanism. It reacts against the type of humanism characterized by
a reason closed upon itself, but in so doing it subjects man to the influence of
forces from below, it shuts off still further communications from above and
alienates man from the spirit which liberates; it walls the creature up in the
abyss of animal vitality. On the other hand there is the spectacle of a
continuance, an aggravation and exasperation of anthropocentric humanism in
the direction in which it had pointed from the very start, the direction of
rationalistic hopes, constituted no longer in mere speculative religion, but in a
lived religion . . . This sums up all the consequences that man alone, and by
himself alone, works out his salvation. (The Twilight of Civilization, 9-10).

Nazism, Maritain argues, was a monstrous irrational cry against the stifling rationality
of bourgeois humanism, and yet was simultaneously beholden to its rationalizing
bureaucracy, the way in which anthropocentric humanism entailed “an activist,
interventionist stance, both towards nature and to human society. Both are to be re-
ordered in the light of instrumental reason, to suit human purposes” (Taylor, A
Secular Age, 246). Humanism thus understood produces its other. Greene shared
Maritain’s sense of the darkness of their hour, writing in The Lawless Roads “one
began to have a conception of the appalling mysteries of love moving through a
ravaged world – the Curé d’Ars admitting to his mind all the impurity of a province:
Péguy challenging God in the cause of the damned. It remained something one
associated with misery, violence, evil, ‘all the torments and agonies,’ Rilke wrote,
‘wrought on scaffolds, in torture chambers, mad-houses, operating theatres,
underneath vaults of bridges in late autumn. . .’” (15). For Greene, then, as for many
other Catholic writers and thinkers of the mid-twentieth century, the rejection of right and wrong as an ethical system and the adoption in its place of good and evil emerges initially out of a sense of the tragedy of modernity, the way in which, as Pinkie learns with “fascination and with fear” from the lawyer Prewitt, “Why this is Hell, nor are we out of it” (BR, 228).

Critics have rightly savaged Greene for the excessiveness of this bleak worldview in Brighton Rock, some tracing in it a misanthropic temperament every bit as dangerous as the crises of modernity it deigned to critique. The Irish playwright Sean O’Casey complains: “Everything and everyone seems to be on the road of evil. Talk of James Joyce! Joyce had humour, Greene has none; and in the darkest part of Joyce there are always bright flashes of light; here the very light itself is rotten. Even the blessed sun ‘slid off the sea like cuttlefish shot into the sky with the stain of agonies and endurance’” (272). Similarly, Alan Warren Friedman argues that “as Catholic icons, Greene’s elegies are meant to be artifacts of triumph rather than mourning, yet they fail to transcend their mordancy and morbidity,” concluding damningly that this contemptus mundi is so extreme in Greene’s fiction that, contrary to his assertion regarding “the religious sense,” Greene implicitly insists “that all human action and appearance are devoid of worth” (132).

There is also the problem of what we might call the “Orwellian” challenge, that is to say the emphasis in the novel on the ethical wisdom of the infernal Pinkie in relation to the schizophrenia of self-righteous Ida, and the conviction of Coetzee et al. that Greene’s “religious sense” is in some ways a perverse claim of the moral superiority of a murderer to secular law ex officio of his Catholicism. “Is not someone
like Ida, a non-believer, preferable to someone like Pinkie, a warped believer, even though God may eventually choose to save Pinkie and damn Ida?” (Karl, 57). In a chapter entitled ‘Ida Arnold and the Protestant Way’ (presumably missing the point that Ida is Protestant only in a very tenuous sense of the word), John Atkins fulminates: “It is a Catholic misconception that we follow our worst while they follow their best. On the other hand, Pinkie is not their best. It is insulting that he should be presented to us, in all his evil, as our spiritual superior” (100).

While these criticisms are valid up to a point, I would argue that they must be qualified in the context of Greene’s interrogation of the ethics of modernity, and allow that Greene writes against the backdrop of a world on the brink of a devastating war. My sense of Brighton Rock is that it represents a reconnaissance of new territory for Greene, the rehearsal of a certain ethical outlook indebted to “the religious sense” that would become much more nuanced and ambivalent in The Power and The Glory. In an interview with V.S. Pritchett years later, Greene as much as accepted some of the criticisms of Brighton Rock:

[Greene:] ‘…I wasn’t thought of as a Catholic novelist until Brighton Rock.’

[Pritchett:] ‘It was very explicit there. You couldn’t stand the Protestant barmaid [sic] who was out for justice.’

‘Yes, I underlined too much in that book…” (G. Greene, “Interview with V.S. Pritchett,” In Conversations with Graham Greene, 117.)
Greene’s admission of the flaws of the novel is in part due to the fact that his ethical inquiry into modernity was a process, in which *Brighton Rock* was a first step, an experiment, albeit an accomplished one: he would go about perfecting this inquiry in *The Power and the Glory*, where the antimodern elements of the earlier novel are rejected for a much subtler, more successful critique of modernity. I will examine this in the final chapter.

However, the critics of *Brighton Rock*’s pessimism and religious morbidity overstate their grievances, strikingly so in the case of Friedman: his argument that in Greene’s novels “all human action and appearance are devoid of worth” is an unjustifiable position to take on his work, and, indeed, the burden of this thesis is to examine how Greene’s fiction exhibits *precisely* the opposite – that the religious sense gives human actions a significance and depth beyond those offered by ethics based upon diffuse pleasure or even steadfast duty, by subjecting to ethical critique the alienating forces of modernity, in which modern man appears as *animal laborans* (literally, a beast of burden) as opposed to *imago dei*, the likeness of God, worthy of nothing less than divine dignity.9

In this chapter, I will carefully examine the negative and positive dialectics of Greene’s ethical critique of modernity in terms of “the religious sense” and the world of good & evil. I will examine the ways in which Greene’s argument against modernity becomes too insistent, how his stark juxtaposition between this supernatural world and the secular world of right and wrong strikes too strident a note; in the vicious teenage thug, Pinkie, this ethical failure is manifested in his demonic contempt for the world, his sense that human life is worthless.
However, I will also elicit the way in which the text depicts and critically challenges the malaise of modern living, and how, ironically, Greene’s adoption of a supernatural schema for ethics is much more attuned to the material social injustice of pre-war Britain. In the character of Rose, Greene offers a critique of the hidebound antimodernist vein within Catholicism, exploring the ways in which *agape* must transcend narrowly sectarian religious moralities. In this way, I hope to oscillate between antimodern elements of the novel and Greene’s incipient attempts to “depass” this, the intimations of his discontented search for a more refined religious critique of modernity – a Catholic modernity.

2. “Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge”: Pinkie as Antimodern Übermensch

There is a sentence by Gauguin, quoted approvingly by Greene, that comes near to expressing his main obsessional [sic] outlook: “Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.” A terror of life, a terror of what experience can do to the individual, a terror at predetermined corruption, is the motive force that drives Greene as novelist… Failure, ugliness, the primitive are in some sense truer than success, beauty and civilization with their deceptive gloss (Allott and Farris, *The Art of Graham Greene*, 15-16).

Pinkie Brown, who is referred to as “The Boy” throughout the narrative, is a figure of pure evil, described in his first appearance as he stalks the journalist as “a boy of about seventeen – a shabby smart suit, the cloth too thin for much wear, a face
of starved intensity, a kind of hideous and unnatural pride” (BR, 5). Indeed, sometimes it seems that the real division in the novel is not between right and wrong and good and evil, rather between right and wrong and evil tout court. Mark Bosco traces this awareness of supernatural Faustian depravity to Greene’s admiration for the writers of the French Catholic revival, including François Mauriac, Paul Claudel, and Georges Bernanos: “it was Bernanos’ bold portrayal of evil personified that Greene most admired, a depiction of a somber but malicious adversary at work in the world that cannot be reduced to mere psychology or human ignorance” (43). Greene, writing in “The Lost Childhood” (1951) about his miserable years at the Berkhamsted school of which his father was the headmaster, and the bully, Carter, who terrorised him there, drew the conclusion that “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” (Collected Essays, 16-17).

Pinkie’s “nature” throughout the novel is overwhelmingly black. He is a believer, but a warped one. When Rose asks him if he believes or not, he replies with diabolical logic:

‘Of course it’s true… What else could there be?’ he went scornfully on. ‘Why,’ he said, ‘it’s the only thing that fits. These atheists, they don’t know nothing. Of course there’s Hell. Flames and damnation,’ he said with his eyes on the dark shifting water and the lightning and the lamps going out above the black struts of the Palace Pier, ‘torments.’
‘And Heaven too,’ Rose said with anxiety, while the rain fell interminably on.

‘Oh, maybe,’ the Boy said, ‘maybe’ (BR, 55).

Pinkie believes passionately in Hell, while Heaven is utterly irrelevant to him. The poetry of Greene’s fiction has a Websterian intensity in scenes such as the one above, where the inner world of the character bleeds seamlessly into the external or “objective” world: “‘Flames and damnation,’ he said with his eyes on the dark shifting water and the lightning and the lamps going out above the back struts of the Palace Pier, ‘torments.’” The character’s speech straddles a rhythmic depiction of the pitch phantasmagoria of Pinkie’s Brighton, but through the clever use of polysyndeton and rhythm (“the dark shifting water and the lightning and the lamps”) there is no caesura between Pinkie’s demonic rhetoric and the objective world around him – the torments of his speech are as one with the lightning and the lamps. Pinkie, a classic fundamentalist, makes no distinction between the figurative and the literal: the world and Hell are as one.

He also has a severe inferiority complex, palpable in his meeting with the crimelord Colleoni: “A stout woman in a white fox fur came out of a lift and stared at the Boy, then she got back into the lift again and moved weightily upwards. A little bitch sniffed at him and then talked him over with another little bitch on a settee. Mr. Colleoni came across an acre of deep carpet from the Louis Seize writing room, walking on tiptoe in glacé shoes” (BR, 64). Pinkie is an outsider in this world of sumptuous, voluptuous luxury (an important facet of the novel, to which I will return later in this chapter). Again, the narrative while remaining de jure third-person
focalises, strains the boundaries between objectivity and Pinkie’s subjectivity to the breaking point: “a little bitch sniffed at him and then talked him over with another little bitch…”

His feelings of inferiority breed a dangerous misanthropy; contemplating killing Rose in a fake suicide-pact to secure his position, Pinkie fantasises about a radical freedom: “He told himself he would soon be free again – they’d see the note. He hadn’t known she was all that unhappy, he would say, because they’d got to part… Life would go on. No more human contacts, other people’s emotions washing at the brain – he would be free again: nothing to think about but himself. Myself: the word echoed hygienically among the porcelain basins, the taps and plugs and wastes” (BR, 251). The incongruous adjective – hygienically – draws the reader’s attention to the Nietzschean overtones of Pinkie’s egocentrism, and implies the drastic cleansing that he is willing to commit in order to achieve it – in the climactic scene as Ida arrives with the police in tow he screams, “My God, do I have to have a massacre?” (BR, 264).¹⁰

Frederick R. Karl writes that it is the emphasis on individualism in modernity that accomplishes this Nietzschean conviction of the putrescence of humanity: “the humility, the obedience, the sense of good and evil implicit in a former age… can no longer be taken for granted. Now, anything goes, and in such a society, the Pinkies will exist in ever greater numbers” (54). While this is undoubtedly true on one level, and resonates with the overall tenor of my thesis, Karl’s argument isn’t attentive enough to the ways in which Pinkie’s misanthropy is also, perhaps primarily, a rejection of modernity, in fact, a kind-of perverted religious antimodernism, total and
uncompromising. This antimodernism may be tied to religious violence, as Charles Taylor has examined. Taylor identifies two ways of dealing with the threats to life in a violent and broken world: one involves seeing “destruction as divine,” thereby domesticating it while submitting to a higher power; the other involves claiming that power for oneself, facing down destruction: “we accept the possibility of violent death.” There is a third possibility that combines the two: “we submit to the god to whom we offer our blood; but the sacrificers also become agents of violence; they do it instead of just submitting to it; they wade in blood and gore; but now with sacred intent” (A Secular Age, 647-8). Pinkie embraces this third strain, disdaining the buffered self of secular modernity to open his being to the infernal powers of darkness. His god is Satan (“‘Credo in unum Satanum,’ the Boy said,” BR, 182) and he must bring all souls to the maw of the Beast: “He trailed the clouds of his own glory after him: Hell lay about him in his infancy. He was ready for more deaths” (BR, 70).

Pinkie manifests his hate primarily in a pathological aversion to embodied being, his own as well as that of others. His death drive is impelled by his longing to escape the carnal world, to spiritually transcend it through numinous violence. His weapon of choice is normally a razor-blade rather than a gun, suggesting his desire to intimately enact his hatred and disgust on the skins of his victims. This sadistic denial of corporeality in seeking to slash through it is tied up with questions of Pinkie’s “soured virginity”; he has a revulsion of sex, constantly revisiting in his mind the lonely ritual of his parents’ weekly lovemaking that he had seen as a child: “It was Saturday night, his father panted like a man at the end of a race and his
mother made a horrifying sound of pleasurable pain. . . he was completely abandoned: he had no share in their thoughts – for the space of a few minutes he was dead, he was like a soul in purgatory watching the shameless act of a beloved person” (BR, 203). Born in the poverty of Paradise Place where families made do with a common sleeping area, Pinkie witnesses the extreme physicality of his parents having sex (his mother cries with the agony of sensual pleasure), which disembodies him, marginalising him to the liminal status of a soul in Purgatory, neither pure angelic spirit nor matter. There is a repressed sexual content to his violent streak: “That music.” It moaned in his head in the hot electric night, it was the nearest he knew to sorrow, just as a faint secret sensual pleasure he felt, touching the bottle of vitriol with his fingers, as Rose came hurrying by the concert-hall, was his nearest approach to passion” (BR, 48). The intimacy of torture is in a certain sense Pinkie’s gruesome substitute for sexual bondedness. This discarnate perversity is an extreme reaction within Catholicism to a parallel emphasis within modernity on the hedonistic pleasure of the individual, yet both ironically lead to the same instrumentalisation of one’s own body and the bodies of others.

Thus Pinkie’s desire to master others is bound up with a religious impulse to disavow the ethical quandaries raised by modernity, and a concomitant inability to accept the world of flesh, human contact, sexuality. The irony is that Greene’s religious critique of modernity at least partially falls victim to the same antihumanism that it locates within the heart of the modern world. The Nietzschean “path to the slaughterhouses” that Maritain explains as both rebellion against and continuous with anthropocentric humanism is not necessarily less germane to religious
antimodernism, as fundamentalism, communal violence and sectarian slayings continually testify.

Religion offers no easy solution to the ethical problems that beset secular modernity, and indeed Pinkie stands as a gruesome warning that religion may entail such a total rejection of modernity that it has the potential to surpass immanent, antihumanist critiques in ardour and conviction. The appalling magnetism of the diabolical within religious tradition is encapsulated in Pinkie’s phosphorent death, in which he blinds himself with the vitriol he intended for the faces of others: “Born a Catholic, Pinkie is somewhere between a repressed Jansenist and a crazed Manichaean, always ready to die one death after another, a more than Eliotic believer in the glory of his own damnation. Quite literally, Pinkie dies a flaming death as he falls into nothingness, his face on fire as he goes off the cliff, memorably consumed by his hatred of every existence, his own most of all” (Bloom, 6).


Critics of “the religious sense” in *Brighton Rock* are quite right to argue that religion and an ethics of good & evil can lead to “expropriated divine violence” (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 653), and in Pinkie we see a Nietzschean glamour of self-assertion (and its attendant self-annihilation), numinous violence, and fear of sex. There are also dangers in a total rejection of the modern moral order, dangers to which mid-twentieth century Catholic converts were susceptible. In France, Charles Maurras founded a Catholic monarchist party, *Action Française*, in order to
counteract the “pernicious” forces of liberalism, democracy and republicanism. This reactionary programme went hand in hand with virulent anti-Semitism. In England, Greene’s friend and sometime rival, Evelyn Waugh, fell quarry to the Maurrassian conviction that Catholicism was the only bulwark against the widening gyre of modernity:

It seems to me in the present state of European history the essential issue is no longer between Catholicism, on one side, and Protestantism, on the other, but between Christianity and Chaos… Civilization – and by this I do not mean talking cinemas and tinned food, nor even surgery and hygienic houses, but the whole moral and artistic organization of Europe – has not in itself the power of survival. It came into being through Christianity, and without it has no significance or power to command allegiance… it is no longer possible… to accept the benefits of civilization and at the same time deny the supernatural basis on which it rests (qtd. in Pearce, Literary Converts, 166-7).

The dangers of this amalgam of civilization and Christianity soon became apparent to the more astute spectators, for as Charles Taylor writes, “the belief that God is on our side, that He blesses our order, is one of the most powerful sources of chauvinism. It can be a fertile inspiration to violence” (A Secular Age, 744). The anti-Semitic elements of Action Française along with Maurras’ repeated calls for the assassination of Republican politicians led to a papal condemnation in 1926.
Greene was by temperament unlikely to travel down the reactionary road. It is true that *Brighton Rock* is his most antimodern book, and Pinkie is a kind of antimodern outsider, who despite his violence and pathology is depicted as superior to the thoroughly-modern Ida. Yet, perhaps in rendering vivid the extremes of Pinkie’s rejection of modernity, Greene was able to avoid Waugh’s blunder of linking civilization with Christianity, and instead begin to pursue a more ambivalent religious critique of modernity. By 1947, less than a decade since the publication of *Brighton Rock*, Greene could reply confidently to a question posed to him at a Catholic conference in Brussels – ‘Is Christian civilization in danger?’ – that such a civilization has never existed. This was to confuse “the earthly and the heavenly city…. Perhaps all we can really demand is the divided mind, the uneasy conscience, the sense of personal failure” (qtd. in Allott and Farris, 51). Thus there are striking differences between the two visions of Christian culture, Waugh’s and Greene’s, aptly encapsulated in Maritain’s vision: “Instead of a fortified castle erected in the middle of the land, we must think of an army of stars thrown into the sky” (qtd. in Barré, 396).

Even within *Brighton Rock*, there are elements that suggest Greene is groping towards a more nuanced engagement with modernity amidst the realization that antimodernism will only render the religious sense pathological. One is the implicit admission that the “activist-interventionist” stance of modernity has made humanity more sensitive to material injustice, as with Marx’s critique of capitalism, and the novel is acutely sensitive towards the poverty that exists in pre-war England: another, is the way in which Ida’s justice fails to pierce Pinkie’s pride, and only Rose’s
selfless love, including the willingness to be damned in the eyes of the Church, can hope to win Pinkie’s salvation. These two facets, a Christian concern for “the least of these,” and an unconditional agape set against both secular law and rigid conformity to religious codes, are the nascent facets towards a Catholic modernity in Brighton Rock.

As I have argued, Pinkie’s misanthropy is in part due to his feelings of inferiority, his outsider status in relation to the sultan-like respectability of his rival, Colleoni, who keeps rooms at the Cosmopolitan: “‘I’ve got all the protection I need,’ Mr. Colleoni said. He shut his eyes; he was snug; the huge moneyed hotel lapped him round; he was at home” (BR, 66); “the visible world was all Mr. Colleoni’s” (68). Colleoni emphasizes the way in which, as criminality shores up its position by adopting a façade of respectability, evil becomes increasingly dubious a moral concept, and the secular system of right and wrong that replaces it is co-opted by those who can effectively manage to manipulate the rules in their favour: “[He owned] the cash registers and policemen and prostitutes, Parliament and the laws which say ‘this is right and that is wrong’” (BR, 67-8).

What’s ironic about Greene’s critique of secular modernity is that his religious sense affirms a modern understanding of material injustice, albeit one that is transformed by the supernatural sense of good and evil and the Christian dignity proper to a human being. Part of Greene’s critique of the immanent materialism of Bloomsbury pertains not to the fact that it is materialist, but that it is bourgeois: their “paper-thin” view of reality cannot incorporate anything beyond Russell Square, rooms at Cambridge, smart Georgian homes, tea-houses, salons. Ida Arnold, a coarse
goodtime girl distinct in everything else from one such as Virginia Woolf, shares at least this characteristic: they have no knowledge or experience of the deprivation and squalor that afflicted the majority of Britain’s working class in the 1930s. Pinkie’s demonism is at least partly constituted by the hellishness of his childhood in the unfortunately-named Paradise Place, which he revisits as a young adult:

The streets narrowed uphill above the Steyne: the shabby secret behind the bright corsage, the deformed breast. Every step was a retreat. He thought he had escaped for ever by the whole length of the parade, and now extreme poverty took him back: a shop where a shingle could be had for two shillings in the same building as a coffin-maker’s who worked in oak, elm or lead: no window-dressing but one child’s coffin dusty with disuse and the list of hairdressing prices (BR, 153).

It is a world in which religion is indeed the sigh of a soulless world, though not necessarily in the pejorative sense in which Marx is usually taken to mean. All the denizens of Paradise Place are “Romans,” who “believe in things. Like Hell. But you can see she [Ida] don’t believe a thing.” [Rose] said bitterly, “You can tell the world’s all dandy with her” (BR, 96). There is a bitter knowledge gained in living through poverty that Ida (for all her worldliness) cannot imagine, and so she inflicts her “experience” on the prematurely-wise Rose, who stares out at “the bright and breezy world” with “Nelson Place eyes” (BR, 131). For all Rose’s innocence, those eyes have witnessed horrors – Annie Collins who put her head on the railway lines: “She had to
wait ten minutes for the seven-five. Fog made it late from Victoria. Cut off her head. She was fifteen. She was going to have a baby and she knew what it was like. She’d had one two years before, and they could’ve pinned it on twelve boys” (BR, 181). This sequence could have been written by no-one but Greene. The detail about the girl waiting on the delayed train is effortlessly moving. The staccato sentences conjure up the sound and passage of the train, the inevitability of a horrific death; they have a headline-like factitiousness, conveying the realism of a teenager’s life tragically cut short and suggesting Greene’s professed interest in culling plot material from newspapers. Once again, in the line “she knew what it was like,” the grim experience of Britain’s impoverished youth is emphasised against the bourgeois confidence of the middle-class.

The horrific conditions of Paradise Place make it easy to believe that, as Newman put it, “the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity,” an insight that remained largely off the radar for the pre-war literary elite who cultivated an optimistic anthropocentric humanism (Greene used the quote, from Newman’s Apologia pro vita sua, as the epigraph to The Lawless Roads). Optimism is regarded by Greene with suspicion, even when it emerges from a political realism engaged with suffering humanity: “There are others, of course, who prefer to look a stage ahead… but my journey represented a distrust of any future based on what we are” (qtd. in Allott and Farris, 18). This is one of his major critiques of Marxism, which he was to investigate more thoroughly and with some ambivalence in The Power and the Glory. Indeed, there were other dangers related to the immanent monist metaphysics of Marxism that he would repudiate in that novel. Nevertheless,
Marx’s insight into the dehumanization involved in capitalism struck a deep chord with Greene, and he felt himself a kindred spirit of Marxism’s relentless assault on the shallow pieties of bourgeois humanism, whether secular or religious in character. Asked why many writers became socially-engaged in the 1930s, Greene replied “…I think it was a reaction to the crisis in England; the Hunger Marches, real poverty, real hunger… [There] were really people who had not enough to eat and I think it was that that turned us all to the Left” (Greene, “Interview with Maria Cuoto,” On the Frontier, 208-9.)

Therefore, one facet of a still-inchoate Catholic modernity struggling amidst the antimodern elements of Brighton Rock is the repudiation of optimistic bourgeois humanism, an acknowledgement of the injustice in extreme disparities of wealth, and a strong critique of capitalism, the virtual non-difference between the illicit Colleonis and their legitimate counterparts. The other facet of Brighton Rock’s ambivalent Catholic modernity is the way in which Rose’s agape must break out of the hidebound morality of the Church in order to selflessly open Pinkie to redemption.

Throughout the novel, Pinkie is closely shadowed by his possible salvation:

He closed his eyes under the bright empty arch, and a memory floated up imperfectly into speech. ‘You know what they say – between the stirrup and the ground, he something sought and something found.’

‘Mercy.’

‘That’s right. Mercy’” (BR, 95-96).
Tellingly, Rose names the theological virtue that Pinkie, like Macbeth unable to pronounce “Amen,” cannot; this pattern, of Rose completing and perfecting the evil Pinkie with her capacity for good, repeats itself again and again:

Coming from Nelson Place, Rose is intimate with the same symbols of evil as Pinkie; but her innocence has not been soured. What is good in her responds to what is evil in Pinkie, and she knows that he can orient himself only in respect to her… Theirs is the marriage of heaven and hell: “She was good, he’d discovered that, and he was damned: they were made for each other” (DeVitis, *Graham Greene*, 71).

One of the intriguing aspects of Greene’s nascent attempt to search for a Catholic modernity is the way in which, despite the stark divisions between secular and religious systems of ethics in *Brighton Rock*, good and evil are depolarized: “Good and evil lived together in the same country, spoke the same language, came together like old friends, feeling the same completion, touching hands beside the iron bedstead” (*BR*, 135). Rose’s love for Pinkie manifests itself in selflessness: she transgresses the edicts of the Church by getting married at a registrar’s office in order to please her bullying husband-to-be: “In the world outside it was Sunday . . . She had joined the other side now forever . . . People coming back from seven-thirty Mass, people on their way to eight-thirty matins. She didn’t envy them and she didn’t despise them: they had their salvation and she had Pinkie and damnation” (*BR*, 212). The extremity of Rose’s self-giving love is shockingly expressed in her willingness to
commit suicide at Pinkie’s behest, a scenario in which what is virtuous seems weak and therefore sinful, while the mortal sin of suicide takes on the quality of truly virtuous love:

To throw away the gun was a betrayal; it would be an act of cowardice: it would mean that she chose never to see him again for ever. Moral maxims dressed in pedantic priestly tones remembered from old sermons, instructions, confessions – ‘you can plead for him at the throne of Grace’ – came to her like unconvincing insinuations. The evil act was the honest act, the bold and the faithful – it was only lack of courage, it seemed to her, that spoke so virtuously (BR, 263).

Here, Greene’s ambivalent Catholic modernity is at its most suggestive and imaginative in Brighton Rock, which otherwise rejects modernity as completely beholden to a secular ethics that diminishes the importance of the human act. In Rose’s suspicion of “pedantic priestly tones,” Greene searches for a modern idiom that breaks out of pharisaic scrupulousness, emphasising the letter of the law to the detriment of the spirit in which it is to be applied. This groping for a new itinerary of faith is made all the more stark by the uncompromising subject matter: the morality of suicide, “the unforgivable sin.”

Rose’s self-effacing love comes close to achieving Pinkie’s redemption, and in a way that Ida’s zealous pursuit could never do. As Georg Gaston argues, “Rose becomes a powerful factor in the process of salvation… She is the clearest and most
compelling representative of what Greene imagines as the omnipresent and appalling force of Grace” (24). Thus, even as he drives towards Peacehaven and the security that Rose’s death will bring him, he is tormented by the sense of her deep love and the salvation that his acknowledgement of that love would entail:

[Rose:] ‘Last night. . . the night before . . . you didn’t hate me, did you, for what we did?’

He said, ‘No, I didn’t hate you.’

‘Even though it was a mortal sin.’

It was quite true – he hadn’t hated her; he hadn’t even hated the act. There had been a kind of pleasure, a kind of pride, a kind of – something else (my italics). The car lurched back on to the main road; he turned the bonnet to Brighton. An enormous emotion beat on him; it was like something trying to get in; the pressure of gigantic wings against the glass. Dona nobis pacem… If the glass broke, if the beast – whatever it was – got in, God knows what it would do. He had a sense of huge havoc – the confession, the penance and the sacrament – and awful distraction, and he drove blind into the rain (BR, 261).

There is such wonderful pathos in this scene, in which Rose, fully aware that they are driving on to their deaths, concerns herself only with the worry that he might hate her. This poignant question moves Pinkie, as does the realisation that he not only enjoyed sex with her and took pride in it, but that another emotion subsumed him during it that he cannot bring himself to name. As divine grace and inner conversion merge,
Pinkie feels his potential salvation ("the confession, the penance and the sacrament") bear down upon the car like a great muscular bird of prey, and it is only by a horrific act of the will that he can force himself to drive on blindly into the rain. It is the closest Pinkie comes to salvation in the novel, and Rose is the catalyst of his experience of grace. In their understanding that good and evil are not stark opposites but a shadowy borderland, and in Rose’s defiance of a rigid Catholic morality, unconditional Christian agape emerges in the novel as a potential source for the Catholic modernity towards which Greene was striving.

In these twin features (good and evil depolarized and the shattering of Catholic legalism), Greene displays his indebtedness to Charles Péguy, the saint of “the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God” in the old bronchial priest’s speech in the last pages of the novel. Péguy was a firm favourite in Greene’s conceptual grab-bag, also offering the epigraph to his later novel, *The Heart of the Matter*: “No one is as knowledgeable as the sinner in matters of Christianity. No one, unless it’s the saint.” A staunch critic of decadent secular republicanism, he was nevertheless equally opposed to “the code-fixation of the Church, with its complicated menu of minor and major faults: … ‘What is termed morality is a coating that makes man impermeable to grace’” (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 750). He descried the attempts to preemptively eschatologise human nature by dividing it into the sheep and the goats, instead recognizing (to switch parables) that the wheat and tares were insolubly intertwined: “What is formidable in the reality of life is not the juxtaposition of good and evil; rather it is their interpenetration, their mutual incorporation, their mutual sustenance, and sometimes their strange and mysterious kinship” (Ibid.) Greene
clearly imbibed much of Péguy’s thought, and used it in *Brighton Rock* to complicate the dichotomy between secular and religious moralities, the way in which “the religious sense,” though a powerful resource with which to critique secular ethics, was no trapdoor with which to escape the problems of history.

In this chapter, I have argued that Greene’s religious critique of modernity shapes the virulently antimodern religious mania of Pinkie. The extremity of the rejection of modernity which animates the novel and is the driving force of its violent young protagonist nevertheless sparks in Greene a need for mitigation; he realizes the dangers implicit in such a total rejection of modernity and the horrific superiority and numinous violence that surrounds Pinkie like an aura. By exploring the material injustice of pre-war Britain, and seeking a new theological and literary idiom to express the mysteries of good and evil, selfless love and salvation, Greene had already begun in *Brighton Rock* to form an ambivalent Catholic modernity, an ethical outlook that he would achieve with much greater finesse and vision in his 1940 novel about the anticlerical purges in Mexico: *The Power and the Glory*. 
Chapter III: The Ambivalent Catholic Modernity of Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory*

1. “A Humbling Realisation”: Contextualising Greene’s “Catholic Modernity”

Some months after the publication of *Brighton Rock*, Graham Greene writes in a letter to his protégé, the Indian author R.K. Narayan, “[the novel] has done well critically, but it’s by no means a bestseller – somewhere about 6,000 which is good for me. But I’m feeling horribly sterile – my only idea is one of frightening difficulty & hazard” (*A Life in Letters*, 95). The idea he was referring to would eventually become *The Power and the Glory*, his masterpiece centering on the pursuit of a cowardly and unworthy whisky priest by the fervently anticlerical Redshirts in 1930s Mexico, during the *maximato* of Plutarco Elías Calles. Part of the “difficulty and hazard” faced by Greene in writing the novel was the way in which his “religious sense” as a critique of modernity was evolving, stretching his talents as an author.

In the last chapter, I concluded by suggesting that despite the overall antimodern tenor of *Brighton Rock*, Graham Greene was tentatively resisting the overwhelming temptation to reject modernity *en bloc*. At least two elements of *Brighton Rock* – a nuanced treatment of social injustice and the tendency of *agape* to break out of religious piety – demonstrate Greene’s attempt to escape the antimodern whirlpool that claimed so many Catholic writers in the first half of the twentieth century, including his friend, Evelyn Waugh. Antimodernism has a complex and persistent place in the history of Catholic theology and ecclesiology, a centrality that
was in someway challenged by the *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* it underwent in the mid-twentieth century, culminating in the convening of the Second Vatican Council (it nevertheless re-emerges periodically in the life of the Church). What I am arguing is that somewhere between the writing of *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory*, Greene preempts some of the thematic impulses of Vatican II in its desire to recalibrate and reassess Catholicism’s relationship to modernity, indeed, to search for what Charles Taylor diffidently terms “a Catholic modernity” (Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, 13-37).

As I explored in the first chapter with relation to the character Ida in *Brighton Rock*, Graham Greene’s “religious sense” provided him with a window onto the modern world and the resources with which to critique some of the shortcomings of modernity in relation to ethics and the human act. In chapter two, I attempted to describe how this critique could potentially succumb to an antimodern antipathy, but that nevertheless *Brighton Rock* has inchoate intimations of Greene’s Catholic modernity. Perhaps this would be a good point at which to explain more fully what is meant by the term “Catholic modernity.” The term, though in wide circulation beforehand, has been most prominently and fruitfully advanced by Charles Taylor in his Marianist Award lecture, published in 1999 with responses from Catholic intellectuals. In his lecture, Taylor lays down the caveat that “the point is not to be a ‘modern Catholic,’ if by this we (perhaps semiconsciously and surreptitiously) begin to see ourselves as the ultimate ‘compleat Catholics,’ summing up and going beyond our less advantaged ancestors (a powerful connotation that hangs over the word *modern* in much contemporary use)” (15). Rather, what is meant by the term is
merely the recognition that “in modern, secularist culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel, of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel”:

The notion is that modern culture, in breaking with the structures and beliefs of Christendom, also carried certain facets of Christian life further than they ever were taken or could have been taken within Christendom. In relation to the earlier forms of Christian culture, we have to face the humbling realization that the breakout was a necessary condition of the development (Taylor, 15).

This “humbling realization” could arguably stand as the entire thrust of the moral education that the whisky priest undergoes in his journey towards martyrdom: he moves from a complacent piety through personal failure to humility and deep compassion with his fellow man, in the process making his peace with the modern world, here represented by the admirable ideals and deplorable conduct of the Communist Lieutenant.

The evolution from Pinkie’s superior Catholic evil to the whisky priest’s tragically inferior compassion is striking. Terry Eagleton, in an essay on Greene’s “Catholic” novels that has difficulties regarding Ida’s schizophrenic ethics as anything other than an aesthetic failure on the part of Greene (which I challenged in the first chapter of this thesis), is nevertheless correct when he writes, “The exploration of evil in *Brighton Rock* is in one sense a dead-end; Greene turns from it to a more subtle and shaded analysis, in which despair and virtue, value and
cheapness, are intricately interwoven” (Eagleton, ‘Reluctant Heroes,’ 118). What is remarkable about the evolution of Greene’s analysis and critique of the ethics of modernity from Brighton Rock to The Power and the Glory is the way in which even as Greene’s critique of modernity becomes more ambivalent, the modern antagonist of the novel becomes more ostensibly cruel and repugnant, but is simultaneously minutely drawn, and therefore more sympathetic. Indeed, it is one of the more impressive achievements of Greene as a writer that his blowsy blonde goodtime girl in Brighton Rock is in many respects a less admirable creation than the Lieutenant of the Redshirts, who will exterminate entire villages to ensure the victory of the government over religion. As the whisky priest confesses incredulously to his persecutor, who has unwittingly captured him and released him with a five-peso piece, “You’re a good man” (G. Greene, The Power and the Glory, 189: all subsequent quotations rendered as PG). François Mauriac, Greene’s “cher maître,” well perceived the writerly skill that lay behind the irony: “It is the hour of the Prince of this world, but you paint him without hatred. Even the executioners, even your chief of police is marked with a sign of mercy; they search for truth; they believe, like our communists, they have found it and are serving it – that truth which demands the sacrifice of consecrated creatures” (78).

In this final chapter, I will explore how Greene’s critique of modernity has evolved in The Power and the Glory to a much more nuanced, ambivalent position than that of Brighton Rock. I will critically examine the symmetrical juxtapositions of the whisky priest and the Lieutenant, a proxemics which Greene uses to establish the mutual ground of modernity and Catholicism as well as the many incompatibilities. I
will elucidate how the theological themes of this novel situate his struggle to articulate a Catholic modernity, in particular how he moves from an almost starkly Manichean division between sacred and profane in *Brighton Rock* to a much more incarnational sense of all of humanity infused with the likeness of God – the Imago Dei.

2. “You are so right… Wrong, too, of course”: Communism and Catholicism in *The Power and the Glory*

One of the features of the *The Power and the Glory* that is impossible to overlook is the way in which the whisky priest and the Communist Lieutenant are analogues of one another. The Lieutenant is repeatedly described in terms that evoke his monkish asceticism, his devotion to an idea: “There was something of a priest in his intent observant walk – a theologian going back over the errors of the past to destroy them again” (*PG*, 32). What is meant by this unusual parallel – comparing the Lieutenant to the very thing that he wants to hunt and exterminate?

Partly, what Greene seems to elicit is the way in which secular Marxist atheism is in some sense descended from Christianity’s emphasis on “the least of these,” not to mention a reaction against the deplorable neglect of so-called Christian societies to honour this emphasis. This is what the metaphor of the Lieutenant as a theologian destroying the errors of the past might evoke – Communism’s indictment of the wrong turn, the “heresy” of bourgeois Christianity. The Lieutenant’s zealous anticlericalism is forged by a passionate and admirable sense of the injustices
wrought on the poor Indians and Mexican peasantry by a complacent and avaricious Church:

Something you could almost have called horror moved him when he looked at the white muslin dresses – he remembered the smell of incense in the churches of his boyhood, the candles and the laciness and the self-esteem, the immense demands made from the altar steps by men who didn’t know the meaning of sacrifice. The old peasants knelt there before the holy images with their arms held out in the attitude of the cross: tired by the long day’s labour in the plantations, they squeezed out a further mortification. And the priest came round with the collecting-bag taking their centavos, abusing them for their small comforting sins, and sacrificing nothing in return – except a little sexual indulgence. And it was easy, the Lieutenant thought. He himself felt no need of women (PG, 30).

Note how, even as he draws the battle lines between a corrupt Church and a philanthropic secular state, Greene manages to insinuate a comparison between the sexual renunciation of the clergy with the Lieutenant’s own celibacy. This co-mingling of an atheistic-Marxist critique of bourgeois Christianity with the underlying links between them achieves two effects: one, it suggests that Marxism is a reformist offshoot of Christ’s teachings on charity and selflessness; two, this being the case, it implies that rather than critiquing Christianity per se, Marxism actually critiques a perversion or degeneration of Christianity into a pious brand of bourgeois
religiosity. Thus Greene is able, from his emergent Catholic modernity, to both critique Marxist atheism and its rejection of Christianity *tout court*, while affirming its reformist bent as regards the failures of the Church to live up to the Christian mission. Maritain expresses in a nutshell the ambivalence of Catholic modernity to atheistic Communism:

The Christian world of modern times has failed in the duty of [a socio-temporal realization of the Gospel truths]. In general it has shut up truth and the divine life within a limited part of its existence, within the things of worship and religious practice, and, at least in the case of the best men and women, within the things of the interior life. Matters of social and economic and political life it had abandoned to their own carnal law, withdrawn from Christ’s light: Marx, for instance, is right when he says that ‘capitalist society is a state of anarchy, where life is entirely given over to the play of particular interests. Nothing could be more contrary to the spirit of Christianity’ (*Integral Humanism*, 43).

As with his awareness of the predations of evil in the world, Greene inherited much of his ire for unfeeling religiosity from his French Catholic revival masters, particularly Leon Bloy, who was a merciless critic of *la bourgeoisie*: “the bourgeois, even when he is a good Catholic, believes only in this world, in the expedient and the useful. He is incapable of living by faith in another world and refuses to base his life on the mystery of Golgotha” (qtd. in Bosco, 40). Greene’s most insistent affirmation
of the Marxist challenge to Catholicism entails his distaste for piety, which he called “that morbid outgrowth of religion” (*A Life in Letters*, 152). Piety is seen as a destructive calcification of the “religious sense” into complacency, narrow-mindedness, pharisaical self-regard. During his degrading and lonely sojourn as a fugitive, the whisky priest often remembers, sometimes with nostalgia, the security of his pious past; he recollects a meeting with the Children of Mary, his former superiority and complacency:

As he talked a whole serene life lay ahead – he had ambition: he saw no reason why one day he might not find himself in the state capital, attached to the cathedral, leaving another man to pay off the debts in Concepcion. An energetic priest was always known by his debts. He went on, waving a plump and eloquent hand: “Of course, many dangers here in Mexico threaten our dear Church…” he refreshed his dry mouth with a draught of wine…. “Watch and pray”, he went vaguely on, “watch and pray. The devil like a raging lion—” The Children of Mary stared up at him with their mouths a little open, the pale blue ribbons slanting across their dark best blouses (*PG*, 126).

The *in terrorem* platitudes he spouts induce jaw-dropped awe in the Children of Mary, while he is completely oblivious to the veracity of his admonitions to be on guard. Later, having fathered a child, reduced to wearing an ill-fitting suit and flitting from village to village like an albatross, the whisky priest comes to realize the error of his former piety with humility and understanding: “The… children were coming up
now to kiss his hand, one by one, under the pressure of their parents. They were too young to remember the old days when the priests dressed in black and wore Roman collars and had soft, superior patronizing hands: he could see they were mystified at the show of respect to a peasant like their parents” (PG, 86).

The whisky priest’s loss of piety transpires through his loss of material security, his intimate sharing in the hardships and dangers of the peasants. It is a move from superiority and clarity (“a whole serene life lay ahead”) to compassion and mystery: “He was a man who was supposed to save souls: it had seemed quite simple once, preaching at Benediction, organising the guilds, having coffee with elderly ladies behind barred windows, blessing new houses with a little incense, wearing black gloves. . . it was as easy as saving money: now it was a mystery. He was aware of his own inadequacy” (PG, 111). Wrenched from the habitual pious trappings of priesthood, he becomes aware of his failures as an individual and as a priest to witness Christ’s call to love. It is a move from cheap knowledge to complete disorientation and abandonment, or, as R.W.B. Lewis writes, with Greene we move “from the deceptive light to the queerly nourishing obscurity” (31).

This fragility opens up the possibility for experiencing real agape. When he is captured and thrown into a foul-smelling, crowded, lightless prison cell, he realises for the first time an intimate (and moving) sense of human contact and love that has been previously unknown to him: “‘Nobody here,’ a voice said, ‘wants their blood money.’ Again he was touched by an extraordinary affection. He was just one criminal among a herd of criminals… He had a sense of companionship which he had

58
never received in the old days when pious people came kissing his black cotton glove” (*PG*, 173-4).

Greene’s Catholic modernity, then, involves affirming modernity’s critique of piety and bourgeois religiosity, the ways in which the Church has in history shamefully betrayed the values Jesus espoused in the Sermon on the Mount. Yet the affirmation is nuanced and ambivalent, criticising modernity’s resultant impulse to reject religion completely, insisting upon the dangers that lurk in exclusive humanism. Nowhere is this clearer than in twentieth century Communist totalitarianism. As Charles Taylor notes, the activist, interventionist stance of modernity’s exclusive humanism may unwittingly lead to totalitarianism:

Before the reality of human shortcomings, philanthropy – the love of the human – can gradually come to be invested with contempt, hatred, aggression. The action is broken off, or, worse, continues but is invested now with these new feelings, becoming increasingly more coercive and inhumane. The history of despotic socialism (i.e. twentieth-century communism) is replete with this tragic turn, brilliantly foreseen by Dostoevsky more than a hundred years ago (‘Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrived at unlimited despotism’)… (*A Catholic Modernity?* 32-3).

This is the contradiction of the Lieutenant, who is, as Mauriac notes, “marked with a sign of mercy”: he is patently a good man, yet his goodness partakes of “alienated Christian virtues, the ‘virtues gone mad’ of which G.K. Chesterton spoke…”
In exclusive humanism as it appears in Marxist atheism, the human may be sacrificed in the name of the communist utopia:

He stood with his hand on his holster and watched the brown intent patient eyes: it was for these [street children] he was fighting. He would eliminate from their childhood everything which had made him miserable, all that was poor, superstitious, and corrupt. They deserved nothing less than the truth – a vacant universe and a cooling world, the right to be happy in any way they chose. He was quite prepared to make a massacre for their sakes – first the Church and then the foreigner and then the politician – even his own chief would one day have to go. He wanted to begin the world again with them, in a desert (PG, 77).

The human person is lost sight of here, converted into a theoretical abstraction that allows for her complete effacement in the mad quest to affirm her dignity. It is a chilling paradox of modernity, and one that clearly fascinates Greene: just as Fred Hale recedes in significance in Ida’s quest for justice ("the idea of Fred Hale dodged backwards like a figure on a platform when the train goes out," BR, 159), the Lieutenant’s conscience permits the eradication and elimination of others in his desire to achieve a pristine liberty. The whisky priest realises that this is the essential conflict between Catholicism and the statism of Communism: he confides tearfully to his daughter, "‘my dear, my dear, try to understand that you are – so important.’ That was the difference, he had always known, between his faith and theirs, the political
leaders of the people who only cared for things like the state, the republic: this child was more important than a whole continent” (*PG*, 111).

As early as 1949, George Orwell (as far from being a Greene groupie as possible) chastised T.R. Fyvel for miscategorising Greene as a reactionary Catholic: “This isn’t so at all, either in his books or privately. Of course he is a Catholic, and in some issues has to take sides politically with the church, but in outlook he is just mid-Left with faint CP leanings. I have even thought that he might become our first Catholic fellow traveler...” (qtd. in Cuoto, 7-8). Greene’s travels in Mexico in 1938 two years prior to writing *The Power and the Glory*, a journey he documented in his non-fiction work *The Lawless Roads*, provided him with his first window onto the vexed question of Christianity and revolutionary politics. He witnessed a strike organised by a priest: “The strike was the first I had come across of genuine Catholic Action on a social issue, a real attempt, led by the old, fiery, half-blind Archbishop, to put in to force the papal encyclicals which have condemned capitalism quite as strongly as Communism” (*Lawless Roads*, 28).

Throughout his life, Greene maintained an ambiguous stance towards Communism and left-wing revolutionary movements; he was highly critical of the Church’s condemnation of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and habitually averse to neoliberal American foreign policy (FBI files declassified in 2002 revealed that the US government had kept a file on Greene for years). He wrote positively about Fidel Castro, whom he visited shortly after the 1959 revolution, arguing for “the possibility, not of a mere chilly coexistence, but of cooperation between Catholicism and Communism” (*Greene, Collected Essays*, 308).
Yet, elsewhere, he was highly sceptical of Communism’s utilitarian subordination of individuals to the collective: “Sooner or later the strenuous note of social responsibility, of Marxism, of the greatest material good of the greatest number must die in the ear, and then perhaps certain memories will come back, of long purposeless discussions in the moonlight about life and art…” (A Life in Letters, 156).

Indeed, his political positions were, in general, idiosyncratic and contrary to say the least: as Richard Greene notes, he gave his unambiguous support to Kim Philby, a spy for the Soviet Union, while refusing to visit the USSR during the Brezhnev era due to its treatment of dissidents (A Life in Letters, xi). Graham Greene was simply too mercurial and intelligent an individual to yield up an unambiguous political slant; he is “a fugitive from our inquiries, a most wanted man who has slipped over the border just when we thought to seize him” (Ibid.). That said, what emerges somewhat convincingly from an examination of the various contrary political positions Greene adopted over the course of his extraordinary career is a stubborn sense of the person: not the individual of liberal democracy, nor the proletarian of Communist agitprop, but rather the unique and utterly irreplaceable being, the lover or kinsman of our interpersonal relationships. Thus, he writes in The Heart of the Matter, “In our hearts there is a ruthless dictator, ready to contemplate the misery of a thousand strangers if it will ensure the happiness of the few we love” (175).

But this passionate loyalty of Greene’s, what might in theological terms be called eros, cannot, in the last analysis, exist without an openness to loving “the thousand strangers,” in other words, caritas or agape; in his experience of deep paternal communion with his daughter, who with a kind-of precocious malevolence
rejects his affections, the whisky priest is simultaneously torn open to a vast communion with humanity: “One mustn’t have human affections – or rather one must love every soul as if it were one’s own child. The passion to protect must extend itself over a world...” (PG, 112) In one sense, then, the whisky priest’s emotional confession to his illegitimate daughter must not be read as merely a “Catholic” foil to Communism’s brutal statism: rather, the personalism which flickers at the centre of the speech is what intrigues and fascinates Graham Greene’s humane heart, and what convinces him of the ultimately transcendental importance of human reality. For Greene, the human factor precedes the religious sense, and makes it what it is.

As Mark Bosco rightly underlines, “Greene’s paradoxical literary expression of Catholic faith is never offered as a comforting way out of the discomforting realities of modernity” (4). Nevertheless, Greene recognised in “the religious sense” the ontological significance of the human, and an ambivalence towards modernity that may work towards what Taylor describes as “[rescuing] admirable ideals from sliding into demeaning modes of realization” (A Catholic Modernity? 36). One of the most potent factors in Greene’s evolution from the antimodernism of Brighton Rock towards a Catholic modernity in The Power and the Glory involves a shift in theological thematics, from an almost Manichean dichotomy between the “frank carnality” of the buxom Ida’s secular world and the discarnate religious perversity of Pinkie, to a striking emphasis on Incarnation, the interpenetration of the profane with the divine. As R.W.B. Lewis writes, Brighton Rock is “in the tradition of Tertullian and the dark, negative, and incorrigibly paradoxical theology wherein everything supernatural stands in implacable hostility over and against everything natural and
human…. About Pinkie and his small explosive world, there is nothing intermediate (i.e. no Incarnation) – here everything is sudden and ultimate” (14). Conversely, in *The Power and the Glory* everything is incarnational, or potentially so. The whisky priest, humbled by the trials of his flesh and the humiliation of his fall from grace, he is able eventually to look at the world with a “saint’s eye for beauty”:

At the centre of his own faith there always stood the convincing mystery – that we were made in God’s image – God was the parent, but He was also the policeman, the criminal, the priest, the maniac and the judge. Something resembling God dangled from the gibbet or went into odd attitudes before the bullets in a prison yard or contorted itself like a camel in the attitude of sex. He would sit in the confessional and hear the complicated dirty ingenuities which God’s image had thought out . . . . It must be a comfort to a soldier that the atrocities on either side were equal: nobody was ever alone. (*PG*, 136)

This recognition of mankind as a unity-across-difference, or even unity-through-difference, is one of the most intriguing aspects of Greene’s novel, and is arguably the central facet of his Catholic modernity. The theological trope of the *Imago Dei*, the human created in the image and likeness of God, crops up again and again in the novel: in the prison cell, in response to a pious woman’s complaint about the sounds of passion coming from a couple in the corner of the darkened cell, the whisky priest intones, “Saints talk about the beauty of suffering. Well, we are not saints, you and I. Suffering to us is just ugly. Stench and crowding and pain. That is beautiful in that
corner – to them. It needs a lot of learning to see things with a saint’s eye: a saint gets a subtle taste for beauty…” (PG, 176). When she denounces him as “a bad priest,” he ponders how “when you visualized a man or woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity… that was a quality God’s image carried with it… when you saw the lines at the corner of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of the imagination” (PG, 177).

Thus in emphasising the ontological significance of the individual as a person worthy of nothing less than divine importance, Greene challenges the impulses of religious integralism to set humanity against God, yet also critiques the tendency of modernity to lose sight of the human person in the name of an hypostasised Freedom, Progress, Race, Nation, etc. Furthermore, the whisky priest’s conviction of the human being as Imago Dei attempts to oscillate between modernity’s propensity to either polarize and minoritize on the one hand (we think of the ways in which difference or deviance is championed by moderns qua difference or deviance), or to homogenize and constrict on the other. As Charles Taylor writes:

Redemption happens through Incarnation, the weaving of God’s life into human lives, but these human lives are different, plural, irreducible to each other. Redemption-Incarnation brings reconciliation, a kind of oneness…. It’s not just that the human material, with which God’s life is to be interwoven, imposes this formula as a kind of second-best solution to sameness. Nor is it just because any unity between humans and God would have to be one across (immense) difference. But it seems that the life of God itself, understood as
trinitarian, is already a oneness of this kind. Human diversity is part of the way we are made in the image of God (A Catholic Modernity? 14-15).

Conclusion

Greene’s journey from the antimodernism of Brighton Rock to the features of Catholic modernity in The Power and the Glory came through humbly recognising that, while it had not gotten everything right about ethics and the human act, modernity was certainly not all wrong, either. The whisky priest expresses this to the Lieutenant as he fulminates about the Church’s corruption and callousness: ‘the priest said, “You are so right.’ He added quickly, ‘Wrong, too, of course’” (PG, 269). Greene’s love of oxymoron as a stylistic device emerged out of his conviction that human nature, and the problems it was enmeshed in, were not reducible to black and white – he was fond of quoting the Robert Browning poem, ‘Bishop Blougram’s Apology’: “All we have gained then by our unbelief/ Is a life of doubt diversified by faith,/ For one of faith diversified by doubt:/ We call the chess-board white – we call it black” (qtd. in A Life in Letters, 152). His honest critique of secular modernity led him to affirm its many virtues, not least of which was its exposé of the posturing of religious piety, and the ways in which Christendom had betrayed the Gospel.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Greene’s emergent Catholic modernity in The Power and the Glory was his emphasis on the human person as meriting the dignity due to a being created in God’s image. This involved a humiliation of self, while also repudiating the temptation in religious tradition to deny aspects of our
humanity in the name of worshipping God: since others were a communication of the divine, they could not be treated as means to an end. Furthermore, the human as imago Dei was a way to counteract the temptation germane to modernity to either limit love to one’s friends or family (the bourgeois solution) or to universally abstract it to the point of losing sight of the individual (the totalitarian solution). Greene was, above all else, a humanist, even when his religious faith waned in old age (he described himself as “a Catholic agnostic” in a letter to Alberto Huerta, S.J., dated 1st August, 1989). “The human factor” which clarified “the religious sense” in Graham Greene’s early fiction shaped an idiosyncratic yet unmistakably Catholic modernity, an amalgamation that continues to have relevance in our particular moment.

1 Habermas retains the empiricist emphasis on experience while he follows American pragmatist John Dewey in rejecting the notion that objects may be known independently of interactions with them, the “spectator model of knowledge.” See Jürgen Habermas, ‘On John Dewey’s The Quest of Certainty’ in Habermas and Pragmatism, 229-234.
2 See especially John Atkins, 92-93: “In this novel every crude aspect of every natural function, the grunts and smells, the coarse, inviting shapelessness of female flesh, the pointless insistence of lechery, the dirty jokes and ribald sniggers of back-alley sex, they all coalesced together and forced themselves upon Pinkie in one hideous ball of filth…”
3 Incidentally, the publication of the diaries of Mussolini’s mistress, Clara Petracci, in November 2009 revealed that the Italian leader found the Fuhrer to be “an old sentimentalist. When he saw me he had tears in his eyes.” “Benito Mussolini regarded Adolf Hitler as a ‘Sentimentalist,’” The Daily Telegraph, 16th November 2009. The link between sentimentalism and fascism was a fascination of Greene’s.
4 “One place where so-called spiritual values, driven from the face of a brutally pragmatic capitalism, have taken refuge is New Ageism, which is just the sort of caricature of the spiritual one would expect a materialistic civilization to produce.” Terry Eagleton, Reason, Faith, Revolution, 40-41. See a similar denunciation from Slavoj Žižek in “The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity.” in The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic, ed. Creston Davis, 27-28.
5 See Jean-Michel Rabaté, Given: 1° Art 2° Crime: Modernity, Murder and Mass Culture, 47.
6 Žižek, following Jacques Lacan, diverges from Adorno’s too-pat coupling of Kant with Sade to probe the limits of this dyad. Lacan shows through a careful reading of the Greek tragedy Antigone how the heroine’s resolute, duty-bound campaign to give her brother the dignity of a proper burial stands as a non-perverse example of Kantian ethics. In revising Kant’s claims of the pathology of desire as such, Lacan (and Žižek in his footsteps) rescues his philosophical project from “the sadists.” Both Adorno’s twinning of Kant and Sade and the revisionist dyad envisaged by the Lacanian psychoanalysts are not without detractors; however, it is a theoretical argument that I find personally persuasive, as it illuminates the relationship between Ida’s pleasure-seeking joie de vivre and her resolute campaign for justice in extremely fruitful ways.
7 In Modernity and the Holocaust, Zygmunt Bauman argues that the Holocaust, far from being a barbarous lapse from modernity, was in fact accomplished by it. The Holocaust is “the hidden and
unseemly face of our confident, affluent brave world” (209), and, more emphatically, “each of the two faces can no more exist without each other than can the two sides of a coin” (7).


9 Here, I borrow Hannah Arendt’s term, *animal laborans*, but substitute a theological concept of man as *imago dei* where Arendt posits *homo faber*, “the creating man.”

10 D.H. Lawrence’s characters have a similar baleful misanthropy, as with Birkin in *Women in Love*, who postulates a human-free utopia, “a beautiful *clean* thought, a world empty of people, just uninterrupted grass, a hare sitting up” (my italics).

11 See also Réné Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.

12 I am indebted to John Pfordsheer for this point. Consult Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. “The physical pain [of torture] is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of “incontestable reality” on that power that has brought it into being. It is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used.” (27).

13 See John W.O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* for an accessible, gripping history of the Council and its major protagonists. Due to the constraints of this thesis, I cannot go in to detail about the antimodern controversies of the Church in the 19th and early 20th centuries: see particularly William M. Shea’s essay in Heft’s *A Catholic Modernity?*, 39-64, and Gabriel Daly’s study *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism*. Daly argues that the papal condemnations of “Modernism” in *Lamentabili Sane Exitu* and *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* lumped together a disparate group of theologies under one ill-fitting umbrella term, engendering an overwhelmingly integralist (antimodern) stance in the Church towards modernity.
Works Cited


---. “Catherine Walston/Graham Greene Papers.” Lauinger Library, Georgetown University.


ed. Print.


Ker, Ian. *The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845-1961*. Notre Dame, Indiana:


