

RESEARCH ARTICLE

DIVINITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN GRAHAM GREENE'S *THE END OF THE AFFAIR*

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ABSTRACT

Graham Greene is a religio-political exponent of the twentieth century. Most of his novels turn around the spiritual gleam that has its roots in the principles of religiosity, catholicity and Christianity. Similarly, *The End of the Affair* explores the themes of sin and salvation, and divinity and spirituality. The novel is set in London—both war time and post war. Sarah Miles, the protagonist, has a love affair with a middle-aged novelist Maurice Bendrix. After sometime, she started to avoid him because he had promised to God : “ I’ll give him up forever only let him be alive with a chance.” Indeed, Bendrix had fallen unconscious during the bomb-raid. It was at this moment that he regained consciousness and came into that room where Sarah was praying. It is, in a way, Sarah’s ‘leap’ into faith and a definite indication of her progression to sainthood.

Keywords: Divinity, spirituality, Catholic, God, love, affair, explosion, pray and sainthood.

Ian Gregor comments that in “*The Power and the Glory*, Greene makes reference to the ‘appalling strangeness of the mercy of God’; in *The End of the Affair* it becomes his *subject*.”¹ A true enough statement this is, for Greene’s Catholic meditation having the seeds of divinity and spirituality had been fully engaged in this “appalling strangeness” since writing *Brighton Rock* in 1938; and with *The End of the Affair* in 1951, Greene attempted to embody this strangeness in the adulterous affair between two people who stand ostensibly outside of Catholicism. Though some critics consider this the most Catholic of his novels because Sarah Miles spiritually ascends to a kind of sainthood, the novel is paradoxically devoid of any explicit Catholic consciousness in the characters. Greene gives Pinkie and Rose, the whisky-priest, and

Scobie a theologically informed frame of reference in a shared Catholicism as they work out their intense inner struggles with God’s strange presence; Sarah and Bendrix are given no such place to stand as they grope to claim the truth of their experience. Greene’s genius is to place the story in the first-person narrative of an unbeliever so that the religious point of view is filtered through a highly unsympathetic consciousness. In this way it is very much a novel of God’s strangeness at work in a thoroughly modern, agnostic world.

Set in London during World War II and immediately afterwards, the story is told by the novelist Maurice Bendrix, who had begun a passionate love affair with Sarah, the wife of a senior civil servant living across from him at Clapham Common. Four years into the affair they are

together in his apartment during an air raid. Bendrix goes downstairs and is buried under the front door in a bomb explosion. Sarah believes him to have been killed and when he recovers consciousness and goes back upstairs to their bedroom, he finds her on her knees. Unbeknown to him, she is vowing to "anything that existed" that if Bendrix is restored to life, she will give him up as her lover and return to her husband, Henry. This she does, and Bendrix assumes that she has ended the affair to be with another man. Eighteen months later and still in a jealous rage, he hires a private detective Parkis after meeting a distraught Henry in the commons. The detective reports on her movements and procures her private diary from her house. He passes the diary on to Bendrix. On reading the diary, Bendrix finds that Sarah, among other things, has recorded the incident when during an air-raid, he had been knocked unconscious and Sarah had presumed him dead. In the entry dated 17th June, 1944, Sarah had written:

"I knelt down on the floor: I was mad to do such a thing: I never even had to do it as a child—my parents never believed in prayer, any more than I do. I hadn't any idea what to say. Maurice was dead. Extinct. There wasn't such a thing as a soul. Even the half-happiness I gave him was drained out of him like blood. He would never have the chance to be happy again. With anybody I thought: somebody else could have loved him and made him happier than I could, but now he won't have that chance. I knelt and put my head on the bed and wished I could believe. Dear God, I said—why dear, why dear?— make me believe. I can't believe. Make me. I said, I'm a bitch and a fake and I hate myself. I can't do anything of myself. *Make me believe.* I shut my eyes tight and I pressed my nails into the palms of my hands until I could feel nothing but the pain, and I said, I will believe. Let him be alive, and I *will* believe.... So I said, I love him and I'll do anything if you'll make him alive, I said very slowly, I'll give him up forever, only let him be alive with a chance..."²

Thus Bendrix finds out about Sarah's vow and is relieved to know that she is still in love with him. Her diary tells of her visits to Richard Smythe, a rationalist preacher whom she hopes will convince her of the futility of her vow but whose words only make her believe even more strongly.

Weary and tormented, Sarah goes to a church but she is told by the priest that she cannot have both God and Bendrix. Thus, gradually and painfully, at the end of her tether, Sarah submits to God. She writes to Bendrix in her letter:

"I believe there's a God—I believe the whole bag of tricks, there's nothing I don't believe, they could subdivide the Trinity into a dozen parts and I'd believe. They could dig up records that proved Christ had been invented by Pilate to get himself promoted and I'd believe just the same.... I fought belief for longer than I fought love, but I haven't any fight left." (*The End of the Affair*, 121.)

Sarah comes to understand God's love which has taken away her disbelief and hate. In self-surrender, Sarah finds, like St. Augustine, the 'way which leadeth not only towards the discovery but also to the inhabiting of that country where alone is true blessedness.'³ In fact, Sarah feels, in spite of her agony, the delight that St. Augustine knew, the delight of opening oneself up to God in a spirit of submission. In the all-embracing love of God she finds peace and prays to Him to give her peace to Bendrix:

"But You are too good to me. When I ask you for pain, You give me peace. Give it him too. Give him my peace—he needs it more." (*The End of the Affair*, 99.)

This charity is the surest indication of the highest form of love to which she has attained. This love is a kind of mystical communion in which agony and ecstasy are compounded: it is the 'burn that searest never'; it is the 'wound of deep delight'⁴

The novel illustrates the value of suffering as a creative process, a mode of spiritual regeneration. Besides Sarah, Bendrix also suffers and grows in awareness of the truths, which he has either ignored or suppressed in his life. Having learnt from her diary that Sarah still loves him, even though she has crucified the flesh, he seeks to renew their affair. His is the same old selfish possessive love but his bitterness is dispelled for the moment. He feels triumphant because he thinks he knows who will win the conflict 'between an image and a man'. In chasing Sarah out of her sick-bed, Bendrix still plays, unwittingly though, the Devil's disciple trying to destroy love.

Sarah, who is suffering from an acute cold,

goes out in the pouring rain to avoid Bendrix. She, then, reaches a Catholic church, the spiritual perception of the church is noteworthy as she recorded in her long diary entry on 2nd October, 1945:

"And of course on the altar there was a body too—such a familiar body, more familiar than Maurice's, that it had never struck me before as a body with all the parts of a body, even the parts the loincloth concealed.... So today I looked at that material body on that material cross, and I wondered, how could the world have nailed a vapour there? A vapour of course felt no pain and no pleasure.... I looked up at that over-familiar body, stretched in imaginary pain, the head drooping like a man asleep. I thought, sometimes I've hated Maurice, but would I have hated him if I hadn't loved him too? Oh God, if I could really hate you, what would that mean?... I walked out of the church in a flaming rage, and in defiance of Henry and all the reasonable and the detached I did what I had seen people do in Spanish churches: I dipped my finger in the so-called holy water and made a kind of cross on my forehead." (*The End of the Affair*, 89-90.)

Sarah's reflections move from wanting to flee the body to looking at Christ's body, to a consideration of Maurice's body, and then to a final insight into the importance of the human body to God. An impersonal, vaporous, disembodied spirit seems less believable to Sarah in this world of flesh. Sarah submits to a person—the person on the cross—even if this person is never addressed directly, only observed. The theological aesthetic is most pronounced here, for in discovering what is at stake in believing in this incarnated God, she becomes a more willing participant in that Christ-form, of identifying herself with the suffering Christ. The diary entry ends with her defiant baptismal gesture, crossing herself with holy water as she leaves the church. It is the transformative moment, the spiritual key to unlocking a mystical, even erotic identification with God.

There is a definite indication of Sarah's progression to sainthood. In a way, this novel dramatizes her efforts to show herself painfully and falteringly worthy of God's love. Sarah's suffering is a prolonged atonement, the burden of the cross

which acts as a compulsion upon her. It is accompanied by the growth of a Christ-like compassion which makes Sarah forget herself in the pain of others. It is nothing but a matter of divinity when she wants to sacrifice herself for the suffering of humanity:

"Let me think of the strawberry mark on Richard's cheek. Let me see Henry's face with the tears falling. Let me forget me.... I don't mind my pain. It's their pain I can't stand. Let my pain go on and on, but stop theirs. Dear God, if only You could come down from Your Cross for a while and let me get up there instead. If I could suffer like you, I could heal like You." (*The End of the Affair*, 96.)

When she kisses the revolting strawberry mark on Smythe's face, Sarah unconsciously imitates Christian saints kissing the leper's sores. She thinks: "I am kissing pain, and pain belongs to You as happiness never does. I love You in Your pain.... How good You are. You might have killed us with happiness, but You let us be with You in pain." (*The End of the Affair*, 98.)

Sarah, therefore, not only gives up her love for the love of God, she grows in goodness. With goodness grows humility which makes her, like the whisky-priest, conscious only of her unworthiness.

Pursuing Sarah, Bendrix finds her in a church and persuades her to seek dissolution of her marriage to Henry so that they may live together. Sarah is sorely tempted but God intervenes to claim her. In her final letter to Bendrix, informing him that she will not go away with him, she writes, "I've caught belief like a disease. I've fallen into belief like I fell in love. I've never loved before as I love you, and I've never believed in anything before as I believe now. I'm sure. I've never been sure before about anything." (*The End of the Affair*, 121.)

Before Bendrix can approach her again, she dies of pneumonia. He persuades Henry against a Catholic burial, though he learns that Sarah intended to become a Catholic. The priest Father Crompton argues against cremation but Bendrix, jealous of Sarah's divine lover does not allow the plans for cremation to be changed:

"I wanted her burnt up. I wanted to be able to say, Resurrect that body if you can, my jealousy had not finished, like Henry's with her death. It was as if she were alive still in the company of a lover

she had preferred to me. How I wished I could send Parkis to interrupt their eternity." (*The End of the Affair*, 112.)

Thus, the image of Sarah is assimilated into the vision of God. She is regarded as a Catholic not only by transformed inner life but by birth also as her mother tells Bendrix after the cremation ceremony that she had her daughter secretly baptized at the age of two, claiming, "I always had a wish that it would 'take'. Like a vaccination." (*The End of the Affair*, 136.)

Greene once again wants to emphasize the mystery of sacramental grace in ontological terms, a visible marker of God's mediation in the life of a human being. Sarah's baptism stresses the vertical relationship with the divine, a work of God by the church that marks indelibly the soul of the baptized. In introductory remarks to the novel, Greene defends the baptism from hostile critics: "If we are to believe in some power infinitely above us in capacity and knowledge, magic does inevitably form part of our belief—or rather magic is the term we use for the mysterious and the inexplicable—like the stigmata of Padre Pio which I watched from a few feet away as he said Mass one early morning."⁵

Critics have also quarrelled about whose story it is, Bendrix's or Sarah's. Greene has so richly represented the spiritual awakening of both characters that it is difficult to categorize whose journey is the major focus. It attests to Greene's success that the dual tension exists throughout the novel: it is at once a story about sainthood but is told by an unsympathetic narrator, himself a primary subject of the story and its harshest critic. Sarah's transformed inner life has an effect on Bendrix's interpretive claims, and he stands transformed in the end (his compassion for Henry is a primary example), though still full of the same hate and jealousy transferred from Sarah to God. Much of Bendrix's hatred of God is the delusion of a tormented mind. But he knows that he is up against a mighty, intangible adversary and that his gibes are of no use against him:

"You didn't own her all those years; I owned her. You won in the end, You don't need to remind me of that, but she wasn't deceiving me with You when she lay here with me, on this bed, with this pillow under her back. When she slept I was

with her, not You. It was I who penetrated her, not You." (*The End of the Affair*, 137.)

It is the discovery that Sarah appears to be the source of a series of miracles that sends him into a terrible struggle with God. First, there is what he would have preferred to see as the coincidence that his mock prayer to Sarah at her funeral to save him from becoming involved with a certain available young woman is answered. Then the touch of a relic of Sarah's hair seems to cure Smythe of a facial birthmark that was perhaps the source of his rebellion against God. And the son of Parkis, the detective who spied on Sarah for Bendrix, is cured of intense abdominal pains by what the boy says was a visitation by her in the night. What haunts Bendrix most, though, is Sarah's diary, which now possesses Bendrix. Its presence in the hands of Bendrix seems to be assurance that the miracle of his cure from self-indulgent hatred will follow.

The mode of progression in *The End of the Affair* is from nature to supernature, from eros to agape. Since Greene traces the workings of divine purpose in the lives of Sarah and Bendrix, the miracles cannot be summarily dismissed as arbitrary or unimportant. Greene is dealing with the subject of sainthood which requires active demonstration of a transcendental power in the field of human experience. Moreover, in this novel Greene is concerned, as Conrad was in *Heart of Darkness*, with the effects produced by events upon the mind of the narrator. The miracles are the means of God's triumph.

The triangular relationship between Bendrix, Sarah and her faith in *The End of the Affair* is similar in its general lines to that between Charles Ryder, Julia Mottram and her faith in *Brideshead Revisited*. There is a 'twitch on the thread' for Sarah, as there is for Julia. In both the novels, the action is based on an antinomy of which the human and the divine are the two poles. Faith is the alternative to sin. But neither for Julia nor for Sarah is it a happy alternative. In Sarah's life, it is like a baleful growth, recorded in her diary, an extremely painful document which Bendrix has to skip when 'a passage hurts too much'. It reveals that, as consequence of her vow, Sarah's being is lacerated by the conflict between 'ordinary corrupt human love' and faith which she has caught 'like a disease'.

It is the conflict between the flesh and the spirit which is experienced by those who renounce one for the other.⁶ Sarah finds that the call of the Spirit which will not be denied mortifies the flesh. In the shadow of plenitude no quarter is given to the ecstasy of the flesh which must be replaced by the agony of the Spirit. Faith brings in its wake an awful deprivation, the dark night of the soul, to Sarah. She undertakes the journey which St. John of the Cross describes in *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*:

"We may say that there are three reasons for which this journey made by the soul to union with God is called night. The first has to do with the point from which the soul goes forth, for it has gradually to deprive itself of desire for all the worldly things which it possessed, by denying them to itself; the which denial and deprivation are, as it were, night to all the senses of man. The second reason has to do with the mean, or the road along which the soul must travel to this union—that is, faith, which is likewise as dark as night to the understanding. The third has to do with the point to which it travel—namely, God, who, equally, is dark night to the soul in this life. These three nights must pass through the soul—or, rather the soul must pass through them—in order that it may come to Divine union with God."⁷

Undoubtedly, Greene's text contains the classic elements of the Catholic revival: the adulterous Sarah at the heart of Christianity; her willingness to give up everything for Bendrix's life; the upended rationalist ideologies of both Smythe and Bendrix; and the amorous God who hounds Sarah and, at the end of the novel, hounds the unwilling Bendrix. It has the usual obsessions found in Greene's novels, a story of parallel pursuits, journeys and betrayals. Simultaneously, the Catholic revival recounts the main theme of divinity and spirituality.

The novel's theological aesthetic pushes most explicitly the spiritual vision of John of the Cross, a mysticism consisting essentially in a passionate exchange of love with God through a process of purification, trials and temptations, and deliberate detachment from external things.

The most provocative aspect of the novel thus turns on the human body as the fundamental sign of God's presence, whether they are bodies in

pain, bodies disfigured, or bodies in erotic intimacy. Greene proposes to place the doctrine of the Incarnation at the center of his realistic novel, thereby pushing the ramifications of the doctrine to extreme moments of sexual ecstasy and of intense suffering because of the loss of the beloved's body. If God has become human flesh, the logic goes, then every finite body is a possible conduit of God's grace. It is the strongest claim of Catholic sacramentality in any of Greene's oeuvre, making "the appalling strangeness" of God's presence stand out in the profound realism of both Bendrix's critical, rationalist narration of events and Sarah's sometimes hysterical meditations in her diary.⁸

The End of the Affair is in many ways Greene's most persistently theological novel. Closer in literary style to the French, and continuing the Catholic aesthetic so evident in that literary revival, Greene attempts to convey the complexities of the appalling strangeness of God's grace.

According to Frank Kermode, *The End of the Affair* is Greene's "masterpiece, his fullest and most completely realized book."⁹

While Greene says, "*The End of the Affair* was a greater success with readers than with critics."¹⁰ It was published in 1951 and Greene's reward was a cover story in Time Magazine—'Adultery can lead to sainthood'—the cover said. The editors of the Time Magazine could not resist the apparent combination of sin and sanctity and the reading public showed equal enthusiasm for it.¹¹

Greene has agreed with the view that in *The End of the Affair* he has written "a novel about plot making... not only about a novelist making a plot, but about God making a plot."¹²

In the Catholic novels the apparently doomed characters can find their way to God through a radical experience of spiritual immolation. Judging the spiritual sense of the novel, Maria Couto rightly comments:

"*The End of the Affair* is much more than a love story in which the eternal triangle is given an interesting twist with God as one of the protagonists. Its powerful representation of a journey into a new awareness, a spiritual journey, in fact, which connects love of man with love of God works best in the early sections of the novel and in

Sarah's diary when the accoutrements of faith do not hinder the flow of experience."¹³

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