Reading for Pleasure

Greene and Baron Corvo

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Few of us are as resistant to the influence of irrational emotions as we would like others to believe. I have always had a secret if slightly incredulous admiration for Charles Bradlaugh, the militant Victorian atheist. His public addresses were memorable performances. He concluded by challenging God to strike him dead within the minute. The climactic end came as Bradlaugh counted the passing seconds from a gold watch held in a steady, outstretched hand until he strode triumphantly from the platform to the applause of the converted. Did he not suffer the slightest hesitation as the hands of the watch moved on—perhaps a momentary wavering? If so, he betrayed no trace of such weakness. He was clearly made of stronger stuff than most of us would lay claim to.

As an altogether weaker individual, I find that my capacity to reject unreasonable sentiments is distinctly limited. When royalty visited our city to open a new hospital wing, I used the free time to dispose of an accumulation of unfinished paperwork with the quiet lack of ostentation which, I felt, befitted a man with logically determined priorities: adulation is the prerogative of the mob. Circumstances soon conspired to destroy my illusions.

Graham Greene

Within a week I attended the première of a Graham Greene comedy, held, almost unbelievably, in a small Leicester theatre; and suddenly I realised that the tall, somewhat uneasy and slightly stooping figure taking his place two seats away was the master himself. My own vulnerability was quickly exposed, feelings that differed little from those of the flag-waving school-children of a few days before. I resisted (and now regret resisting) the urge to join the little knot of people whose programmes he was patiently signing at the end of the play. He held a question and answer session at the University Literary Society: he was immediately liked—a gentle and unexpectedly accessible person.

Graham Greene should be recommended reading for doctors. His own encounter with death (recorded in his autobiography, *A Sort of Life*) occurred in the wards of Westminster Hospital, where his brother was a houseman. His world is one which doctors ought to appreciate. His characters are flawed individuals, frequently seedy, suffering for their shortcomings, and imposing suffering on others. As in life, the seediness is often associated with elements of black comedy and there is also perhaps (although never explicitly stated) an impression that their lives have value. The distinction that Greene makes between his serious works (such as *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*) and his entertainments (*Stamboul Train* and *The Third Man*) is, I have always felt, that of the author rather than the reader. Indeed, I suspect that it is based on the time spent on a work rather than its content; otherwise it

is difficult to see why *Brighton Rock* should be a serious novel while *The Ministry of Fear* is an entertainment.

I find writers such as Somerset Maugham, who apparently had a closer connection with the medical profession, quite unreadable. Ingenious plots like crossword puzzles and mathematical conundrums leave me unmoved. I am temperamentally unfitted to be entertained by the products of other people's cleverness. Medical and academic life presents enough knots to unravel without continuing the activity in my leisure time.

Greene's volume of essays, *A Lost Childhood*, also repays reading: it is a study in humane and civilised judgment. My test on these occasions is a simple one: how does a writer deal with those fellow authors he is likely to find most antipathetic? For Greene there could be no better literary litmus paper than Samuel Butler, that strange and unfashionable Victorian philosopher. The essay on Butler, which could so easily be a catalogue of his shortcomings, unexpectedly begins with a description. Then the truth is revealed: the unsympathetic character is not Butler, but Greene's idea of the archetypal disciple of Butler:

One knows the man well in his suit of scrubby black, his stained greenish felt, with his umbrella, the odour of tobacco on his clothes: he leans over the bookstall fingering the ugly cheap reprints of the Rationalist Press. . . Greeting him one is embarrassed by his inability to tell polite untruths. "Good morning." The morning is nothing of the kind. He will not stoop to the medieval superstition of "Good-bye." He is an Honest Man and rather conscious of the fact, but he has gained little stature from his emancipation. One is instinctively aware in his past of an ugly crippling childhood, attics and black beetles and some grim grammar school and sadistic masters. His favourite author is Samuel Butler.

Clearly, this is a novelist's and not a critic's literary criticism.

The original edition

As a medical student at Cambridge in the 'fifties it was relatively easy to read my favourite authors in the first edition: the post-war book trade was at a low ebb after the widespread pulping of books for salvage. Impoverished students and dons elbowed and fought their way to the Saturday morning treasures displayed on David's bookstall. The rewards were indeed rich. When I discovered that a friend and I were simultaneously reading Newman's *Apologia* I was delighted to find that my first edition had cost less than his modern reprint. I find the desire to read a book in the original edition is now ineradicable, with a consequently bizarre effect on my reading habits. It is not wholly indefensible. Books are documents. Paper, binding, and print are as characteristic of the author and his time as the actual text. Once the original edition is familiar, it is difficult to avoid a feeling of discordance on handling a reprint. This is true even with a modern author such as Greene, whose works span only a few decades. *The Ministry of Fear* is a typical war-time production—poor quality economy paper, drab endpapers like wrapping, and cheap garish yellow-cloth covers. The 'thirties novels

which established his reputation are quite distinct. *Stamboul Train* and *It's a Battlefield* are clad in respectable black cloth and printed on the typically thick absorbent paper which disappeared with the second world war.

Baron Corvo

I am prepared to admit, however, that the case for the first-edition reader is at its weakest with modern novelists. The case is overwhelming when we consider the multitude of books of which the first edition proves to be the last. With some, most value would be lost in a modern reprint. Corvo's *Chronicles of the House of Borgia* undoubtedly belongs to this category. Three inseparable factors make the first (and only) edition of this a fascinating document—the writer, the prose, and the book itself. The book is not a difficult one to find: the edition was large and few readers can have been tempted to subject it to the wearing and ultimately destructive process of thorough reading, so that most copies have survived. It is a thick work, elegantly bound in crimson cloth, richly illustrated, and bearing the Borgia arms in gilt on its upper cover.

In common with every other production of its author, *Chronicles* was the cause of a prolonged bitter dispute with the unfortunate publisher, who was subjected to repeated threats of litigation alternating with venomous invective. Corvo's attempts to disown the work were unsuccessful, but in any case the authorship is evident on every page. His genius for ridicule and diatribe sets him apart from the common herd of historians. To take a relatively innocuous example, he gives short shrift to Dumas's theory that the Borgias prepared poison from the saliva of a bear that had been fed arsenic. "Having caught his bear, Duke Cesare would convey him to the Vatican—a large palace truly, but rather too full of people to be desirable as a private venom factory. On a dark night in a lonely courtyard, the Pope's holiness and the Duke's excellency would administer the arsenic to the bear. The method of administration is not described, nor the slinging up of the beast prior to his convulsions, nor the picture of the aged Pontiff skipping round with the silver plate in His solicitude that no drop of the fluid should be lost, nor the solemn bottling of the vials, nor the hermetic sealing with what seal? The Ring of the Fisherman? And M Dumas carefully omits to say that the nasty mess so secretly and arduously obtained would have been far less venomous than the original dose of arsenic; which would be deprived of most if not all its venomous potency by its submission to the digestive processes of M Dumas's improbable and impossible bear."

Baron Corvo was the pseudonym of Frederick Rolfe: his claim to an Italian barony was false and, after exposure, his later books were published under his true name. Even here, the element of poseur is apparent with the ambiguous abbreviation of his Christian name—"Fr Rolfe." He was a failed priest. Rolfe's writings are the product of a man whose wayward genius was never publicly recognised in his lifetime and who could not understand that his failure was the result of his own personal shortcomings rather than the malice or stupidity of others. As a consequence, his tirades were directed at all who had dealings with him. Publishers, lawyers, priests, patrons, and former friends all suffered as more pressing and exorbitant demands were made for money, perfection, and, finally, redress for injustice. His books are an interesting testimony to the man, each work bearing the imprint of a sequence of battle-scarred publishers—Chatto and Windus, John Lane, Grant Richards, William Rider, who had to deal with threats, attempted litigation, and final disowning. His commercial failure as an author has made most of his other books scarce: they are, however, well worth seeking out since each bears some marks of his eccentricity. His best-known work *Hadrian VII*, for instance, carries on its upper cover the hero's portrait drawn by the author, traced in white on a purple background—explaining, incidentally, Rolfe's failure as an ecclesiastical artist.

Unfortunately, with the exception of *Hadrian VII* his books cannot be easily read in their entirety. Like his behaviour, his genius was too erratic and the rest of his work can be sampled only in small doses. Rolfe was fortunate in one respect only—his biographer. A simple chronicle of the repetitive sequence of disasters that characterised Rolfe's life could not have been a particularly successful work. A J Symons approaches him as a mystery—a man of genius, who ended his days as a neglected failure. *Quest for Corvo* is a record of the solution to this mystery achieved by questioning those who had dealings with Rolfe—often to their considerable cost. Ironically, Symons achieves what Rolfe never could achieve—a consistently enthralling book. Unfortunately the final mystery of this extraordinary and perplexing man cannot be resolved either by perusal of his books or his biography. How could a man of such an obviously aberrant personality exert such an impact on a succession of otherwise rational and successful human beings to the extent that he was supported by them for almost all his 53 years? What vital quality, now irrecoverable, enabled him to tap the well of human generosity in this way?

Apart from Catholicism he has little in common with Greene. I can, however, commend the books of both for the different light which they throw on human behaviour and, if possible, I would suggest the original edition.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

An echo of indigo

Until recently if I thought about indigo at all, I suppose it would be as the least exciting colour of a rainbow. I was therefore intrigued, when driving through a lovely coastal town in South Carolina, to see a large, beautiful colonial mansion which proclaimed to be the "Indigo Society" and about 200 years old. I had to find out more.

Indigo comes from plants, one species being known to the ancient Britons as the woad plant. The early colonial settlers took indigo seeds with them to the New World 350 years ago but at first failed to exploit it successfully for its purple-blue dye. In the early 1700s it was found growing wild in South Carolina, where it preferred the higher better-drained ground rather than the swampy regions which were being used for the major crop, rice. Indigo could be harvested at a different time to rice, so allowing an efficient use, of the slave labour. The vats in which the dye was extracted were kept close to the slaves' quarters and away from the graceful plantation mansion for two good reasons—firstly, because large quantities of the slaves' urine was

necessary to steep the plants and, secondly, because the process was consequently very smelly.

Until this time indigo dye came from the French West Indies, and the British Government in England, ever anxious to obtain goods from our colonies rather than the French, offered a bounty on Carolina indigo of 4 to 6 pence a pound. Exports soared and with it the prosperity of South Carolina and its ports. By 1770 over one million pounds a year were being shipped to England, for which the plantation owner received one dollar a pound. The American Revolution, a few years later, snuffed out the trade, as the British withdrew their bounty and found a cheaper product in India. Within twenty years no more indigo was being exported and the rise of the European synthetic dye industry was the final blow to natural indigo.

A reminder of this industry still lingers, not just in that fine mansion in South Carolina—but also in the blue denim jeans synonymous with American youth—originally the cloth being dyed with indigo—

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