

Einführungsseminar Literaturwissenschaft B

The Power and the Glory: British Catholic Novelists

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WS 2010/11

15.03.2011

**Politics and Commitment
in Graham Greene's Writings**

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Lehramt Gym/Ge Englisch Latein

3. Semester

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1. Introduction

The reaction that Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory* (PG) evoked in the Holy Office of the Catholic Church in Rome could be considered as irony of fate: The novel that deals with the suppression of Catholicism by the state, Greene's "most theologically Christian book" (Sharrock 1984: 112), was condemned by the Catholic Church in 1953. "Literature of this kind does harm to the cause of the true religion", one consultant from the Vatican wrote. Greene answered in 1953 that

the aim of the book was to oppose the power of the sacraments and the indestructibility of the Church on the one hand with, on the other, the merely temporal power of an essentially Communist state (Thorpe 2001).

This reaction of the Holy Office shows how highly influential literature is supposed to be: "Die katholische Kirche hat kein Verzeichnis der verbotenen Bilder oder Musikstücke angelegt, wohl aber gab sie einen Index Librorum Prohibitorum heraus" (Haslinger 2000). Conversely, writers have always tried to make use of the assumed persuasive power of literature. The above mentioned example also shows that Greene, who is often labelled a Catholic writer, by no means represented the interests of the Catholic Church. The question is whether he consciously wrote his pieces of prose to serve a political purpose.

Religious persecution in Mexico had inspired Greene to write *The Power and the Glory*. It is by far not his only novel that deals not only with theological but also with political and social issues which he had taken from real experience. All his lifetime Greene visited and wrote about states where social and political struggle took place, like Mexico, Havana or Nigeria. Nevertheless, Greene did not overtly call himself a politically engaged novelist and also was cautious with being labelled politically engaged. Yet, his exigencies for good literature comply with several of the criteria which his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre set as characteristic for a committed writer. Irrespective of Sartre's definition of engaged literature and although he distanced himself from engaged writing, Greene himself had clear principles regarding the obligations of a writer towards society. These principles can be summed up as "truth", "independence" and "disloyalty". What Greene meant by these terms and how he applied them in his writings – *Brighton Rock* (BR) and *The Power and the Glory* among them – will be shown in the following.

2. Criteria for Committed Writing

The role of commitment in literature has changed through different periods of time. George Orwell writes in his essay "Inside the Whale" about the shift from literature as an end in itself to politically motivated writing. During the 1920s "literature was supposed to consist solely in the manipulation of words. To judge a book by its subject matter was the unforgivable sin" (Orwell 1957: 27 f.). For the years between 1930 and 1935 Orwell saw the literary climate change: "'Purpose' has come back. The younger writers have 'gone into politics'" (Orwell 1957: 30). Graham Greene wrote his first successful novels during those years of change. Yet, he does not seem to be eager to be involved in discussions about committed writing. Asked about the role of engagement in his works in an interview, he does not give any individual definition of commitment. He says: "I don't know what is meant by a 'committed writer'" (Allain 1983: 88).

Jean-Paul Sartre addressed the problem of engaged writing in his essay "What is Literature?" in 1947. He stated that every writer has an impact on the reader and thus functions as a social reformer (cf. Cormier 1979). Words have a special power on the reader's mind: The writer of prose can guide the reader and can, "if he describes a hovel, make it seem the symbol of social injustice and provoke your indignation" (Sartre 1947: 10). It is his duty to reveal social truths to the public. If wrongs or injustice are disclosed by the written word, their initiator is, according to Sartre, automatically bound to change his behaviour: "To speak is to act; anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence." Sartre calls this "action by disclosure" – revealing things leads to change (1947: 22).

Apart from revealing things, committed literature conveys personal beliefs of the writer. Literature is in fact an utterly individual thing "demanding mental honesty and a minimum of censorship" (Orwell 1957: 39). Independence of the writer is according to Orwell the essential precondition for good literature. Any kind of orthodoxy, whether it is imposed by a certain political party or the church, means harm. Serving a political party by writing – instead of treating one's own beliefs – bears the danger of being forced to either "toe the line, or shut up" (Orwell 1957: 39). It is important to note that committed literature, here, is not understood as propaganda literature. The German writer Josef Haslinger explains in his plea for a new engaged literature that readers did not like au-

thors who promote political or moral beliefs and militates against this kind of writing:

Damit ist nicht das Ende der engagierten Literatur erreicht, sondern nur das Ende der simpelsten Version engagierter Literatur, einer Literatur, die [dem Leser] eine festgelegte politische Interpretation des Textes förmlich aufzwingt (2000).

Whether a writer is a social reformer as Sartre claims is debatable and can be doubted (cf. Cormier 1979: 75). Greene is generally in agreement with Sartre regarding the influence that literature might have, though he qualifies it: "It sometimes happens that a writer can make a sharper impact with his books than if he signed petitions and tracts. Writing is certainly a kind of action" (Allain 1983: 81). Some of his characters in the novels emphasize this opinion. One character in *The Comedians* says: "A pen, as well as a silver bullet, can draw blood" (Allain 1983: 84), and Fowler, the reporter in *The Quiet American* states: "Even an opinion is a kind of action" (Allain 1983: 81). To find an answer in how far literature not only has an impact on the intellect of the reader but also makes the reader change his behaviour is too complex to be discussed in short. All this aspects brought together, the term commitment therefore is defined here as clearly distinguished from pure art as an end in itself on the one hand and from art serving the promotion of political platforms on the other hand. A committed writer conveys his individual beliefs to the reader. An impact on the reader that results in action – a change of behaviour – is intended although it is not clearly verifiable.

3. Greene and Politics

3.1 Separating Private from Public Engagement

The same way Greene preferred to be called a writer who happens to be Catholic he strongly divided acting politically as a private person from acting politically as a writer. Regarding his biography, Greene seems to be a politically engaged person. He states that he wants to contribute to change actively, but only in a private way: "I'd throw a stone without hesitation!" But he emphasizes that it is not Greene, the writer, who is acting but "a character called Graham Greene who happens to be a writer" (Allain 1983: 81). Although Greene engaged in politics, he says of himself that he seldom committed himself completely to this subject – for fear of being labelled a political writer (Allain 1983: 87). He

was a member of the socialist Independent Labour Party for a short time, but later often declared that this was considered to have been a joke by him (Couto 1988: 207). Greene says of himself that he had voted only once in his life because it was "not easy to feel enthusiasm for any particular party" (Allain 1983: 109). Even when he did not engage in party politics this does not mean that he was not interested in politics. The contrary is true: Greene's letters to the press give evidence of his involvement in political and social issues of his time. These letters are concerning the Watergate case, the civil war in Cuba as well as the war in Vietnam (cf. Greene 1989). Still, it is the private person, not the novelist who is speaking.

As to his literary works, Greene maintains that he does not use literature to any political or religious ends. Just the way he happens to be a Catholic who writes his books happen to be political. Greene states not to write in order to change anything. He neither intends to convert his readers to Catholicism nor to any political ideology. "I don't want to use literature for political ends, nor for religious ends. Even if my novels happen incidentally to be political books, they're no more written to provoke changes than my so-called 'Catholic' novels are written to convert anyone" (Allain 1983: 80). Beside the fact that acting in a political mission does not belong to the duties of a writer Greene also did not consider a novel to be the appropriate medium to convey a political message (Allain 1983: 80). Although he admits that there have always been influential books, he does not consider his works to have had a political influence on the readership (Allain 1983: 117). He therefore is not as strongly a believer in the power of words changing the reader's behaviour as Sartre is.

Yet, Greene is said to have become increasingly politically engaged in his writings over the years. Although he keeps negating a political purpose of his writings, exceptions show through. On occasion different from that mentioned before he points out an exception from his never being motivated to write for political reasons: Greene declares that he had started writing *The Comedians* (1966) with the intention to make his point of view clear and to fight against the dictatorship of Haiti's president François Duvalier (Allain 1983: 99). He also denies feeling guilty of political inaction. "For me political action is writing and nothing else. I've helped and defended some people by my writing, I've attacked some people by my writing" (Allain 1983: 84). It becomes clear that Greene is not as apolitical in his writings as he claims to be. In interviews, he

tends to evade answering questions concerning his commitment. Perhaps he is, as Allain supposes, "anxious to emphasize the element of commitment" in his work (1983: 87).

3.2 Overall Presence of Politics

Though Greene is not comfortable with the label "political writer" he has often been declared to be one (Couto 1988: 1). Politics are essential to his novels. Greene himself qualifies the attribute of a political writer which is attached to him. He agrees with being called a political author when he deals with political subjects – "but politics are in the air we breathe" (Allain 1983: 87). Greene's contemporary George Orwell advises the writer in his essay "Inside the Whale" to stay out of politics with an age of totalitarian dictatorship to come. He names Henry Miller's novel *Tropic of Cancer* as a piece of literature which successfully complies with this need. Greene, however, negates in another context that Miller's novels are worth being labelled literature. They were instead mere pornography (Allain 1983: 182). Although Greene may have had different reasons to dislike Miller's work of prose, his statement hints at the fact that literature for Greene has to have some political involvement immanent. Regarding that Greene considers politics as something in the air one breathes, Greene subsumes the term politics and its implications rather widely. He does not pick up themes considering community policy or bourgeois interests. As Couto puts it: "His interest in politics is not where elections and votes determine the degree of income tax, but where the issue is life and death" (1988: 167). Concerning the quality of politics in Greene's writings, Burgess stresses that "the politics of Greene are world politics" (1967: 95). Greene's characters work out their moral struggles on an international stage, but in isolation. This is demonstrated by the following examples taken of *The Power and the Glory* and *Brighton Rock*.

Politics are overall present in *The Power and the Glory*. As Greene had explained in his letter to the Vatican, he opposes "the indestructibility of the Church" with "the merely temporal power of an essentially Communist state". The characters are strongly bound to their political environment and their fate is influenced by the circumstances given by the state. The struggles fought are merely inner ones: The whisky priest has to decide between delivering himself to the police and thus giving up or doing his duty. This duty consists not only in saving his own soul as the Church teaches it but also in doing his job as a priest:

"When he was gone it would be as if God in all this space between the sea and the mountains ceased to exist" (PG 62). Religious persecution, however, is the reason why the whisky priest has got into the described predicament. He is so proud of himself for having stayed when other priests have capitulated that he neglects his duties as a clergyman: He becomes a drunkard and begets a child (PG 194). The repressions by the state trigger the personal hardship of the individual. This confrontation of individual fate and politically caused circumstances are exemplary for many of Greene's writings: He is "concerned with the crises of moral decision and the preceding strains" and "deliberately [seeks] evidence of them at the flashpoints of wars and political disturbance" (Sharrock 1984: 102).

The novel *Brighton Rock* might at first sight not fit into the scheme of internationality because it is set in England. Yet, the setting is by no means one of "the ordinary bourgeois English novel", but "the jungle of gang warfare" (Burgess 1967: 95). The protagonist of *Brighton Rock*, Pinkie, is presented as a product of politics in a wider sense, too. He grows up in the slum of Brighton. Greene puts the postcard picture of the tourist area of Brighton in contrast to Pinkie's world. On the one hand there is the "holiday crowd" stepping off into "fresh and glittering air": It is a world without sorrows, where houses are shining creamy white, the band is playing and flowers are blooming (BR 1). On the other hand Greene shows "the shabby secret behind the bright corsage" (BR 153): Nelson Place, where children play "on the steep slope of rubble" with pistols, surrounded by houses with cracked windows, just as if bombs had exploded in the place (BR 153 f.). Pinkie, poor, underprivileged and characterised as "a chilling specimen of the Adolf Hitler type", is a victim of this environment (Coetzee 2004: viii). He strives to become the same kind of person as Colleoni, the Mafia boss of the town, who is the embodiment of a successful man for Pinkie. But the contrast of the shabbily dressed Pinkie and the powerful Colleoni who looks as a man "who owned the whole world", cash registers, "policemen and prostitutes, Parliament and laws" included, indicates that Pinkie's efforts are futile (BR 67 f.). "The effect of poverty on Pinkie and Rose in Nelson Place makes *Brighton Rock* a social novel as much as a so-called 'Catholic' one" (Allain 1983: 88). It is one of several books – besides *It's a Battlefield* and *The Honorary Consul* – that stands for Greene's "concern with the possibility of social change" (Allain 1983: 88). *Brighton Rock* is one of a series of books by Greene where the capitalist system is exposed "to suggest that exploitation is more subtle and sophisticated, and its influence more extensive" (Couto 1988: 56f.). Greene presents one more time the struggle of an individual opposed to some higher power: A

young man damaged by a system that has produced him and that he cannot fight against.

4. Greene's Commitment

4.1 Truth and Independence

Although Greene does not want to teach any political conviction to the reader he states that the writer owes several duties to society. The first of these duties is truth (Bowen 1948: 30). By truth Greene does not mean exposing anything in the way a journalist would do. Greene rather means accuracy or precision, for which he has struggled "more than anything else [...] in form as well as in substance" (Donaghy 1983: 115). Greene himself explains that his "characters must not go white in the face or tremble like leaves" – not because these phrases were clichés but because they were untrue (Bowen 1948: 30). He assumes that phrases like those mentioned above have a negative effect on the reader. Every time they pass "into the mind uncriticised, it muddies the stream of thought" (Bowen 1948: 30). Greene's accuracy also reveals itself in the description of Mexican landscape and environment: In *The Power and the Glory*, vultures look down from above constantly searching for carrion. The blazing sun causes unbearable heat. Mosquitoes are whirring and beetles are crawling everywhere. Greene makes the little boy Luis squash a beetle with his bare foot. He "thought gloomily that after all everything had an end" (PG 20). The hostility towards life is present everywhere throughout the novel. But Greene stresses that this atmosphere is not invented by him. It is not the "strange violent 'seedy'" Greenland his critics refer to. "This is Mexico [...] carefully and accurately described" (Greene 1980: 77).

The second duty is to accept no privileges from the state in order to stay independent (Bowen 1948: 30). Greene considers states which are too interested in art to be dangerous. In Russia, where artists had been given a better flat and more money, they had been asked in return to cease to be an artist. To abstain from privileges one has got used to is hard. Furthermore, privileges would separate the novelist from the rest of society, "and we can't afford to live away from the source of our writing in however comfortable an exile" (Bowen 1948: 50). Greene often states that he does not belong to any political party (Allain 1983: 88). This duty has strong parallels to Orwell's claim for the

author who must not be driven by any authority. It is also an important precondition for Greene's most important duty: acting as the "devil's advocate".

4.2 Virtue of Disloyalty

Greene describes himself as a critical person and he proves to be eminently critical towards the state: "It has always been in the interests of the State to poison the psychological wells, to restrict human sympathy, to encourage cat-calls." Greene wants the writer to act against these tendencies. It "is a genuine duty we owe to society, to be a piece of grit in the State machinery" (Bowen 1948: 47f.). The most important responsibility of the writer to society, hence, is "the establishment of justice" in which the writer has "greater opportunities and therefore greater obligations" than other citizens (Bowen 1948: 46). The author has this extraordinary position because of his independence: He is his own employer as soon as he has reached a certain level of success and is hence privileged to other citizens.

By establishing justice Greene means that the writer should awake sympathy for "those who lie outside the boundaries of State sympathy" (Bowen 1948: 47). He defines these people as not necessarily the poor and physically defenceless but "publicans and sinners" of all classes (Bowen 1948: 47). The protagonists of *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory* perfectly fit the category of those outside the boundaries of state sympathy: Pinkie comes from an underprivileged neighbourhood and is a criminal. He is born as an infant of hell and although his guilt is not excused by Greene, it is lessened by these circumstances. Although Pinkie is as evil as a character in Greene's novels might be, he is not presented as a condemned person. Nobody can conceive "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God", the priest says to Rose who is convinced that Pinkie is damned in the end (BR 268). In *The Power and the Glory*, the whisky priest is not naturally poor, but he is made an outlaw by the state. Once he had been respected by people. After the chief of police decides to take hostages in every village to catch the priest the latter becomes an unwelcome danger for every community. The priest is abandoned.

The novelist's independence from any group and his principle of creating sympathy enable him to create seemingly paradoxical characters like in *The Power and the Glory*: A sinful priest who becomes a saint and a lieutenant who kills people, but "from the best possible motives" (Greene 1980: 86). The lieutenant feels deceived by the church and the

clergy and wants justice for the sake of the people: "No more money for saying prayers. [...] We'll give people food instead. [...] We'll see they don't suffer", he says to the whisky priest (PG 192). The character of the lieutenant furthermore serves Greene's aim of creating sympathy: He postulates that writers should not only awake the readers' sympathy for the most evil characters – the losers of society – but also for the winners. Greene created most of his characters in the novel on the basis of people he had met in Mexico and had described in his travel book *The Lawless Roads* (1939). Three or four real Mexican priests form together the character of the fictional whisky priest (Donaghy 1983: 15f.). Greene did not find, however, "the idealism or integrity of the Lieutenant of *The Power and the Glory* among the police and *pistoleros*" (Greene 1980: 85). He invented a lieutenant who is "not only a strong man, but a good man, who is selflessly devoted to the people" (Donaghy 1983: 40). As a result, the two counterparts, the priest and the lieutenant "are presented with the integrity characteristic of Greene's fiction which is fair to both sides" (Couto 1988: 69).

Greene's critical attitude and his efforts in creating justice in his literary works reveal his commitment. Greene sees his function in acting as the "devil's advocate" whose privilege is the "virtue of disloyalty". He explains this role with the help of the black and white squares of a chess board: "As a novelist, I must be allowed to write from the point of view of the black square as well as of the white" (Bowen 1948: 32). For this reason he has never been a seriously committed member of any political party. His loyalty would shift every time he would have felt the party had made a mistake (Allain 1983: 19 f.). For this reason, too, he denies that literature can serve as a means for edification. "Literature presents a personal moral" of an individual, in contrast to a moral prescribed by an institution or organisation. This personal morality is in most cases not congruent with that of the group to which the writer belongs (Bowen 1948: 32). The stress on individual beliefs corresponds to Orwell's call for an independent author on the one hand. On the other hand it becomes clear that Greene sees the role of the writer as an eminent one in society: The writer is an advocate of his own beliefs, independent from any political lines and acting for the sake of justice.

5. Conclusion

Greene wrote his first successful novels in a time when it had become modern again to write for certain ends. He is in no case a promoter of art without purpose. His claim for independence makes him resistant to any propaganda or edification literature, too. His writings are soaked with politics on a more general level. Politics seem to be so ubiquitous for Greene that it is nothing special for him when they are ingredients of his writings. Perhaps Greene denies being a political author out of understatement. More probably, independence of the writer is such a significant feature for him that he avoids being labelled with the attributes political or Catholic. It is important for him to rely on his own moral standards.

Greene treats writing as a form of acting – in the best Sartrean way. If he did not believe that literature influences the reader, he would not have criticised popular literature for its crude use of language which muddies the reader's mind. If he did not believe that literature had an impact on the reader, Greene would, furthermore, not have demanded truth as one virtue of the writer. That literature can influence the reader is the precondition for change. And change is what the committed writer in the sense of a social reformer wants to motivate. Greene does not believe that his writings can change anything. It is not his aim, anyway: He says he wanted to show things, not to change things. But, according to Sartre showing already involves changing.

Even if Greene seems eager to keep distance to committed writing, he is too much concerned about the function and the effect of literature as that he could not be considered committed. By postulating the virtue of disloyalty in every writer and presenting himself as the "devil's advocate", Greene reveals that he aims to establish justice. By evoking sympathy for the losers as well as the winners of society he discloses his responsibility for the effects of his literature. Constellations of his characters are not black and white since real life is not. He reports about real political backgrounds but his writings include a general truth: The slum where Pinkie grew up is not only found in Brighton. The prosecution of Catholics is not only a Mexican theme. When *The Power and the Glory* was published, a much more fatal prosecution was going on in Europe. Greene's understanding of literature and his values of truth, independence and disloyalty make him a socially committed writer calling for humanity and creating pieces of prose that are true for all times and places.

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