Stranger Than Fiction

Just as the absurd demeanor of the court jester, or fool, provided him with a license to say things that would have cost a more serious man his head, so too the novelists of today, because they are inevitably comic figures in a materialistic world, are permitted to expose those embarrassing truths that no historian with an instinct for self-preservation would dare record. Thus it was that in 1961 novelist Evelyn Waugh depicted — in *The End of the Battle,* the third volume of a war trilogy begun in 1952 — the monstrous crime committed by allied troops on the orders of General Eisenhower (and given the cynically appropriate code name of "Operation Keelhaul"). And thus it was that in 1940 novelist Graham Greene depicted the relatively recent persecution of the Church in Mexico during a revolution that has yet to be accurately and comprehensively chronicled by contemporary historians.

As *The Power and the Glory* opens, the churches in many parts of Mexico have been closed, the celebration of the Mass and the saying of prayers in public have been forbidden, and the clergy have been ordered to break their vows of celibacy. Many have fled; many have been executed. The common people have been cowed, but they retain their faith, and they risk their lives and endure incredible hardships to be able to participate in the Mass or make their confessions on those rare occasions when a fugitive priest passes through their region. At long last, only two priests remain. One, a timid soul, has consented to be married, to a domineering old shrew, and has become an object of ridicule to the children of the town. He is no longer a threat to the State.

The other remains at large. He is pursued from town to town by a crusading police lieutenant intent on extinguishing this last representative of the Church he detests. Over the years, the priest has made several attempts to flee, but always, at the crucial moment, duty has called and in responding to it he has let pass the opportunity for escape. Several times, his nemesis the lieutenant has closed in upon him, but always, as if miraculously, he has eluded capture.

At last he crosses over the border into a Mexican state where the revolutionary fervor has not yet reached a fever pitch, where the lives of the clergy are not as yet in jeopardy. Just then he receives word from the state he has left behind that an outlaw has been shot and has asked for last rites. Knowing that he is walking into a trap, the priest returns to find the outlaw dying but unrepentant, and the police lieutenant ready and waiting. Within days he has been condemned and executed by firing squad.

Overindulging in Ambiguity

The Power and the Glory is not without its author's trademark ambiguity, the shades of ethical gray he so delights in, and for which he is justly criticized by readers who retain the ability to judge literature in reference to moral criteria. For dramatic purposes, Greene has endowed his hero, the priest, with certain character flaws, among them an overfondness for spirits and an obsession with his solitary lapse in chastity. His villain, the lieutenant, is possessed of traits that pass for virtues among simpletons: straitlacedness, singlemindedness, an abstract humanitarianism. The "badness" of the good man and the "goodness" of the bad man would make perfect examples of irony in a teacher's guide to modern literature. Greene himself admits in the introduction to his novel that at least one of the portraits is contrived. He says of the visit to Mexico that inspired him to write the book:

> I had not found the integrity of the lieutenant among the police and *pistoleros* I had encountered. I had to invent him as a counter to the failed priest: the idealistic police officer who stifled life from the best possible motives, the drunken priest who continued to pass life on.

Yes, there may be debased priests ennobled by their faith, and righteous reformers corrupted by their ideologies, and yet both are exceptional figures. Greene's concentration on them gives *The Power and the Glory* the air of a values clarification test. As we read it, we want to cry out with the browbeaten student who screams at last: "I wouldn't kill my mother OR my father, no matter what!" We feel compelled to reject the juxtaposition of bad goodman and good badman, and to bear witness instead to the thousands of uncorrupted priests whose martyrdoms — while lacking in subtlety or ambiguity or in half a dozen other precious qualities that have given rise to literary terms — demonstrate clearly and convincingly that evil does exist and that good can and will triumph over it.

Greene may, for dramatic purposes, understate the goodness of the good man, and the badness of the bad; nevertheless, he does insist that the important questions in life are moral questions, and he does refuse to shy away from those unpleasant facts that put the lie to the liberal vision of our age. In an era of general dishonesty, when the truth is, as often as not, stranger than fiction, fiction, paradoxically, becomes an ideal vehicle for the preservation of facts that are stranger than fiction. When the scholars of the 21st or 22nd Century write the story of our time, they may chuckle at the documents of our diplomats, the public statements of our politicians, and the final words of our historians. But, if they want to get at the truth, or to get as close to it as they will ever get, they will turn instead to novels like Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory.* ■

— F. R. DUPLANTIER