

THE LANGUAGE
OF ETHICS AND
COMMUNITY IN
GRAHAM GREENE'S
FICTION

PAULA MARTÍN SALVÁN



The Language of Ethics and Community in Graham Greene's Fiction

Also by Paula Martín Salván

COMMUNITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FICTION

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FIGURES OF BELATEDNESS: Postmodernist Fiction in English

The Language of Ethics and Community in Graham Greene's Fiction

Paula Martín Salván

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To Carlos, who always carries my books

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Introduction: Occasions for Unselfing

In a typical Graham Greene novel, a male character – we can tentatively call him the Greenean hero – becomes estranged from his communities of origin, such as family, profession, nation. He becomes a monad, unable to relate to others in a meaningful way, until he leaves and makes a fresh start in a new, often distant location. In this new setting, he will be given a second chance to engage in the life of another, usually marginal, community. The initially reluctant hero becomes thus committed to a cause or to a people, through acts of compassion and sacrifice. Most of Greene's novels, however, end with a twist that upsets the apparent integration of the hero into a community, questioning the nature of his commitment.¹

This outline emphasizes the persistence of some narrative elements (character types, kernel events, chronotopes) and some lexical items (commitment, compassion, community) in Graham Greene's fiction. In this book, I would like to map out the lexico-conceptual articulation of Greene's narrative dramatization of ethical situations. This main aim issues from three working hypotheses: In the first place, a reduced set of terms such as *peace*, *despair*, *pity*, and *commitment* have a striking lexical recurrence in Greene's texts. I consider them as keywords that articulate his discourse at a conceptual level. In the second place, those keywords are invested with narrative potential. I believe they have the capacity to generate narrative situations and developments. And in the third place, they articulate a particular narrative pattern. I contend that such lexico-conceptual articulation is shaped mainly as ethical conflict dramatized in narrative form.

The lexical recurrence of specific terms in Greene's work has been observed in previous criticism, but it has been statistically noted as either a peculiarity of his style, or as an index of thematic prominence

assumed uncritically. Lynette Kohn's early monograph *Graham Greene: The Major Novels* (1961) illustrates this critical approach, ascribing a key term to each novel as the unifying thematic element: *Brighton Rock* (1938) is about evil, *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) is about pity, and so on. What this approach does not take into account is the fact that Greene's usage of such terms is idiosyncratic, and often deviates from common usage.

Narrative and thematic patterns, on the other hand, have been explored before, but the general tendency has been to chain those recurrences to the author's biography, or to pre-existing political or religious frameworks.² The main problem with this methodology is that it stands on a classification of Greene's texts into religious and political ones.³ These critical stances tend to perceive only some of Greene's novels – the ones in which the political-secular or the religious-Catholic elements respectively are thematically explicit – as the direct expression of his concerns, while the others are relegated as indirect symptoms of such concerns. That is to say, the religious readings of Greene's work consider the Catholic cycle as their main object of interest, yet claim that the discursive role of Catholicism permeates in a sublimated form the so-called non-Catholic novels through his concern with salvation, compassion, and sacrifice. Similarly, political readings of Greene's texts tend to focus on novels that dramatize imperialist and postcolonial situations, while simultaneously claiming that issues of justice, representation, and political and cultural colonization are indirectly present in the religious texts as well.⁴

My own critical approach benefits from the critical insights of previous explorations of lexico-conceptual and narrative recurrences in Greene's work, while tackling the shortcomings previously sketched. On the one hand, I propose a conceptual archaeology of Greene's keywords, in order to explore the resonance of religious, political, and philosophical discourses in his idiosyncratic uses. On the other hand, I intend to overcome the political/religious bias by proposing that the nature of narrative conflict in Greene's fiction is ultimately ethical. I contend that the religious and the political are two possible answers to the same question posited by Greene's characters, which could be formulated in Kantian fashion: "What should I do?" (*Pure* 677).⁵

The search for pattern

It has become a recurrent nod among Graham Greene's critics to quote his celebrated assertion that "a ruling passion gives [...] to a shelf of novels the unity of a system" (Shuttleworth and Raven 41).⁶ Giving the

unity of a system to shelves of novels is, after all, what literary critics do. Greene, however, was quite defensive when it came to acknowledging critics' attempts to systematize his fiction. Only a few lines before, in the same interview, he said: "I agree with you, of course, when you say that there is a relationship between, let us say, Anthony Farrant in *England Made Me* and Pinkie, or Scobie, even – but they are not the same sort of person even if they are expressions of *what critics are pleased to call my fixations*" (41; emphasis added). Greene repeatedly mentioned his fear that his work was narrowly interpreted by critics on the basis of recurrent narrative patterns. Both in *Ways of Escape* (1980) (134–35) and in the series of interviews edited by Marie Françoise Allain, he expressed his anxiety over the effects this might have on his work: "In anybody's work there's always a pattern to be found. Well, I don't want to see it [...] Otherwise I think my imagination would dry up" (Allain 23). Recent critical work like Stephen K. Land's *The Human Imperative* (2008) is structured precisely around recurrent elements in Greene's work, providing readers with a sort of "morphology" in a formalist sense.⁷ Land focuses specifically on Greene's characters and on the transformations in characterization patterns through what he calls the three phases in Greene's career.⁸ The idea of pattern seemed to Greene something to escape from. Talking about the possibility of using a first-person narrator for the first time in his career, Greene observed: "Here seemed an escape from the pattern, a method I had not tried" (*Ways* 135). Indeed, as he feared, criticism of his work has endeavored to "unroll before his eyes the unchanging pattern of the carpet" (134).⁹

The kind of work developed by Land lays bare the presence of recurrent elements, precisely in the way Greene did not want to be made aware of. Considering the "all too many repetitions" (Allain 23) that make up what De Vitis calls "the overall pattern of Greene's novels" (*Graham Greene* ii), one may wonder about their nature: what narrative elements tend to constitute the "pattern in the carpet" in Greene's fiction? Characterization, a tendency toward foreign settings which has earned his work the label of "international fiction" (Couto 111), the repetition of some plot elements, a particular style some have identified with the use of cinematic techniques, or with the recreation of the "seediness" he often alluded to in his essays and travel books?¹⁰

To these, I would add another level of recurrence, constituted by his use of a specific set of terms, a reduced vocabulary, to which he resorts once and again in the attempt to define his narrative universe. Words such as "peace," "despair," "pity," "commitment," or "bargain" are so recurrent in his work that some critics have been led to point out their conceptual importance. Rarely, however, have they gone beyond the

mere observation of the lexical recurrence of a word as an index of the thematic importance of a particular topic. An early instance of this critical approach is found in Kohn (1961): "When one surveys the works of Graham Greene, one notices certain themes recurring so frequently that they are clearly central to the author. These themes are related to his primary concern for man as a moral and rational being" (Kohn 1). Twenty-five years later, Grahame Smith, in *The Achievement of Graham Greene* (1986), still discusses the main themes in Greene's fiction, such as "the fear of betrayal" (216) or characters' longing for "peace" (215), without questioning or analyzing what the terms "betrayal" and "peace" imply in Greene's fiction. Even later, still looking for patterns, Robert Hoskins sets out to explore, in his 1999 study, Greene's "obsessional themes" (xi), taking for granted once more that the lexical recurrence of specific terms is just a symptom of thematic prominence.

I consider that the recurrence of a particular set of words in Greene's work deserves deeper critical attention: to begin with, because Greene's use of the terms does not usually coincide with regular, common usage. Thus, his understanding of "pity" as enacted in *Brighton Rock*, *The Confidential Agent*, and, above all, in *The Heart of the Matter*, does not fit the dictionary definition of the word as "sympathetic sorrow for one suffering, distressed or unhappy,"¹¹ but needs to be assessed in contrast to its twin term, "compassion." As he explains in *Ways of Escape*, pity has for him a negative connotation related to the position of superiority in which the one who pities places him/herself regarding the one pitied. "Compassion," the preferred term to express a positive relation to another's suffering, is posited as the appropriate term indicating a truly ethical behavior. Understanding Greene's use of these terms is fundamental to grasp why characters like D. in *The Confidential Agent* (1939) or Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* despise themselves for their feelings of pity toward others.

Similarly, in order to avoid misreading characters like Pinkie (*Brighton Rock*), Arthur Rowe (*The Ministry of Fear*, 1943), the Whisky Priest (*The Power and the Glory*, 1940), and Querry (*A Burnt-Out Case*, 1960), it is crucial to understand Greene's peculiar usage of the term "peace." All these characters long for "peace," but they do not wish for "freedom from civil disturbance" or "a state of security or order"; nor do they seek mere "tranquility or quiet." Their desire for peace needs to be understood, within Greene's fictional universe, as opposed to action, intervention, or commitment, thus dramatizing these characters' estrangement from the communities that may exact from them some form of active engagement in their affairs.

The principal aim of this book is to develop a lexico-conceptual exploration of Greene's fiction. The first step, sketched in this introduction, is delimiting and defining the basic vocabulary structuring Greene's fictional universe. I contend, moreover, that the terms which tend to be most prominently recurrent in his work may be analyzed as structuring elements from a narratological point of view. The second step involved in my reading, therefore, is the analysis of the narrative potential of those keywords. In this sense, I broadly share David Lodge's early assessment of Greene's Catholicism as "a system of concepts, a source of situation, and a reservoir of symbols with which he can order and dramatize certain intuitions about the nature of human experience" (*Graham Greene* 6).

Individual, community, and the ethical pattern

The theoretical framework for my study of Greene's fiction emerges from a double critical stance.

First, the nature of narrative conflict in Greene's novels is ethical. Although some critical readings have emphasized the religious or political formulations of conflict in specific novels – the religious dimension being thematically emphasized in *The Power and the Glory*, the political in *The Honorary Consul* (1973), for example – it is my contention that those formulations may be subsumed under the wider scope of the ethical. My understanding of the ethical is informed, on the one hand, by the theoretical work of critics like Derek Attridge and J. Hillis Miller, who have applied Jacques Derrida's speculative engagement with ethics to the analysis of literary works. In this theoretical framework, the oppositional nature of ethical choice regarding organized forms of morality is emphasized, often expressed as a conflict between individual "calling" and communitarian law. The ethical, in the Derridean schema, is necessarily a transgression of the Law, an act of disobedience on the part of an individual, a jump into the moral void of a law that is unwritten. In Greene's novels, a recurrent storyline is created around a character whose conflict with community is expressed as the need to betray the norm that grants him permanence in such community. The double bind in which most of Greene's characters find themselves may be understood in terms of what Derrida calls "the paradox of Abraham" (*Gift* 78), a branching out of moral behavior into separate and conflicting calls for action, the call of the Law, and the excessive and transgressive call to violate the Law, a demand to take responsibility through action, a praxis "that exceeds simple conscience" (25). There is always,

in Greene's fictional world, a two-level understanding of morality: a superficial one, expressed in socially regulated behavior, and a deeper, transgressive one that exceeds the first and involves a reversal of official religious and political vocabularies – broadly coincidental with the Derridean distinction between Law and the ethical.

On the other hand, my theoretical approach to ethics partly draws on Alain Badiou's definition of the ethical. Several elements of Badiou's ethics are relevant to my reading of Greene's novels – in the first place, his understanding of ethics in universalist terms (*Ethics* 27). This ethics, in Greene as in Badiou, is defined as a *truth*, and it is understood to be universal – “indifferent to differences [...] the same for all” – eternal – “something we have always known” – and oppositional, in the sense that it opposes and is obscured by official discourses – “even if sophists of every age have always attempted to obscure its certainty” (*Ethics* 27). Behaving “ethically,” in this context, means being faithful to the event of a truth, which is made self-evident in a particular situation, making the subject conscious of the existence of something that cannot be reduced to “what there is” (41):

To be faithful to an event is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by *thinking* [...] the situation “according to” the event. And this, of course – since the event was excluded by all the regular laws of the situation – compels the subject to *invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation. (41–42)

At this point, Badiou's formulation touches Derrida's, in that both recognize the inaugural and transgressive nature of ethical action. Moreover, according to Badiou, “every truth erupts as singular” but “its singularity is immediately universalizable” (*Saint Paul* 11). The idea of a “universalizable singularity” (11) finds a sharp formulation in novels like *The Power and the Glory* or *The Heart of the Matter*, where individual characters recognize the necessity of a particular course of action – the need to become faithful to a particular truth, in Badiou's vocabulary – acknowledging the singularity of this recognition, while simultaneously recognizing its universal nature, even in the face of others' ignorance of it. In other words, in Greene's fiction, all human beings are bound to the same ethical impulses, but only his “heroes” answer the call to enact them. The idea is expressed in *The Heart of the Matter*: “This was a responsibility he shared with all human beings, but that was no comfort, for it sometimes seemed to him that he was the only one who recognized his responsibility” (109).

Second, narrative conflict of an ethical nature is articulated as a conflict between individual and community, often dramatized in the establishment of alternative, oppositional communities. Ethical impasse, as it has been sketched above, is something that happens necessarily in connection to others, in a double framework of collectivity. On the one hand, the isolation of the character with his responsibility is opposed to what Derrida would call “universal generality” of moral duty (*Gift* 66), incarnated in the institutional communities to which the character belongs (familial, professional, national). The ethical, in this schema, is dramatized as a conflict between community and individual, or specifically between communitarian morality and individual ethics. On the other hand, Greenean ethics is, as Derrida would say, following a Lévinasian approach, an ethics of the other.¹² There is always a recipient of the main character’s ethical decisions and actions, even if sometimes this connection between both remains secret (which is precisely the melodramatic element introduced in *The End of the Affair*). In this sense, Greene’s work may be said to explore the potential constitution of forms of community based on ethical action, established as alternative – often opposed – to official or institutional communities.

The analysis of such dialectical interaction between opposing models of community finds an apposite critical tool in Tönnies’ sociological distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* (17). The *Gesellschaft*, or society, would stand in Greene’s fiction for the institutionalized forms of community in which the main character has been initially entangled: family, profession, official Church, national allegiance. Once uprooted from these, the hero contacts other forms of community, represented as smaller forms of natural interaction among human beings, roughly corresponding with Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft*.¹³ These tend to be represented as pastoral communities, depicted through organicist metaphors – home, roots, blood ties – which betray an element of nostalgia for lost wholeness of a romantic kind. Meaningful, permanent integration into these communities is rare for Greene’s characters. Yet, it is in the context of the *Gemeinschaft* that a third form of communitarian interaction emerges, through acts of compassion and commitment that were impossible in the context of the *Gesellschaft*. Attention to this third form of community is almost nonexistent in criticism of Greene’s novels, which tends to remain focused on representations of the *Gemeinschaft* as the realization of a particular ideological or doctrinal position.

I intend to explore the ways in which ethics interact with communal structures in Greene’s novels. The narrative dramatization of ethical conflict finds its most complex expression in the realization

that neither *Gesellschaft* nor *Gemeinschaft* provide permanent solutions for the Greenean hero. Regarding the analysis of models of community and the potential conflict between individual and community, my research applies contemporary theories of community developed by Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben, and Roberto Esposito, among others. All of them have taken as their departure point the alleged collapse of some forms of community in the contemporary world and the search for alternative models. What their theoretical approaches have in common is a reconsideration of what a community is, drawing on Bataille's philosophical explorations of radical communities in *Inner Experience* (1954). The models of community explored in their work are non-identitarian, that is, not based on individual subjectivities sharing what is proper to them (Esposito *Communitas* 6; Blanchot *Unavowable* 65), and they tend to be codified as contingent and often ahistorical, rooted on universalist conceptions. Their articulation entails a reconsideration of notions of ethics, humanity, and human rights. This is the main reason why they seem to be particularly relevant for the analysis of a corpus in which ethical behavior, and its problematic definition regarding standard social normative behavior, seem to be a central concern.

Ethical aporias

Critics have identified his taste for paradox as one of Greene's frequent stylistic devices.¹⁴ Even the Holy Office referred to *The Power and the Glory* as "paradoxical" in its letter condemning the novel (*Ways* 86). Sunita Sinha's Sartrean reading, for instance, emphasizes the paradoxical nature of commitment in *The Comedians* (1966), according to which even non-commitment can be perceived as an act of commitment to nothing (95).¹⁵ Conflict, in his novels, tends to be dramatized in the form of a double bind, a situation in which a character's course of action is directed by contradictory claims of a moral or ethical nature, often resulting in narrative paralysis (Sinha 91). Paradox, in this context, is enacted as a moral problem, and formulated as the doubling or unfolding of the semantic field covered by a specific term into conflicting meanings. Greene's fictional dramatization of ethical conflict enacts Jacques Derrida's claim that all ethical concepts are intrinsically paradoxical: "the concepts of responsibility, of decision or of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal and aporia. Paradox, scandal and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit" (*Gift* 68). Specifically, Derrida's

understanding of ethical aporia puts it in connection to responsibility in a sense that seems crucial also for Greene: “a sort of non passive endurance of the aporia was the condition of responsibility and of decision” (*Aporias* 16). Perhaps the character who most directly embodies this articulation of ethical responsibility as inextricably linked to uncertainty is Monsignor Quixote in the 1982 novel of the same title, for whom certainty appears a nightmarish possibility that would deprive him of his faith (*Monsignor* 68–69).

The paradoxical nature of ethical articulation in Greene’s novels has been defended by Hayim Gordon in *Fighting Evil: Unsung Heroes in Graham Greene’s Fiction* (1997), where he claims that critics’ perception of a “cleavage between right and wrong and good and evil” is a sign of critical myopia (90). In order to justify his claims, Gordon repeatedly uses dictionary definitions of the terms whose meaning he is trying to fix in connection to Greene’s fiction, and in contradiction to common readings of it (66, 85–86, 122). This evinces the need to pinpoint the exact meaning of ethical terms in any discussion of Greene’s fiction.¹⁶

As has already been pointed out, Greene’s work has been interpreted in a theoretical key as a discussion of specific ethical or religious problems. In an early essay on *The End of the Affair*, Ian Gregor focuses his discussion of the text on whether it was appropriate for the novel to engage in theological debate. Gregor notes how many Catholic readers “fail to distinguish between theology and theology-in-fiction, between ‘views’ and ‘the use of views’ as artistic material” (110). Beyond Greene’s taste for theological matters on a purely speculative ground, however, lies the ultimate problem of the ethical demands made on human beings. His concern is with the difficult, often impossible, passage from thought to action. The answer to the Kantian question, “What should I do?” is never answered easily by Greene’s characters. If answering that question is a conflictive matter, and not simply the application of an ethical, moral, or religious code to human behavior on a universal basis, it is precisely because of the discontinuity between moral systems and individual action.

This line of thought leads to the field of moral philosophy, straight to Kant, first, and, closer in time to Greene himself, to Theodor W. Adorno, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone Weil, and Iris Murdoch. All of them, more or less overtly taking their cue from Kant’s discussion on the need to ground morality on universal reason, have discussed the problematic passage from moral codes of general application to individual behavior. From their contributions, an understanding of ethics as opposed to morality in terms of individual versus social behavior has emerged in

more recent theorizations. In particular, the work of Jacques Derrida, Derek Attridge, and J. Hillis Miller has traced a redefinition of ethics in terms of an opposition between the normative character of morality as codified in custom and social regulation, on the one hand, and genuine ethics, on the other hand, demanding individual acts of disobedience or rupture with previous codes. This was expressed by Derek Attridge in the following terms:

We can only continue to use terms with ethical implications like “responsibility” and “obligation” – indeed “ethics” itself – if we are prepared to make some kind of distinction between the most fundamental ethical demands, which always involve unpredictability and risk, and specific obligations governing concrete situations in a given social context, which require the greatest possible control of outcomes. To the latter, the name “morality” is often given. (126–27)

Attridge opposes the idea of risk involved in specific ethical behavior to the controlled scope of the normative and the generalized application of morality. This definition entails a double deviation from earlier articulations of morality. On the one hand, Attridge’s conception of the ethical opposes the consideration that human behavior can be regulated through convention and tradition. Codes that may be applied by all individuals in an automatic manner, without posing a challenge to individual consciousness, are not ethical, but social forms of regulation. On the other hand, it draws on an emotivist approach to ethics, as opposed to the Kantian conception of morality as grounded on universal reason. Attridge partakes of the conception, shared by Derrida among others, that the ethical cannot be abstracted into universal rational principles, but must remain on the level of particular, contingent moments of unprecedented decision born out of compassion for another’s suffering. In the ethical model one can intuitively deduce from Attridge’s words, an active decision is made, one that cannot be contained within the normative framework of social behavior nor grounded on universal rationality, and it involves the deliberate adoption of a course of action (often conflicting with morality, as Derrida’s celebrated argument on Abraham’s sacrifice in *The Gift of Death* illustrates).

The ultimate source of narrative development in Greene’s novel tends to lie within the scope of the asymmetry between what different codes demand from the individual regarding his relationship with others, and the individual’s reluctance to comply with a specific course of action. From the friction between individual and community – expressed