

A Brief Outlook on Graham Greene's Reception in France

O scurtă privire asupra receptării lui Graham Greene în Franța

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief outlook on Graham Greene's reception in France in order to analyze the author's worth as a major European literary figure. Accordingly, we have proceeded to the examination of some of the French critical studies centered on the British author's work namely Victor de Pange's monograph as well as some of the works of the French scholar Francois Gallix. Our study manages to show Graham Greene's writings fit into a specific French literary pattern.

Rezumat

Scopul acestui articol este de a oferi o scurtă privire asupra receptării lui Graham Greene în Franța pentru a avea o imagine asupra valorii și orientării literare a autorului în Europa. În consecință am examinat câteva dintre studiile critice care s-au scris în Franța referitoare la opera sciitorului britanic și anume monografia lui Victor de Pange cât și unele dintre lucrările criticului francez Francois Gallix. Studiul nostru reușește să arate că operele lui Graham Greene se încadrează în tradiția literară franceză.

Keywords: *French criticism, Graham Greene's reception, literary pattern, Francois Mauriac, Francois Gallix*

Cuvinte cheie: *Critica franceză, receptarea lui Graham Greene, model literar, Francois Mauriac, Francois Gallix*

The very fact that for the last part of his life, during the years 1966 up to 1990 the author lived in Antibes, France can be regarded as having a considerable influence on his creative life. It was in France that the author wrote his last novels and short stories out of which we mention *May We Borrow Your Husband?* which is set in the very Antibes, the small town on the French Riviera where the author used to live. Also revealing in his sense is one of his final works, the pamphlet *J'Accuse – The Dark Side of Nice* (1982), which concerns a legal matter that provoked a libel lawsuit that the author has lost.

The starting point of French critical interest in Greene came with the year 1946 when Graham Greene's novel *Brighton Rock* was serialized in the review *Poésie*. [1]. The growing interest the author subsequently received along with the publication of a large majority of his novels testifies to the fact that French critics have immediately acknowledged the value and moral profundity inherent in Graham Greene's works. Without doubt, H. A. Mason in his article *A Note on Contemporary Philosophical Literary Criticism in France* published in 1949 at the beginning of Graham Greene's literary debut in France best synthesizes the French reaction to the British author's work, claiming French critics see his worth as a literary figure because his works fit into a specific French literary philosophical pattern, more interested in meaning than in form. [2]

This is more than evident as we proceed to examine some of the monographs and studies which have appeared in France, immediately after Graham Greene's texts were available in translations. We would like to refer here to Paul Rostenne's *Graham Greene: témoin des temps tragiques* (1949) and Victor de Pange's monograph entitled *Graham Greene* which was published in 1953.

The discussion on Greene in Paul Rostenne's book highlights the author's affinity with other French writers such as Bernanos, Sartre and Celine as well as the existentialist aspects of Graham Greene's writing. In fact, much of the French criticism is centered upon comparative approaches with French writers whom critics have found as having an influence on Graham Greene's artistic development and vice-versa. This is perfectly understandable given the fact that the British author was familiar with most of the works of his French contemporaries.

Of all the French contemporary writers however, it is with Francois Mauriac that both English and as well as French critics have found Graham Greene as sharing the most similitude in both biographical as well as writing themes. It is interesting to note how Greene and Mauriac struggled both with their identity as religious men and writers having written about their childhood as the most important period of their lives from which sprang their obsessions as well as their fascination with the religions force. Like Mauriac, Greene was drawn to the exploration of sin and evil inherent in the human nature and saw the tensions between man's fallen condition and his divine grace. [3].

Many of Mauriac's novels served as examples of catholic literary aesthetic masterpieces when Graham Greene began his grasp of Christian tradition and continued representing an artistic inspiration for him as he used to discuss them in numerous articles and interviews.

What Mauriac appreciated in Graham Greene's work beyond any technical innovation is his rich Catholic aesthetic, the way in which the British author knew how to make him rediscover and reconsider his Catholic faith once more. The following statements taken from the preface of Victor de Pange's book on Graham Greene are more than revelatory in portraying the French writer's admiration for the British author:

Je découvre que je l'ai aimée pour des raisons qui ne tiennent pas à l'art du romancier. Dans Greene, c'est le chrétien, c'est le catholique qui me touche, non le technicien portant admirable d'un art que j'ai moi-même pratiqué.

[...] Ce que je trouve d'authentique dans les romans de Greene, c'est la Grâce. Son actualité consiste à être inactuel. Graham Greene aurait fait déboucher le film policier et le roman de série noire sur la Vérité que le monde ne connaît pas : voilà sa grandeur. Et cette vérité lui apparait a lui, anglais d'éducation et de tradition protestante, dans un tout autre éclairage que celui qui nous est familier a nous, catholiques français de tradition janséniste. Nous redécouvrons la foi chrétienne a travers lui ; ses réponses touchant la Grace et le salut échappent aux classements rigides de nos théologiens et de nos casuistes. Il rend à Dieu à notre égard une liberté a la fois terrible et rassurante, parce que finalement Dieu est amour et que si rien n'est possible à l'homme, tout est possible à l'éternel amour. (Foreword. Victor de Page, Graham Greene). [4]

Moreover, both Mauriac as well as Victor de Pange's considerations give us a clear idea about both the similarities as well as the differences between the French Catholic tradition and the new dimension Graham Greene provided it with. Besides the comparison between Graham Greene and Francois Mauriac to which the French critics were often drawn, Victor de Pange's work also highlights the author's resonance with the existentialist philosophy and in particular with French existentialism which was particularly influenced by Sartre's thought. His doctrine strongly influenced a current in French literature whose most prominent representative is considered the writer Albert Camus.

At the heart of French existentialism's doctrine and its literary schools lies the importance of the human choice and the absurdity of existence.

The analogies between some of Graham Greene's writings and those of the French writers Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre are not easy to overlook. The priest character in *The Power and the Glory* is very much an outsider, resembling Camus's characters while the main protagonist from *The Quiet American* can be interpreted as being confronted with the Sartrian existentialist dilemma of weighing the importance of each of his acts when he has to choose whether get involved or not into a war that doesn't concern him.

In order to understand the implications of the early French critics' reaction to Graham Greene we would like to praise their interest with regard to his work, as well as their having "the acuity of perception with regard to Greene", that has been lacking in English and American criticism.

Despite early French critic's merit in being among the firsts to uncover the writers of Graham Greene's work, the weak point of their literary endeavors is constituted specifically by the fact that they tend to fit his work into all sorts of philosophical discussions and trends specific for the French novel. However, this is not the case with recent French criticism on Graham Greene which offers critical analysis that contains some of the most significant and representative elements of Graham Greene's work.

Moving beyond early Paul Rostenne's and Victor de Penge's readings, recent French criticism which we find as most representative in the works of the French critic and scholar François Gallix, professor at the University of Sorbonne Paris, and founder of the E.R.C.L.A. [5] research centre provides a new dimension to Graham Greene's reception in this country by evincing not only similarities but also significant differences between French and English critical canons.

Professor Gallix's work is also important because it breaks new ground in the study of Graham Greene, as it continues to inspire a great deal of scholarly interest along with the Professor's recent discovery in July 2009 of an unfinished and unpublished manuscript belonging to Graham Greene, written when the author was twenty-two years old. The story discovered at *Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center* at the *University of Texas* was serialized in the British quarterly *Strand Magazine* under the title *The Empty Chair* and the reaction to it was overwhelming proving once more that Graham Greene's writings are still very much in demand. Particularly illustrative for his constant preoccupation with the British author are also the critical studies edited by Professor François Gallix, which represent the transcription of a series of conferences organized at the ERCLA Paris research centre under the heading of *The Power and the Glory – Graham Greene at the Sorbonne*.

These works gather a number of articles written by some of the most renowned French as well as English and American scholars interested in Graham Greene who reconsider the British author's masterpiece *The Power and the Glory* in light of the latest critical theories. Thus, in order to illustrate the importance of recent French critical reception, we will briefly present some of the critical analyses which contributed to the genesis of a 2007 study on Greene entitled *Plus sur Greene*. [6]

One of the most interesting views is articulated in the article entitled *The Power and the Glory – the dramatic heritage*, belonging to the critic Bernard Bergonzi who reconsiders Graham Greene's novel from the perspective of Shakespearean intertexts and Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies which Graham Greene used as devices in *The Power and the Glory* in order to present its protagonists as abstractions in the morality tradition.

Another French scholar, Catherine Miquel, analyzes the poetry of *The Power and the Glory*, using as a starting point a quotation from Baudelaire's poem *Une Charogne*. [7]. In this poem, Charles Baudelaire claims that even the most repulsive object, such as a piece of meat, in the process of corruption, can be viewed from a poetic angle. (Gallix, Plus, 19). According to the French critic, decay and seedy atmosphere in Graham Greene's novel, similar to Baudelaire's poem, can offer a poetic reading forcing the reader to look for "the crystal hidden between the carious teeth". (19).

The next analysis which caught our attention belongs to yet another French critic, Delphine Cingal who assigns serious attention to rhetoric devices and to the role of the reader in Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*. According to her, the question which rises regarding the status of the reader is whether this one identifies with the whisky priest as someone seeking desperately a way to escape, or he sees in the whisky priest the tragedy of a Christ-like figure whose fate is sealed.

Last but not least, Professor François Gallix proposes an understanding of Graham Greene articulated on his overemphasized visual writing. It also presents the way in which Greene was involved with the Seventh Art in his quality of screen-play writer and film critic, illustrating the theories according to which cinema was a source of inspiration for him.

Conclusions

Our brief examination of Graham Greene's French criticism has managed to convince us that the connection between the British author and the French literary milieu represents a vital critical aspect worth taking into consideration as it uncovers the fact that Graham Greene has received some of his most competent criticism in France.

References

[1] The choice is not surprising considering the fact that Brighton Rock is the first novel with a Catholic message and it introduces the central concept of the "appalling strangeness of the mercy of God"

[2] See also H.A. Mason, *A Note on Contemporary Philosophical Literary Criticism in France*, *Scrutiny: A Quarterly Review* vol. 16, 1949

[3] One of the most notable features the two authors share in common is the fact that they added a new dimension to the term of "Catholic writers" through their reserved attitude towards it which convinced critics of the fact that they prefer to be regarded as writers who are also Catholics

[4] „Descopăr că am iubit-o (opera n.a.) pentru motive care nu țin de arta romancierului. La Graham Greene, este creștinul, catolicul cel care mă emoționează și nu tehnicianul, chiar dacă pot să-l numesc admirabil, al unei arte pe care eu însumi am practicat-o.

[...] Ceea ce mi se pare autentic în romanele lui Greene, este Harul. Actualitatea lui consistă în a fi inactual. Graham Greene este cel care a condus filmul polițist și romanul de serie neagră la descoperirea Adevărului pe care lumea nu îl cunoaște : iată grandoarea sa. □i acest adevăr i se arată lui, englez de educație și de tradiție protestantă, într-o cu totul altă lumină decât cea care ne este nouă familiară, catolici francezi de tradiție jansenistă. Noi redescoperim credința creștină datorită lui ; răspunsurile sale pline de har și de vigoare scapă clasamentelor rigide ale teologilor și cazuiștilor noștrii. El îi redă lui Dumnezeu, în ceea ce ne privește, o libertate în același timp teribilă și liniștitoare, pentru că până la urmă Dumnezeu este iubire și dacă nu toate îi sunt permise omului, ele îi sunt permise iubirii eterne.”(my translation)

[5] ERCLA is the acronym for *Ecritures du Romain Contemporain de Langue Anglaises*

[6] More on Greene (my translation)

[7] *Une charogne* (A Carcass) is a poem by Baudelaire published in the famous volume « *Les Fleurs du mal* ».

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