Graham Greene

Why I Left... and Yet...

William Giraldi

In a 2015 essay called "Confessions of a Catholic Novelist"—about Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, and Graham Greene, and my own convulsive attachments to Catholicism—I concluded with the admission that if being a Catholic is contingent upon fealty to the supernatural and the church, I wouldn't call myself one. Since I wrote that piece I've been visited by not necessarily a recrudescence of faith but more of a recrudescence of regard for tradition and my own upbringing. I've been forced to admit that an unbelieving Catholic is a Catholic still, if his rearing in the church was arrant enough, as mine was. How do I reconcile the contradiction of an unbelieving Catholic? I don't because I can't. Contradiction is at the spine of human living, and unless one learns to digest this fact, unless one is at home in antinomy and paradox, living becomes a lunacy. William Empson: "Life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis."

A cradle Catholic with a boyhood in the church and parochial school, I rampaged into adolescence with an unignorable itch for sedition. Soon all the Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Swinburne, and Shelley did a real number on me—Shelley's *The Necessity of Atheism* had particularly seismic effects on my outlook—supplanting the gospels, the Catechism, Augustine, and Aquinas. For most of my twenties I was naggingly atheistic and antipapal; my library boasted whole yards of heresy, blasphemy by the bookshelf. I sought debates with believers and asked them to square their daily experiences with the dogmas they'd been dished by their faiths. These debates rarely ended well, mostly because I didn't know what I was doing with my end of them—youth, says Disraeli, is a blunder; I blundered more than most—and also because you can't argue religion without the emotions of believers polluting the pith of argument. Rather quickly the believer swerves from explaining a theological stance into unconsciously defending his childhood, his parents, his Aunt Eleanor, his dog—his identity in toto.

But in my early thirties, in the process of trying to develop as a prose writer, I unknowingly began pulling from the Catholic myth, pageantry, and rituals of my youth, and before long became aware of a debt I had to those Catholic writers and thinkers who'd helped carpenter my own sensibility as a novelist and essayist. As I outlined in "Confessions of a Catholic Novelist," this awareness was spurred by the late D. G. Myers, a conservative Jew and fierce literary intellect who wrote about my work in *Commentary* magazine. Knowing almost nothing of my history, Myers detected the stamp of Catholicism everywhere throughout my two novels. His astute critical perceptions, and our warm correspondence that evolved from them, nudged me into acknowledging what I had denied for a decade. Cancer killed Myers in 2014 (he was only sixty-two) and my grief attained new focus when I understood that I had a duty to him to mine my Catholic past and further enact what he found valuable in my work.

This new pitch of mind also has much to do with being the father of three small sons—they daily, almost hourly, transport me back to my own boyhood—but literature has been, as with nearly everything else in my life, the guiding potency here. Because I want nothing to do with hocus-pocus, because dogma and decrees are closed to real con-

test, and because corporations make me glum (the Vatican is, among other things, a corporation), Catholicism is for me a literary affair: drama, poetry, myth, tradition. Homilies and hymnals, liturgies and sermons done right, the *Benedictus*, the *Magnificat*, the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*: these are literature no less than *The Iliad* is. The sermons of John Donne (an ex-Catholic) and Gerard Manley Hopkins (a convert) are integral to comprehending their poetical programs. F. R. Leavis once pointed out that you cannot spend very long with Hopkins's verse before having to deal with his faith—and, I should add, with his austere vocation as priest.

Garry Wills, in *Why I Am a Catholic*, puts it plainly enough for himself: "I am a Catholic because of the creed." But I am a Catholic—in culture, in imagination, in storytelling, in my specific grammar of understanding—because of Dante and Hopkins and Chesterton, Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh and Simone Weil, because I can't undo the determining effects their work had on my notion of what literature and thought should be. Nor can I undo my upbringing and the influence it still exerts on my sensibility.

The conservative Catholic journalist George Weigel puts it this way (the italics are his): "While Catholicism is a body of beliefs and a way of life, *it is also an optic, a way of seeing things, a distinctive perception of reality*." In other words, Catholicism, like literature, is an aesthetic commitment, regardless of your level of piety, of whether or not you're partial to the papacy or the creed. The Catholic, says Chesterton, "knows there is something in everything. But he is moved by the more impressive fact that he finds everything in something." That works as a pretty good description of the novelist, too. Augustine, taking a cue from Corinthians, makes a similar distinction: "The intellectual cognition of eternal things is one thing, the rational cognition of temporal things another; and no one doubts that the former is to be preferred to the latter."

Even as a boy, I never believed in an Iron Age Hebrew deity who gives a damn about our mammalian plight. When Orwell, writing about Waugh, remarked that one really can't be Catholic and grown-up at the same time, he was getting at the wild implausibility at the hub of Christianity. But "God" and "Christ" are, above all, terms of poetry, of allegory and metaphor and myth. Flannery O'Connor once famously snapped at Mary McCarthy when McCarthy said that the Eucharist is only a symbol: "Well, if it's only a symbol, to hell with it." Reluctant as I normally am to dissent from O'Connor, I have to side with McCarthy there. Religion not only traffics in symbols, it survives by them, and to mistake the figurative for the factual or allegory for history is to mistake much indeed. But mouthy unbelievers who find, say, Original Sin barbaric and absurd are missing the point on purpose: whatever else it is, Original Sin is most potently a metaphor for the inherent psychological wackiness of our kind, all those pesky hormonal urges that make us batty. Of course we are born blighted: evolution by natural selection is a malfunctioning process. Never mind your soul: just look at all those problems with your teeth, your back, your knees.

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My new regard for the artistic possibilities of my Catholic past coincided with my rising certainty that unless a novel sets out to confront the sublime, the sacred, the state of the soul—and I mean *soul* in both the sacral and the secular sense—the novelist is not firing on all eight cylinders. If fiction writers are content to fashion only worn simulacrums of reality, more domestic dramas—the marriage is shot, the bills are due—then they're barring themselves from an inner cosmos it is art's job to encounter. The clergy don't have exclusive say over the sacred; it is the province of writers and poets too.

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