The Narrator of *Brighton Rock*

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On re-reading *Brighton Rock* after an interval of over thirty years, I found myself being preoccupied by the narrative method. This would be partly a residual effect of the 'thriller', the mode in which the novel began, with Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* as Greene's exemplar of the genre. In later years Greene was apt to shrug off the 'thriller' element, claiming that 'the first fifty pages of *Brighton Rock* are all that remain of the detective story',[1] but of course the thriller 'plot' continues to direct the narrative, through the bet on Black Boy, the chance photographing of Spicer, and Ida's encounters with Cubitt, Colleoni and Dallow. *Brighton Rock* is still a detective novel to the point when Pinkie plunges over the cliff, although by then we are looking to other outcomes from the narrative. The book that had been styled 'An Entertainment' on the title-page of the first Penguin edition had been removed from that category by its author by the time of the Collected Edition of 1970.[2]

My re-reading of *Brighton Rock* came from its inclusion in a course I was teaching. I discovered that the texts which the students had were different from mine. The lawyer called Drewitt in the original text had now become Prewitt. On Pinkie's first visit to the Cosmopolitan, the 'little Jewess' who 'sniffed at him bitchily and then talked him over with another little Jewess on a settee' (p.63) had become 'a little bitch' who 'sniffed at him and then talked him over with another little bitch on a settee' (p.62), and Mr Colleoni had changed from 'a small Jew with a neat round belly' (p.63) to being 'small with a neat round belly' (p.61), with an 'old

1 Introduction to *Brighton Rock* in the Collected Edition (Heinemann & The Bodley Head, London, 1970), p.x.

2 *Brighton Rock* was first published in 1938, and first issued in Penguin in 1943. Penguin editions after 1970 are based on the Collected Edition (omitting the Introduction). All page-references in this paper are to the revised Penguin text, unless otherwise specified.

Italian face' (p.65) instead of an 'old Semitic face' (p.66). When Pinkie is attacked at the racecourse, he sees 'faces ringing him all round' (p.106) instead of 'Semitic faces ringing him all round' (p.107), and when Colleoni is observed by Ida Arnold at the Pompadour Boudoir he is 'an elderly man in glacé shoes' (p.144), not 'an elderly Jew in glacé shoes' (p.147).

This is only of passing interest; what struck me more on re-reading was the role of the narrator in the story. Greene has said that in his early writing his long studies of Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* taught him the importance of 'point of view', even to the neglect of physical action.[3] He also confessed to a feeling of 'spying on' his characters, so much in the role of an outside observer that he could become visually fatigued.[4]

Yet it is hard for Greene to remain detached. How are we to take the account of 'the very last of Fred', when at the end of Part One Ida comes out on to the street after the funeral service:

> She came out of the crematorium, and there from the twin towers above her head fumed the very last of Fred, a thin stream of grey smoke from the ovens. People passing up the flowery suburban road looked up and noted the smoke; it had been a busy day at the furnaces. Fred dropped in indistinguishable grey ash on the pink blossoms: he became part of the smoke nuisance over London, and Ida wept. (p.36)

This is not from Ida's point of view ('it had been a busy day at the furnaces'), but from the narrator's, as observer of the scene. It is detached, but only in the way in which irony is detached: there is an attitude informing it none the less. Is it a cruel irony, such as we encounter in the last sentence of the book? Probably not, because Fred's becoming part of the smoke nuisance over London seems a consequence of his bad taste in being cremated, or of becoming part of the

3 See *A Sort of Life* (1971: repr. Penguin Books, 1972), p.144.

4 Marie-Françoise Allain, *The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene* (1983), pp.131-2.

accompanying religious service, in the first place:

> 'We believe,' he [the clergyman] said, glancing swiftly along the smooth polished slipway towards the New Art doors through which the coffin would be launched into the flames, 'we believe that this our brother is already at one with the One.' He stamped his words like little pats of butter with his personal mark. 'He has attained unity. We do not know what that One is with whom (or with which) he is now at one. We do not retain the old medieval beliefs in glassy seas and golden crowns. Truth is beauty and there is more beauty for us, a truth-loving generation, in the certainty that our brother is at this moment reabsorbed in the universal spirit.' He touched a little buzzer, the New Art doors opened, the flames flapped and the coffin slid smoothly down into the fiery sea. The doors closed, the nurse rose and made for the door, the clergyman smiled gently from behind the slipway, like a conjurer who has produced his nine hundred and fortieth rabbit without a hitch. (p.35)

This is narrative offered as observation, which is at the same time commentary, if not judgement.

The cremation episode is in this typical of Greene's method. The narrative immediately continues: 'It was all over. Ida squeezed out with difficulty a last tear into a handkerchief scented with Californian Poppy' (p.35). The 'last tear' squeezed out with difficulty is an indication that Ida's grief is superficial, though we are to be told in a paragraph or two that 'Ida wept'. We suspend judgement on the handkerchief scented with Californian Poppy at this stage, although Ida's choice of perfume will become significant later. As she distances herself from the clergyman's idea of heaven and also from ideas of life on 'the upper plane', the analysis is offered as dispassionate:

> Flowers, Ida thought scornfully; that wasn't life. Life was sunlight on brass bedposts, Ruby port, the leap of the heart when the outsider you have backed passes the post and the colours go bobbing up. Life was poor Fred's mouth pressed down on hers in the taxi, vibrating with the engine along the parade. What was the sense of dying if it made you babble of flowers? Fred didn't want flowers, he wanted – and the enjoyable distress she had felt in Henekey's returned. She took

> life with a deadly seriousness: she was prepared to cause any amount of unhappiness to anyone in order to defend the only thing she believed in. (p.36)

The last sentence is delivered in the form of a judgement, but I think that we are meant to take it at this stage as a definition of what Ida is like. This is one of a number of passages analysing and explaining Ida: Ida as 'a sticker' (p.37), Ida remarking to no one in particular 'It's a good life' (p.72), Ida with the mind that cannot entertain the thought of death ('Her mind couldn't take that track; she could go only a short way before the points automatically shifted and set her vibrating down the accustomed line, the season ticket line marked by desirable residence and advertisements of cruises' – p.144). Overheard singing in the bar, Ida is described by Hale as 'A cheery soul' (p.8). Could Patrick White possibly have appropriated this phrase for the lethal Miss Docker?

The efforts to explain Ida – which become increasingly critical in tone – must be set beside the effort to delineate Pinkie. He is not Pinkie at the beginning, but 'the Boy', first seen in 'a shabby smart suit, the cloth too thin for much wear, a face of starved intensity, a kind of hideous and unnatural pride' (p.7). As Ida is 'placed' by the copies of *The Good Companions* and *Sorrell and Son* on her bookshelves,[5] he is 'placed' as the archetypal boy of Wordsworth's *Immortality* ode, with the difference that 'He trailed the clouds of his own glory after him: hell lay about him in his infancy' (p.68).

The first statements of the narrator about Pinkie tend towards the oracular. 'When you met him face to face he looked older, the slatey eyes were touched with the annihilating eternity from which he had come and to which he went' (p.21). The phrase 'annihilating eternity' is not in

5 J. B. Priestley had threatened a libel action against *Stamboul Train*, believing himself to be aimed at in the character of Mr Savory. Greene wrote in *A Sort of Life* 'I had never met Mr Priestley and had been unable to read *The Good Companions* which had brought him immense popularity three years before' (p.155). *Sorrell and Son* was a popular novel by Warwick Deeping.

Pinkie's vocabulary: this is the narrator's point of view. It is the same when we are told 'He fell asleep at once: it was like the falling of a shutter, the pressure of the bulb which ends a time exposure. He had no dreams. His sleep was functional' (p.60). These oracular pronouncements deflect for a time the sense of bias that creeps into the accounts of Ida, and to some extent of Rose.

There are two other features that distinguish the Pinkie narrative. 'The annihilating eternity from which he had come and to which he went' – does the tense of 'went' apply to someone whose history is already over? Pinkie is again spoken of in the past tense when he is confronted by the manageress at Snow's, who suspects him of stealing from the bottles in the cellar. '"If you weren't so young", she said, "I'd call the police". He said with the only flash of humour he ever showed: "I'd have an alibi"' (p.114). (His alibi is that he has been attending to the death of Spicer.) In the novel's time scheme there is still scope for other flashes of humour, but this is designated the only one.

In a number of later comments on *Brighton Rock*, Greene reiterated a view of Pinkie as 'a character possessed by evil', or 'a creature ... worthy of hell'.[6] Nelson Place may have contributed to the making of him, but still fundamentally 'Pinkie is a monster. Horror is there in this novel; one can set a finger on it'.[7] Greene seems to adopt Pinkie's boastful view of himself, that 'Perhaps when they christened me, the holy water didn't take' (p.127).

The presentation of Pinkie is the presentation of someone who courts damnation, and this touches the imagination of the narrator as nothing else does. '"Of course there's Hell"', Pinkie insists to Rose. '"Flames and damnation", he said with his eyes of the dark shifting water ... "torments"' (p.52). As he watches Rose sign the marriage register, he sees

6 See *Yours etc.: Letters to the Press* (1989), p.7, and Marie-Françoise Allain, *The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene* (1983), p.157.

7 *Conversations with Graham Greene*, p.71.

the ceremony as buying 'his temporal safety in return for two immortalities of pain. He had no doubt whatever that this was mortal sin, and he was filled with a kind of gloomy hilarity and pride' (p.169). It might seem to the reader that Pinkie's greater fear is that he might yield to human feeling – music has the power to infiltrate his defences – and that the continuance of the marriage would condemn him to a life of unbearable human contact, which any child would prolong even more unbearably. But this aspect is always subordinated to the theological one, to Pinkie as a creature worthy of hell, and this gives him a paradoxical splendour.

Ida Arnold, reading Warwick Deeping and consulting the ouija board, cannot compete. Greene has noted that adopting the point of view of a given character 'doesn't totally exclude the author, whose viewpoint may emerge in a metaphor, a comparison or what-have-you'.[8] Ida is subjected to a barrage of metaphors and comparisons. As she returns home from Fred's funeral, Ida's thought processes are likened to the automatic movements of a neon sign. 'Ida's mind worked with the simplicity and the regularity of a sky sign: the ever-tipping glass, the ever-revolving wheel, the plain question flashing on and off: "Do you use Forhams for the Gums?"' (p.37). She moves across the restaurant towards Rose 'like a warship going into action, a warship on the right side in a war to end wars, the signal flags proclaiming that every man would do his duty' (p.121). Sitting opposite Dallow in the tearoom, Ida 'carried her air of compassion and comprehension about her like a rank cheap perfume' (p.233). 'Cheap' is the epithet which pursues her: 'cheap drama and pathos' (p.32), 'cheap port' (p.72), and 'cheap perfume' – Californian Poppy.

The presentation of Rose is harder to characterize. The metaphors and comparisons which qualify her point of view are more sparing, and less revealing of the narrator's attitude. Thus the account of Rose arriving at the registry office:

> She had tricked herself up for the wedding, discarded the hat he

8 *Conversations with Graham Greene*, p.131.

> hadn't liked: a new mackintosh, a touch of powder and cheap lipstick. She looked like one of the small gaudy statues in an ugly church: a paper crown wouldn't have looked odd on her or a painted heart: you would pray to her but you couldn't expect an answer. (p.166)

This passes judgement on Rose, but there is a touch of compassion in it, extending to the 'cheap lipstick'. The description does not have the animus that can enter into the descriptions of Ida. When Ida forces her way into Rose's room, assuring her that her infatuation with Pinkie will pass after 'a bit of experience', the metaphor is more extended:

> The Nelson Place eyes stared back at her without understanding. Driven to her hole the small animal peered out at the bright and breezy world; in the hole were murder, copulation, extreme poverty, fidelity and the love and fear of God, but the small animal had not the knowledge to deny that only in the glare and open world outside was something which people called experience. (p.123)

The image of the trapped animal is the narrator's interpretation of Rose's predicament, but no active dislike enters into this judgement. The emphasis is on Rose as bewildered, perhaps Rose as victim – her eyes staring back 'without understanding'.

Overriding these discriminations is Greene's fascination with the conjunction of 'murder, copulation, extreme poverty, fidelity and the love and fear of God'. These are almost the values by which everything else in the novel is measured. Rose allies herself with Pinkie on the ground that they can go together to the everlasting flames, like Molly Carthew; a privilege which is denied to Ida: '"Oh, she won't burn. She couldn't burn if she tried". She might have been discussing a damp Catherine wheel. "Molly Carthew burnt. She was lovely".' (pp.113-4). Pinkie assures Rose, just before the wedding, 'It'll be no good going to confession ever again – as long as we're both alive', speaking with 'bitter and unhappy relish' (p.167). An authorial presence may be detected in the 'bitter ... relish', as in the 'damp Catherine wheel', but there is no irony playing over these

various affirmations: this is all in earnest.

To the reader of the 1990s *Brighton Rock* has become something of a 'period' novel, as the deleted references to Jewishness may attest. Has its theology also become part of the time warp? Do Rose and Pinkie appear to readers in the 1990s as captives to some set of primitive beliefs, with a God intent on administering eternal pain, but offering the reprieve of a split-second repentance as the murderer plunges over the cliff? Some forty years after writing *Brighton Rock*, Greene offered the opinion: 'I don't think that Pinkie was guilty of mortal sin because his actions were not committed in defiance of God, but arose out of the conditions to which he had been born'.[9] This is to see Pinkie as to some extent not a responsible agent, but a casualty of his upbringing.

This conception seems to be endorsed, if only fitfully, as Pinkie driving towards Peacehaven intones *Dona nobis pacem*, but decides that peace is not for him:

> It didn't matter anyway ... he wasn't made for peace, he couldn't believe in it. Heaven was a word: hell was something he could trust. A brain was only capable of what it could conceive, and it couldn't conceive what it had never experienced; his cells were formed of the cement school-playground, the dead fire and the dying man in the St Pancras waiting-room, his bed at Frank's and his parents' bed. An awful resentment stirred in him – why shouldn't he have had his chance like all the rest, seen his glimpse of heaven if it was only a crack between the Brighton walls ... He turned as they went down to Rottingdean and took a long look at her as if she might be it – but the brain couldn't conceive – he saw a mouth which wanted the sexual embrace, the shape of breasts demanding a child. (p.228)

This is a determinist view of Pinkie, his brain cells formed of the cement school-playground, so that his mind cannot conceive of the idea of Heaven.

9 Marie-Françoise Allain, *The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene* (1983), pp.158-9. And again: 'The effect of poverty on Pinkie and Rose makes *Brighton Rock* a social novel as much as a so-called "Catholic" one' (p.88).

But does it extend to the ideas which Pinkie's brain cells do conceive of, the ideas with which he has been indoctrinated by his upbringing? The narrator can delineate the muddle of platitudes which for Ida pass as a 'philosophy' (p.76), but does not seem to present the beliefs which Rose and Pinkie act upon as what passes for them as religion. With the fading of the 'thriller' element in *Brighton Rock*, it developed into an analysis of 'right and wrong' on one side against 'good and evil' on the other, and however spiritually deprived Rose and Pinkie may be, the narrative leaves little doubt of the superiority of their side of the argument.

Brighton Rock is a classic instance of the necessity in interpretation to distinguish the author – especially an author looking back on his work after half a century – from the narrator. Commenting on an interviewer's description of Pinkie as 'the very incarnation of evil', Greene said

> I tried, as a sort of intellectual exercise, to present the reader with a creature whom he could accept as worthy of hell. But in the end, you remember, I introduced the possibility that he might have been saved 'between the stirrup and the ground'. I wanted to instil in the reader's mind a fundamental doubt of hell.[10]

And again:

> God's justice is not like that of a judge ... God's justice derives from total knowledge. That is the reason why I don't believe in hell: if God exists – I'm not convinced He does – He is omniscient; if He is omniscient, I can't bring myself to imagine that a creature conceived by Him can be so evil as to merit eternal punishment. His grace must intervene at some point.[11]

10 *Conversations with Graham Greene*, p.157. The 'stirrup and the ground' comes from William Camden's *Remains* (1605), in an epitaph for a gentleman who broke his neck in falling off his horse:

> Betwixt the stirrup and the ground
> Mercy I asked, mercy I found.

11 *Conversations with Graham Greene*, p.161.

How does the narrative of *Brighton Rock* 'instil in the reader's mind a fundamental doubt of hell', or show the exercise of God's grace? These notions are simply not given enough intellectual play in the novel. Hell is given status on the 'good and evil' side of the equation, and there is some faltering discussion of 'between the stirrup and the ground' by Pinkie and Rose. Rose is too unreflecting a character – 'without understanding' – to explore these issues, and her contemptuous view of Ida as someone who 'couldn't burn' is like the utterance of someone programmed in a particular way.[12] She embraces the sin of despair 'to show Them that They couldn't damn him without damning her too',[13] but at the last moment throws the revolver away – and later 'repents' of having done so.

When Pinkie takes refuge from Colleoni's men in the garage, believing that Spicer is now dead, he briefly contemplates 'making his peace', but finds that 'it was impossible to repent of something which made him safe' (p.109). The prospect of 'the tiny dark confessional box' is deferred: 'He was head of Kite's gang, this was a temporary defeat. One confession, when he was safe, to wipe out everything' (p.209). On the drive to Peacehaven, Pinkie is still calculating that he'll have the next sixty years in which to repent once the murders are complete, but again he dismisses the thought, in the conviction (as we have seen) that heaven is not for him. 'Heaven was a word: hell was something he could trust' (p.228). Although the author may make the point that 'in the end ... he might have been saved "between the stirrup and the ground",' the narrator gives no hint of this outcome:

12 George Orwell, reviewing *The Heart of the Matter* in 1948, was to remark that for Greene 'Hell is a sort of high-class night club, entry to which is reserved for Catholics only, since the others, the non-Catholics, are too ignorant to be held guilty, like the beasts that perish'. Orwell detected an accompanying assumption that 'ordinary human decency is of no value'. See *Collected Essays* (Secker & Warburg, London, 1968), iv. 441.

13 This is the original reading (Penguin, p.231); in the revised text 'Them' and 'They' are no longer capitalized (p.228).

> 'Come on, Dallow', he said, 'you bloody squealer', and put his hand up. Then she couldn't tell what happened: glass – somewhere – broke, he screamed and she saw his face – steam. He screamed and screamed, with his hands up to his eyes; he turned and ran; she saw a police baton at his feet and broken glass. He looked half his size, doubled up in appalling agony: it was as if the flames had literally got him and he shrank – shrank into a schoolboy flying in panic and pain, scrambling over a fence, running on.
>
> 'Stop him', Dallow cried: it wasn't any good: he was at the edge, he was over: they couldn't even hear a splash. It was as if he'd been withdrawn suddenly by a hand out of any existence – past or present, whipped away into zero – nothing. (p.243)

This impassivity extends to the coda, which is concerned with Rose's non-confession to the old priest. The balance of narrative and commentary is difficult to strike. Rose does not want absolution: 'It's *that* I repent. Not going with him ... I want to be like him – damned' (p.245). She would by now have found the courage to kill herself, but for the fear 'that somewhere in that obscure countryside of death they might miss each other' (p.245). The 'obscure countryside of death' is the narrator's translation of Rose's thoughts. Although it is she who hears 'the exasperated women creak their chairs outside waiting for confession' (p.245), it is he who interprets the noise: 'Outside the chairs creaked again and again – people impatient to get their own repentance, absolution, penance finished for the week' (p.246). The old priest has a cold, a whistling voice, and smells of eucalyptus. This does not I think devalue what is going on, as had been the case with the disposal of Fred. It may point to the pitifulness of it all, or it may be insisting that faith is independent of the seediness of outward circumstance.

While it is not then necessarily a criticism that the spiritual advice which the priest offers is mechanical or even fatuous, it may be significant that neither party to the interview really enters into the mind of the other. The priest's advice is first directed to Rose's situation, not Pinkie's. To seek to be damned, in order to share the fate of another, has a saintly precedent: one cannot conceive of the 'appalling ...

strangeness of the mercy of God' (p.246). The priest shivers and sneezes. '"We must hope and pray", he said, "hope and pray"' (p.246). The repetition suggests the falling back on a well worn formula; between the third and fourth repetitions, the narrator will interpolate 'mechanically'. But Rose has already taken his next remark ('The Church does not demand that we believe any soul is cut off from mercy' – p.246) as applying to Pinkie, and counters it with the claim that as he was a Catholic, he knew he was damned. When the priest replies to the effect that as a Catholic is more capable of evil, he may be in a special situation (*Corruptio optimi est pessima*) there is no indication that Rose understands what he means. The priest reaches for a conventional consolation ('If he loved you, surely ... that shows there was some good' – p.246), and although this is mistaken, it sets Rose's train of thought on the possible baby, whom the priest then sees as a future saint, praying for his father.

Rose goes out into the street as Ida had from Fred's funeral, full of a new resolve. She believes that 'the worst horror' is now over, the horror of returning to her life as though the Boy had never existed. But of course the worst horror, the message left on the gramophone record, still awaits her:

> He had existed and would always exist. She had a sudden conviction that she carried life, and she thought proudly: Let them get over that if they can; let them get over that. She turned out on to the front opposite the Palace Pier and began to walk firmly away from the direction of her home towards Frank's. There was something to be salvaged from that house and room, something else they wouldn't be able to get over – his voice speaking a message to her: if there was a child, speaking to the child. 'If he loved you', the priest had said, 'that shows ...' She walked rapidly in the thin June sunlight towards the worst horror of all. (p.297)

The narrator has the last word, as he had in describing Pinkie 'whipped away into zero – nothing'. This is hardly the way to instil in the reader's mind a fundamental doubt of hell, or to show the mercy of God. The most that can be

salvaged from the conclusion is that hope may spring afresh, even in the form of a delusion. 'If he loved you', the priest had said; 'if there is a child', Rose thinks: the hope is no more than tentative, and the horror that Rose walks rapidly to meet will show it to be treacherous.

The ambiguities of the narrative persist to the end, suggesting that it may be wrong to look for too much consistency in the narrator. Do the fluctuations and contradictions in his point of view come to enact the issues of the novel? Greene expressed his own ambivalence towards *Brighton Rock* in saying 'it began as a detective story and continued, I am sometimes tempted to think, as an error of judgement'. He went on to describe it as 'perhaps ... the best I ever wrote – a sad thought after more than thirty years'.[14]

14 Introduction to the Collected Edition, pp.vii, xii-xiii.