

OUR MAN AT THE MOVIES

The Pleasure Dome by Graham Greene

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"Call me Ishmael!" One can't help but wonder whether this most famous opening sentence in all of modern literature flew to the mind of Melville like Archibald MacLeish's finches or whether it is a piece of rhetoric polished like the jewel it is, or should I say, the *music* that it is: it is indeed the rhythm of the V (for Victory?) in the Morse Code or the famous strains of Beethoven's Fifth—da, da, da, DAH! It is not only dramatic but sets the mood and the tone of the long novel that follows, and that is surely its chief function. Most of my favorite novels by my favorite writers (especially those of this century) have similar openings that the writer must have carefully written—and re-written. A cursory glance at books in my library provides the following:

We are talking of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child.¹

If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog.²

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins.³

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.⁴

She was so deeply imbedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise.⁵

Extending this to biography, I am impressed with Graham Greene's "If

I had known it, the whole future must have lain all the time along those Berkhamsted streets." The ring of that is pure Greene. One may venture to say that if we include the whole opening paragraph, Greene's in *Travels with My Aunt* is the most efficient in all of contemporary fiction insofar as putting us immediately into the story:

I met my Aunt Augusta for the first time in more than half a century at my mother's funeral. My mother was approaching eighty-six when she died, and my aunt was some eleven or twelve years younger. I had retired from the bank two years before with an adequate pension and a silver handshake. There had been a take-over by the Westminster and my branch was considered redundant. Everyone thought me lucky, but I found it difficult to occupy my time. I have never married, I have always lived quietly, and, apart from my interest in dahlias, I have no hobby. For those reasons I found myself agreeably excited by my mother's funeral.

Where did this clear, clean-cut, hard-as-diamond style originate? In his autobiography (which only takes us up to the success of his first published novel) he credits much to having been a sub-editor on the *London Times*:

And while the young writer is spending these amusing and unexacting hours, he is learning lessons valuable to his own craft. He is removing the clichés of reporters; he is compressing a story to the minimum length possible without ruining its effect. A writer with a sprawling style is unlikely to emerge from such an apprenticeship. It is the opposite training to the penny-a-liner.⁶

A few pages later he adds (the italics are mine):

...Now when I write, I put down on the page a mere skeleton of a novel—*nearly all my revisions are in the nature of additions*, of second thoughts to make the bare bones live—but in those days to revise was to prune and prune and prune. I was much tempted, perhaps because of my admiration for the Metaphysical poets, by

exaggerated similes and my wife became an adept at shooting them down.⁷

He ascribes credit for this spare style, too, to the study of Robert Louis Stevenson's works:

...Excitement is simple: excitement is a situation, a single event. It mustn't be wrapped up in thoughts, similes, metaphors. A simile is a form of reflection, but excitement is of the moment when there is no time to reflect. Action can only be expressed by a subject, a verb and an object, perhaps a rhythm—little else. Even an adjective slows the pace or tranquilizes the nerve. I should have turned to Stevenson to learn my lesson: "It came all of a sudden when it did, with a rush of feet and a roar, and then a shout from Alan, and the sound of blows and someone crying as if hurt. I looked back over my shoulder, and saw Mr. Shuan in the doorway crossing blades with Alan." No similes or metaphors there, not even an adjective. But I was too concerned with "the point of view" to be aware of simpler problems, to know that the sort of novel I was trying to write, unlike a poem, was not made with words but with movement, action, character. Discrimination in one's words is certainly required, but not love of one's words—that is a form of self-love, a fatal love which leads a young writer to the excesses of Charles Morgan and Lawrence Durrell, and, looking back to this period of my life, I can see that I was in danger of taking *their* road...⁸

Though we are not aware at this point whether Mr. Greene will honor us with a continuation of his autobiography, a partial account of further adventures most assuredly lies in the volume of his movie criticism, *The Pleasure Dome* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), which also has much to suggest about the distillation of his prose, and, almost like a window to his mind, allows all of us amateur psychologists to make wider judgments on Greene the man, based on his lists of likes and dislikes than even his excellent (but partial) autobiography allows.

Greene, who had been film critic of a literary magazine at Oxford, was movie critic for *The Spectator* and *Night and Day* from 1935 through 1940 (on the latter, Elizabeth Bowen was theatre critic, Evelyn

Waugh chief book reviewer!). During this period when he was at work on *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory*, he watched more than four hundred films, reporting on them almost weekly in a very limited space indeed: an important film such as Chaplin's *Modern Times* got one of the longer reviews—all of four paragraphs. Distillation? Yes. A *collection* of opening sentences, of key sentences? Yes. It is hardly presumptuous to imagine that writing such compressed reviews, a sort of continuation of his sub-editing on the *Times*, further slimmed down the words and rhetoric of Mr. Greene, and very likely, too, increased his use of irony (of which there is so LITTLE in the autobiography although, of course, that was written years later in retrospect). There wasn't too much to admire in most of the films so he told his impressions quickly—and yet with the ironic point of view that also soon became his trademark. If the *movie* couldn't entertain, it was still his duty to entertain us in telling us so! He early reveals his taste. In a 1935 double review of a serious German film, *Der Schimmelreiter* and *Star of Midnight*, a glossy Hollywood murder mystery, he definitely prefers the latter:

Der Schimmelreiter is a film which can be confidently recommended to the middle-aged...it cannot meet such a film as *Star of Midnight* on equal terms because it represents a quite different conception of art, sailing majestically like an Armada galleon through the fleet of bright, agile, intelligent films, sniped at and harassed and unable to reply...but of a film one expects something more agile: a speed which cannot be attained on the stage or in a novel. *Star of Midnight*, a light, quick, sophisticated comedy...has no content which one would trouble to read in a novel or to praise in a play. It is all suavity and amusement, pistol-shots and cocktails; but I am uncertain whether the Victorian profundity of the German film has any more to offer, that there is really more behind the whiskers than behind the polish. And this genre of humorous detective films...has no superiors in streamlined craftsmanship.⁹

"A speed which cannot be attained on the stage or in a novel"? One

wonders whether or not Mr. Greene made a definite *attempt* to do so, using this particular film genre as a model. Interestingly, Greene is an early admirer of Perry Mason (at least the cinematic one):

...Detection is almost necessarily the weakest part of a detective film; what we do get in the Perry Mason films is a more vivid sense of life than in most detective stories, the quality we get in some of Mr. David Frome's novels, in all of Mr. Dashiell Hammett's, and in a few of the early works of Miss Sayers. Perry Mason is my favorite film detective; he is curiously little known, perhaps because his films as "second features", are usually not shown to the Press. *The Case of the Lucky Legs* is an admirable film...Perry Mason is a hard-drinking and not very scrupulous lawyer. He owes something to the character established by Mr. William Powell: there is the same rather facetious badinage with a woman assistant, but he is, I think, a more genuine creation. Mr. Powell is a little too immaculate, his wit is too well turned just as his clothes are too well made, he drinks hard but only at the best bars; he is rather like an advertisement of a man-about-town in *Esquire*...I find the cadaverous, not very well-dressed Perry Mason [Warren William] more real in his seedy straw hat with his straggly moustache; one does not find him only in the best bars; he is by no means irresistible to women; his background is the hiss of soda rather than the clink of ice. He is far more likely on the face of it to be a successful detective than Mr. Powell's character because he belongs to the same class as his criminals...¹⁰

I hope I have already established that the book is FUN. It is filled with delicious nuggets that could have been ored gleefully at the original reading four decades ago but which now, in retrospect, are pure gold. And the price of gold is UP!

In a review containing an irony so scathing it has only been imitated unsuccessfully elsewhere, Mr. Greene first lulls us with a touch of childhood, perhaps a universal autobiography:

Mr. Cecil de Mille's evangelical films are the nearest equivalent today to the glossy German colour prints which sometimes

decorated mid-Victorian Bibles. There is the same complete lack of a period sense, the same stuffy horsehair atmosphere of beards and whiskers, and, their best quality, a childlike eye for details which enabled one to spend so many happy minutes spying a new lamb among the rocks, an unobtrusive dove or a mislaid shepherd.

The much-imitated irony (the film is *The Crusades*):

Neither of the two principal players, Miss Loretta Young and Mr. Henry Wilcoxon, really gets a chance in this film. The programme says all there is to be said about them. Mr. Wilcoxon is "six feet two inches tall, weighs 190 pounds. He was nicknamed 'Biff' as a child." Miss Young "is five feet three and weighs 105 pounds!" The information is not as irrelevant as it sounds, for the acting can roughly be judged in terms of weight. Mr. Wilcoxon leads over the hairy hermit, played by Mr. C. Aubrey Smith, by six pounds, and Miss Katherine de Mille, who has an agreeably medieval face, as Alice of France beats Miss Young by ten pounds.¹¹

"Movement, action, character." In films, too, essentially this is what Greene sought. Anything that impeded movement or the action, anything that made character false, had to brook Mr. Greene's scorn. The veneer of Art, the false pomposity of those who hid their inadequacies behind the facade of Art gain nothing but scorn. Singers seem especially vulnerable to Mr. Greene's ire. The singer he likes best is the one who doesn't sing (and in 1976 I am tempted to add that, yes, that would make it much more easy to accept a Wada Akiko, an Aoe Mina, a Mori Shinichi):

Miss Gladys Swarthout is the latest singer from the Metropolitan Opera House to "go movie" and to my mind, which cares little for music, the most agreeable. *Rose of the Rancho* is a very long way indeed from being a good film, but at least it is without the bogus seriousness, the artiness, the pomposity of Miss Grace Moore's and Miss Pons's pictures...one could do very happily without the music altogether, for Miss Swarthout is quite as attractive

as any other star dummy...and one could do very happily, too, without Mr. John Boles. I find Mr. Boles, his air of confident carnality, the lick of black shiny hair across the plump white waste of face, peculiarly unsympathetic; and never more so than in this film as he directs his lick, his large assured amorous eyes, toward Miss Swarthout and croons:

I call you a gift from the angels,
For I feel in my heart you're divine.¹²

He also objects to the Hollywood sound track that so often was (is?) used when silence would have been preferred:

...Like *These Three*, another realistic film produced by Mr. Goldwyn, *Dodsworth* is marred by almost incessant music, a relic of the small orchestras which used to accompany silent films. Music may be occasionally justified in a fictional film, but certainly not in *Dodsworth* or *These Three*, where the music sentimentally underlines emotional situations which have been carefully played down by the actors and the dialogue-writers.¹³

He is not immune to the power and the attraction of GARBO, and there is a whole mine of nuggets to be mined from his review of *Anna Karenina*:

A new film with Greta Garbo: the event is exciting, of course, but it has very little to do with the art of the cinema. The film does not need great actresses so much as great directors, and it is no reflection on Hollywood to say that no one there knows what to do with Garbo, with her awkward ungainly body, her hollow face strong and rough as an Epstein cast. *Mata Hari*, *Grand Hotel*, *The Painted Veil*: these are typical of the slick commercial products to which she has been expected to adapt her powerful personality. The result has generally been unfortunate. Power misapplied is apt to be a little absurd. Garbo's great talent might appear less confined on the stage.

In *Anna Karenina* she has been better served than in most of her films. Guilt and misery and passion, these suit the melancholy grandeur of her voice. Very nearly all her acting is in

her voice: watch her among a crowd of other actresses in the mazurka, she is stiff, awkward, bony, rather grotesque among the graceful bodies, the lovely shoulders; but listen to her as she bends over her croquet-ball playing a game with her lover before all the gossips in St. Petersburg and you are in the presence of deep and authentic pain. The word "doom" is frequently in the mouths of these characters, but there is no other actress on the screen who would not have made the idea of doom false and preposterous...

What can the cinema do with an actress of her quality and kind? The film, if it is to be true to itself, must depend first on picture and movement and only secondarily on dialogue: it is a director's art, neither an author's nor an actor's...

It is Greta Garbo's personality which "makes" this film, which fills the mould of the neat respectful adaptation with some sense of the greatness in the novel. No other film actress can so convey physical passion that you believe in its dignity and importance, and yet there is no actress who depends so little on her own sexual charm. Sitting in the corner of a freezing railway carriage, with the ugly shadows of the single globe deepening the crevices of her face, she is more like a man than a woman. What beauty she has is harsh and austere as an Arab's; and I was reminded of Mr. Yeats's lines on Dante's mask:

An image that might have been a stony face,
Staring upon a bedouin's horse-hair roof
From doored and windowed cliff, or half upturned
Among the coarse grass and the camel dung.¹⁴

And yet...and yet... In the opening paragraph of his review of her *Marie Walewska* ("one of the dullest films of the year") he probably says it all:

She is, of course, the finest filly of them all.... And yet a dreadful inertia always falls on me before a new Garbo film. It is rather like reading *Sartor Resartus*—Carlyle's a great writer, but need one—now—this week...he's waited half a century: he can afford to wait a little longer: he'll still be on the public library shelves when one is old. And so too, I expect, will Garbo be: will figure like Duse and Rachel in the reminiscences of bores;

that magnificent mare's head of hers will puzzle our descendants, seeking a more obvious beauty... A great actress—oh, undoubtedly, one wearily assents, but what dull pompous films they make for her, hardly movies at all so retarded are they by her haggard equine renunciations, the slow consummation of her noble adulteries. She is a Houyhnhnm in a world of Yahoos, but, being Yahoos ourselves, we sometimes yearn for less exalted passions, for people who sin for recognizable reasons, because it's pleasurable. "It's a bawdy planet".¹⁵

The actresses who continually win his praise and affection are ones who are more contemporary, who are usually carefree (a notable exception: Sylvia Sidney, the proletarian heroine of the '30's), and who easily fit into that mould of "movement, action, character": Claudette Colbert ("the most charming light comedy actress on the screen"), Carole Lombard, Jean Arthur. The actor, music notwithstanding, that wins his top accolades is Fred Astaire:

...genius. It doesn't really matter that the music and lyrics are bad. Mr. Astaire is the nearest approach we are ever likely to have to a human Mickey Mouse; he might have been drawn by Mr. Walt Disney, with his quick physical wit, his incredible agility. He belongs to a fantasy world almost as free as Mickey's from the law of gravity, but unfortunately he has to act with human beings and not even Miss Ginger Rogers can match his freedom, lightness and happiness.¹⁶

A recurring PLUS word in these reviews is the word *agile*: a recurring NEGATIVE word is the word *pompous*.

Of the directors, Greene is most impressed by Fritz Lang and Frank Capra (the Capra of *Mr. Deeds* and *Mr. Smith*, never the Capra of *Lost Horizon*). Lang's first American movie, *Fury*, draws a rare encomium: "the only film I know to which I have wanted to attach the epithet of 'great'". Two months later, he is equally astonished by Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, the entire review of which I include as it is probably the most significant in the whole book:

Mr. Deeds is Capra's finest film (it is on quite a different intellectual level from the spirited and delightful *It Happened One Night*), and that means it is a comedy unmatched on the screen. For Capra has what Lubitsch, the witty playboy, has not: a sense of responsibility, and what Clair, whimsical, poetic, a little precious and *a la mode*, has not, a kinship with his audience, a sense of common life, a morality: he has what even Chaplin has not, complete mastery of his medium, and that medium the sound-film, not the film with sound attached to it. Like Lang, he hears all the time just as clearly as he sees and just as selectively. I do not think anyone can watch *Mr. Deeds* for long without being aware of a technician as great as Lang employed on a theme which profoundly moves him: the theme of goodness and simplicity manhandled in a deeply selfish and brutal world. That was the theme of *Fury*, too, but Capra is more fortunate than Lang. Lang expresses the theme in terms of terror, and terror on the screen has always, alas, to be tempered to the shorn lamb; Capra expresses it in terms of pity and ironic tenderness, and no magnate feels the need to cramp his style or alter his conclusion.

Mr. Deeds is a young provincial who inherits twenty million dollars from an uncle he has never seen. An ardent tuba-player in the local band, he makes his living by writing verses which are printed on postcards on such occasions as Mothers' Day. The uncle's solicitors, who have absorbed, with the help of a Power of Attorney, half a million dollars of his money, hope to continue the process with his unsophisticated nephew who is quite unexcited by his fortune and only wants to do good with it. They bring Deeds up to town. Wealth educates Deeds, he learns the shabby side not only of business but of art, with the help of the opera directors and the fashionable poets; he learns, too, the deceit which may exist in ordinary human affection (the girl he loves, and who loves him, is all the time writing newspaper articles which make front-page fun of the activities of the Cinderella Man). A revolver and a would-be assassin's nerveless hand educate him socially, and he is arranging to use the whole of his fortune in providing ruined farmers with free land and free seed when society controlled by racketeers—strikes its last blow at the elements it cannot absorb, goodness, simplicity, disinterestedness. Claimants are found to dispute his sanity and to try to remove the management of the

estate from his hands.

It sounds as grim a theme as *Fury*; innocence lynched as effectively at a judicial inquiry as in a burning courthouse, but there is this difference between Lang and Capra: Lang's happy ending was imposed on him, we did not believe in it; Capra's is natural and unforced. He *believes* in the possibility of happiness; he believes, in spite of the controlling racketeers, in human nature. Goodness, simplicity, disinterestedness: these in his hands become fighting qualities. Deeds sees through opera directors, fashionable intellectuals, solicitors, psychologists who prove that he is insane merely because he likes playing the tuba and isn't greedy for money. Only for a few minutes in the courtroom does he lose heart and refuse to defend himself: he is never a helpless victim, like the garage-man behind the bars watching the woman lift her baby up to see the fun, and he comes back into the ring with folk humour and folk shrewdness to rout his enemies for the sake of the men they have ruined. The picture glows with that humour and shrewdness, just as Lang's curdles with his horror and disgust; it is as funny, most of the time, as *Fury* was terrifying. It is not a question of truth or falsehood: two directors of genius have made pictures with curiously similar themes which present a conviction, a settled attitude towards life as it is lived. The pessimist makes a tragedy, the optimist (but how far from sweetness and complacency is Capra's optimism) makes a comedy. And Capra, as well as Lang, is supported by a perfect cast. Every minor part, however few the lines, is completely rendered, and Mr. Gary Cooper's subtle and pliable performance must be something of which other directors have only dreamed.¹⁷

And, yes, this fat book of reviews is filled with the lovely one-liners I expected—and more. When Greene comes across one that he admires, he quotes it. He likes Lillian Hellman's "It is the very young and the very old who are wicked" that he repeats it elsewhere in another context. A few I have jotted down:

It reminds one again that only the cinema and the music among the arts have been able to convey this sense of poignant happiness, the quickness and lightness and transience of a sen-

sation you cannot call by any name so heavy as joy: "the phoenix hour": the nearest to a Utopia poor mankind is ever likely to get.¹⁸

There are very few examples of what I mean by the proper use of the film, and most of those are farces.¹⁹

Like Restoration prose, his [M. Jacques Feyder] photography moves with a fine strut to the music of horns.²⁰

Mae West: the Edwardian bust, the piled peroxided hair, the seductive and reeling motions reminiscent of an overfed python.²¹

The name of England is so frequently on the characters' lips that we recognize at once an American picture.²²

Herr Jannings has the meaningless gaze of a sea-lion with huge sloping shoulders and watery whiskers, to whose emotions we apply, for want of anything better, such human terms as pity, anger, terror, though we cannot tell, on the evidence of those small marine eyes, whether he is really registering anything more than a dim expectation of fish.²³

Murder, if you are going to take it seriously at all, is a religious subject.²⁴

There are all sorts of literary allusions and references. I was not surprised to see old GBS get a sort of come-uppance ("a subject which defeated even Mr. Shaw's talent for triviality") but a bit disconcerted to find one of MY heroes not on Greene's approved list—J. M. Synge, but dramatists of the twentieth century (with the exception of Miss Lillian Hellman) fare rather dimly at Greene's hands. There are at least favorable passing references to such diverse writers as Somerset Maugham, H. Rider Haggard, Dorothy Parker (representing, respectively, movement, action, and character?), and constant usage of quotations from Conrad, James (movement? action?), and Shakespeare.

My task is ended. Either you will turn to *The Pleasure Dome* for more or you will not. There is no real way to prove my original point that these movie reviews affected Greene's style, but let me go back to his autobiography one last time:

It is better to remain in ignorance of oneself and to forget easily. Let the unemployed continue to lurk around the pubs in

Vauxhall Bridge Road and the kidnappers drive out of Heidelberg toward the frontier, safely and completely forgotten; we ought to leave the forgotten to the night. If one day they find their way into a book, it should be without our connivance and so disguised that we don't recognize them when we see them again. All that we can easily recognize as our experience in a novel is mere reporting: it has a place, but an unimportant one. It provides an anecdote, it fills in gaps in the narrative. It may legitimately provide a background, and sometimes we have to fall back on it when the imagination falters. Perhaps a novelist has a greater ability to forget than other men—he has to forget or become sterile. What he forgets is the compost of the imagination.²⁵

NOTES

- 1 Agee, James: *A Death in the Family*.
- 2 Bellow, Saul: *Herzog*.
- 3 Nabakov, Vladimir: *Lolita*.
- 4 Salinger, J.D.: *The Catcher in the Rye*.
- 5 Roth, Philip: *Portnoy's Complaint*.
- 6 *A Sort of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 156.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 175–176.
- 9 *The Pleasure Dome*, p. 14.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 16–18.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- 25 *A Sort of Life*, pp. 159–160.