

Ethical Modernity and the Case of *The Heart of the Matter* Adam Ahlgrim

It's my most popular book but I don't like it any longer. It was written at the end of the war, too soon. I wasn't up to it [. . .] and people kept getting it wrong.

—Graham Greene, Lambert & Pritchett Interviews (1966, 1978)

Graham Greene's 1948 novel, *The Heart of the Matter*, is a failure. A failure despite winning the "James Tate Black Memorial Prize" in 1948, and notwithstanding finishing fortieth on the Modern Library's "100 Best Novels of the 20th Century" in 1998. Even Greene himself claimed that some ideas he discarded while writing "might well have been a better book" ("Introduction" ix). How, then, do we reconcile the discrepancy between acclaim and authorial dissatisfaction? Clearly, Greene's standards for success do not include awards won, books sold, or movies made. What if the book was critically mislabeled, misjudged, and more importantly, why does this matter today?

While here I focus on Greene, *The Heart of the Matter* is a case study for a larger phenomenon: the question of the real political ramifications of literature and criticism. Greene's postwar pessimism, cosmopolitanism, and the narrative strategies of strategic avoidance, I believe, work as coping mechanisms against the horrors of the 1930s and '40s. Thus the novel is not exclusively a "Catholic" novel, as many previous critics claim (Boyd, Orwell, Wood). Instead, I see the novel as a failed attempt to extend the capacities of compassion beyond the category of "enemies," as well as to condemn the justifications used for violence within and without the parameters of war. In the first half of the paper, I examine the critical reception of Greene's

novel, as well as his relationship with Modernism. In the second half, I highlight the areas of political sentiment of the novel overlooked by previous critics.

***The Heart of the Matter* and its Reception**

The Heart of the Matter represents the struggle against a triumphant culture of war growing in the wake of WWII. The book reviews and general criticism from the novel's publication to contemporary readings gravitate toward two of the novel's largest themes: religious and romantic conflict. For example, in the same year as the novel's publication, novelist George Orwell condemned Greene for his unrealistic depictions of hyper-religiosity and adultery in the same conflicted character. In short, he did not find the plot or climax believable. Around sixty years later, novelist William Boyd echoed Orwell's condemnations, claiming, "*The Heart of the Matter* is a novel that only fully, truly resonates for a devout Catholic" (4). Yet, Greene addressed these charges of believability in the intro to the 1971 Vintage publication of the novel, stating, "novelists are praised or blamed for their success or failure in creating a character, [. . .] the contradictions you find in human beings are pared or explained away. The result is Art—which is arrangement and simplification [. . .] This book cannot pretend to be art because the compiler has left in all the contradictions" (viii). However, both Orwell and Boyd stopped short of a truly productive and rigorous critique, ultimately failing to see the novel as a political work profoundly concerned with the injustices of the Second World War, and furthermore, represents narrow readings of the period which contribute to numerous blind spots in literary and cultural criticism.

Contemporary critics and journalists later noticed Greene's explicit anti-war and humanitarian sympathies, though through other novels such as *The Quiet American* (1955). Moreover, twenty-first century critics such as Lisa Fluet and Patrick Deer reference the prevalence of the Blitz in Greene's earlier entertainment, *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), which is not surprising considering the extensive documentation of Greene's experience in the London bombings.¹ Yet, the lack of scholarship connecting *The Heart of the Matter* with Greene's separate classification as a political author is extensive. Many books analyzing WWII literature make little to no reference to the novel. When they do, it is usually in one or two sentences on *The Ministry of Fear* or *The End of the Affair* (1952) in relation to the Blitz.² In this way, *The Heart of the Matter* is a novel overlooked for its explicit and implicit critiques of war violence, and its anticipation of similar future concerns.

Greene's choice to privilege Catholic characters wrestling with God is an act neither of praise nor of explorations in the expanded moral capacities of the religious. In Greene's settings, God is certainly not dead, but has—with equal certainty—failed humanity. In *Brighton Rock* (1938), God is less a refuge against sin and damnation than the pretentious moral shield against Pinkie's adolescent naiveté. The God within *The End of the Affair* saves Bendrix's life after the aerial bombardment of the Blitz, only to condemn him to a life of hatred, isolation, and obsession. *The Heart of the Matter* similarly broaches the moral ambiguity that confines the protagonist Scobie, and ultimately leads to his suicide. What all these narratives share is a specific temperament that reflects the irreconcilable dialectic between believing God exists, and witnessing the modern experience of human suffering and mass death of twentieth century imperialism and both World Wars. Greene's relationship with God is not hyper-religious like

Orwell and Boyd claim, but existential, anxious, and blasphemous because of his political sensibilities. For Greene, life is far too miserable for God to be good.

The misrecognition of *The Heart of the Matter* is a casualty of the politics of criticism. As critics, we are trained to read certain types of novels in certain ways, and distinct from others. However, strict literary boundaries restricts novels from productive readings beyond their traditional reception and classification. In *The Affective Life of Law*, Ravit Reichman describes the “normative novelist” as a writer who “would press [. . .] ethical claims into normative ones, suggesting not only what was wrong with the world, but also how the affective experience produced by these wrongs could be harnessed to do something right” (6). I contend Greene’s felt responsibility towards victims, and failed attempt to harness the wrongs of the war for a more just and social world became lost within the parochial scope of periodization.

It does not seem surprising to find similarities in intellectual culture arising in the wake of both world wars. For instance, traits of the early modernist movement include existential rather than utopic narratives, and a growing distrust and disgust of the enlightenment.³ In comparison, the culture surrounding World War II birthed the most important contributions to existential philosophy in the writings of Camus, De Beauvoir, and Sartre, and saw the critical anger with post-atrocity complacency culminate in Horkeimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Therefore, it would be productive to explore works coming out of the same history and tradition as their modernist ancestors with a similar critical lens. Such an approach serves to recover dissident works lost in the ambiguities of language, and also to recognize how—similar to the ethical dilemmas earlier modernists confronted—later authors battled the moralizing

conclusions coming from war-culture narratives concerning the recent acts of mass death and atrocity.

When Orwell claimed Greene should have made the war more prominent, he wrongfully denied Greene the careful type of interpretive attention we, as critics, give to other authors. For *The Heart of the Matter* specifically, reading the novel through a modernist lens allows us to recognize Greene's normative and political qualities overlooked until later in his career. For this type of reading, it is not necessarily important that the novel is accepted *as* modernist, but simply that we read it *as if*, and more importantly, alongside Modernism proper.

Recognition and Dangerous "Mourning"

In *Culture in Camouflage*, Patrick Deer argues that rather than producing a supportive war culture at home, WWI produced a large amount of literature depicting the "waste of war" (2). In contrast, WWII authors had to fight a growing propaganda machine and ideological constrictions from "an enormously powerful and persuasive mass media and culture industry" (Deer 3). This battle over the social narratives of identification and collective memory, along with a repeated need for "new modes," led many authors to reuse literary strategies established by their Modernist predecessors to combat the harsh realities of the 1930s and '40s. Unfortunately, these formalistic and thematic approaches of resistance caused the wrongful accusations of quietism against many works to proliferate for decades to come. Notwithstanding the similarities between the "interwar" authors of the 1920s and late '40s, those writing during and after World War II found their narratives of military and national dissatisfaction working against a powerful new war-culture.

Greene's novel is certainly not high modernist fiction. However, expanding the parameters of modernist studies would help combat false charges of postwar quietism, and more importantly, recognize and expand the mercy rhetoric prevalent in many "war" and "postwar" works.⁴ Greene's novel seems to disrupt the accelerated mourning of the horrors of WWII by choosing 1942, his past, all in the hopeful possibility of criticizing and avoiding similar injustices in the future, and in doing so, refuses the moralizing and rationalizing "world-view" of his era, and in this way, justifies a new modernist reading of *The Heart of the Matter*.⁵

The Heart of the Matter takes place in an unnamed West African port. Inhabited by African locals, British colonial officials and immigrants from all over the world, no single character or group of people is exempt from corruption. After Scobie is passed over for a promotion for Deputy-Commissioner of Police, his ostracized wife Louise begs to leave the colony. However, his pity for the town and the people keep him from wanting to leave. In order to raise enough money to send Louise to South Africa, Scobie borrows money from a smuggler named Yusef. In return, however, he becomes involved in the framing of another diamond smuggler. During Scobie's descent from a good man into dishonesty, Wilson, a British police spy sent to investigate the smuggling, falls in love with Louise.

Set in 1942, the colony is not immune from World War II's reach. After enemy torpedoes sink a French passenger ship, the newly widowed Helen Rolt joins the survivors on the colony and eventually becomes Scobie's mistress. Cornered between his love and responsibility for Louise and Helen, and guilt-ridden by the pain he is causing God as a result of his adultery and feigned acts of contrition, Scobie elects to kill himself in order to end the pain he is causing all three.

While certainly not alone, Orwell's review exemplifies the trend of critical oversight to come. He asks, "Why should this novel have its setting in West Africa? [. . .] the hostility between black and white [. . .] is not mentioned at all. Indeed, although we are shown [Scobie's] thoughts in considerable detail, he seldom appears to think about his work [. . .] and never about the war, although the date is 1942" (Orwell). Here, I find one of the most beloved English authors of the twentieth-century quite wrong. The novel is in fact, profoundly concerned with war, and the lack of black and white hostility is not a symptom of poor writing, but intentional. If we, unlike Orwell, do not expect Greene to give us answers on how to process the events of the war, we see that the value of his work comes from engaging the reader in exposure and awareness of the human experience of injustice and suffering.

In contrast to Orwell's review, Greene's novel contains many explicit reminders of the threat of war. For example, the fear of enemy submarines closes the colonial borders (15), and the censorship and screening of mail for sensitive information propagates (40-42). Moreover, when torpedoes eventually destroy a passenger ship that strayed from a convoy, Greene shows the innocent victims of war in the form of a child dying in Scobie's arms (108-9). Beyond the seascape, frequent air-raid sirens signal the perpetual possibility of an attack from enemy planes. Though the attack never arrives, Scobie enforces numerous blackouts to avoid an air strike. In fact, enforcing a black out becomes the catalyst that propels Scobie into his affair with Helen Rolt (122-24). In these moments of waiting for an attack, even the anticipation of violence, *Angst* (apprehension) and *Furcht* (fear) as Freud posited, produces traumatic effects (Saint-Amour 7-13). As the narrator shows, "The sirens were wailing for a total black-out, wailing though the rain which fell interminably; the boys scrambled into the kitchen quarters, and

bolted the door as though to protect themselves from some devil" (Greene 122). When we witness children dying from submarine attacks, the threat from unambiguous enemy planes, and the reduction of social and communicative mobility, I would ask Orwell, how is this war vague?

Greene's obsession with aerial bombardment, both threatening and actualized, spans both his fiction and nonfiction. As shown earlier, critics such as Lisa Fluet and Patrick Deer have explored Greene's writing in relation to the London Blitz. For Deer, Arthur Rowe, the protagonist of *The Ministry of Fear*, becomes obsessed with the "social phenomena" of the Blitz (160). He claims, "Greene's novel suggests that war is a more natural state than the repressions of peacetime, as it forces violence out into the open" (162). These sentiments of exposure echo through Greene's reflections of his time spent under the threat of bombs.

Decades after the war, Greene nostalgically states, "During the Blitz one loved London particularly. Awful as the war was, one is nostalgic for the feeling of that period. London became a series of villages. During a blackout you could see the stars and the moon even on Oxford Street, and flares dropping like chandeliers" ("Places" qtd. in Baldrige 1). Notwithstanding the obvious romanticism of the language in describing flares as chandeliers, the Blitz seems to bring the modern subject to a less mediated reality. Cates Baldrige claims these sentiments arose "suddenly and continually [and] turned the familiar markers of a routinized bourgeois existence into so many macabre heralds of an urgent existential confrontation" (1). In these instances, violence exposes the individual to mortality, the arbitrariness of death, as well as to the hypocrisies of modern comfort. This type of exposure to the realities of twentieth-century violence, while more explicit in Greene's nonfiction, serves as a reoccurring theme across his

fictional works, and in *The Heart of the Matter* specifically, focuses particularly on civilian innocence, responsibility, and our relationship to the remote victims of war.

More important than the explicit references, Greene's novel contains many implicit anti-war or political themes. The town is a colonial space rife with distrust and corruption. As the Assistant Police Commissioner, Scobie is particularly aware of bribery and exploitation. Yet, even immersed in the deceit, he finds relief in the colony's flaws. "There was always a blacker corruption elsewhere to be pointed at, [. . .] no one was to be trusted. Why, he wondered [. . .] do I love this place so much? *Is it because here human nature hasn't had time to disguise itself?*" (Greene, my emphasis 25). In a paradox of morality, the coastal town is honest in its dishonesty. This quasi-naturalism answers Orwell's question of "Why Africa?" Greene's fictional colony remains nameless, has no dominating race, nationality, or loyalty. In fact, there are West Indians, Africans, Indians, Syrians, English, Scottish, Irish, French, Portuguese, and Japanese. All the characters exhibit fundamental flaws such as dishonesty, selfishness, and adultery. In turn, this problematizes the distinctions between traditional heroes and villains, and like the Modernists departure from sites of memory, shows the epistemological relations of subjects during war.⁶ These characteristics of both locale and morality contribute to one of the novel's fainter but nonetheless important themes: reevaluating civilian casualties and innocence after the traumatic events of World War II.

In *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács argues that since the French Revolution, "the inner life of a nation is linked with the modern mass army in a way it could not have been with the absolutist armies of the earlier period, [. . .] the war inevitably destroyed the former separation of army from people" (24). However, for critics such as Jan Mieszkowski and Susan

Sontag, "being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience" (Sontag 18). Here, we see a shift in the perceptions of the modern subject's relation to war. On one side, the distance between civilians and soldiers has eroded, opening up any and all as a potential target. On the other, spectatorship of war is one of privilege, primarily in Western civilians watching other civilians being bombed instead of being bombed themselves.

Criticism of Greene's novel often misses the connections to war and empathy when the crux of the book is about the relationship between compassion, pity, and remote victims during times of violence. The narrator asks, "If one knew, he wondered, the facts, would one have to feel pity even for the planets? if one reached what they called the heart of the matter?" (107). This pity for an object as remote as the planets initially seems obscure, but in context, Greene began writing the novel in 1946, shortly after some of the most notorious war atrocities in human history. Struggling with the deaths of innocents on an enormous scale, Greene's novel serves as both a coping mechanism and an emphasis on sympathy beyond national borders through the expansion of duties of care.

From a distance, especially when distorted through propaganda, violence against enemies is often justified. However, in Greene's world without heroes and villains, when the priest states, "You can't desire the end without desiring the means," we can almost hear Greene in Scobie's retort, "one can desire the peace of victory without desiring the ravaged towns" (205). This statement appears hauntingly autobiographical of Greene's lifelong convictions against war violence, regardless of spatial distance or nationality. Following these sentiments, a critique of mourning and loss after trauma seems especially appropriate after the 1930s and

1940s.

To emphasize the importance of truly coping with the dead, Greene depicts the loss of a husband as “terribly easy to get over” (136). Later, when confronted with his daughter’s illness, Scobie is merely disappointed. He states, “now the anxiety begins, and the pain,” but after she dies, he concludes, “then it was all right, she was dead, I could begin to forget her” (136). Here we have a distinct separation between caring and duty. Before she dies, Scobie is obligated as a father to worry about her. However, her passing releases him from the responsibility of pain. Continuing this logic, because Scobie feels he is causing pain to his lovers and God, he believes he can release them through taking his own life. He admits, “They wouldn’t need me if I were dead. No one needs the dead. The dead can be forgotten” (166). Even the language of these sections demonstrates a passive stance of Scobie allowing these actions to occur. If he “*could begin to forget her,*” and “the dead *can be forgotten,*” then there is a possibility of resisting such a callous response to the dead by way of active acknowledgment and engagement.

The problems addressed surrounding the lack of compassion and the ease of forgetting the dead reinforces the validity of a psychoanalytic reading of the novel through a reevaluation of Freud’s theories. In fact, many scholars are working toward divorcing psychoanalytic critiques from what fueled much of the Freud wars. In *Imperial Masochism*, John Kucich attempts to move masochistic tendencies away from Oedipal drives in order to make psychoanalytic criticism both politically and culturally productive. Furthermore, in *Dark Continents*, Ranjana Khanna exposes the imperialism inherent in early psychoanalysis, while still seeing the approach as a viable form of literary analysis. If Greene’s corruption of coping with the dead was in fact meant as a critique of how quickly he saw the recent war casualties forgotten, then removing the setting from

familiar historically charged sites for his primarily Western audience serves as an act of defamiliarization. These “colonial spaces” contribute what is necessary for active “ideological reworking” (Kucich 80), though it should be noted that using the colony in such a way certainly participates in Orientalist tropes of magical transformations.

Moreover, In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, a collection edited by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, they explore one of these possible applications by challenging the traditional mourning and melancholic binary in traumatic responses. They argue that rather than “moving on” in mourning, or the paralysis associated with the Freudian melancholic, they believe in “depathologizing” the melancholic. This allows for creative and productive responses to grief rather than stagnation. Here, the melancholic does not simply hold on to the loss, but is instead in the continuous engagement of rewriting and reworking the past (1-23). For Greene, cultural memory and the rhetoric and justifications used to commit atrocities becomes the very past to be engaged with and rewritten in order to eliminate the two-dimensional good and evil binary used to rationalize injustice. These sympathetic approaches to dangerous cultural narratives reflect a similar response to Woolf’s aversion to the British War effort. Like Woolf, Greene’s pessimism grew from revulsion with the romantic posturing of the recent “victory.”

Greene’s novel reevaluates the rhetoric surrounding trauma, confronting these events in order to avoid future violence. The inhumanity of Scobie’s relief at his own child’s death is intentional. If, as readers, we are prompted to resist the easily “worked through” deceased, then Greene has succeeded in his attack against the necessity of violence and the justifications of “collateral damage.” With his fictional West African colony as a representation of the nonfictional world, Greene hauntingly writes, “Nobody here could ever talk about heaven on

earth. Heaven remained rigidly in its proper place on the other side of death, and on this side flourished the injustices, the cruelties, the meanness that elsewhere people so cleverly hushed up" (25). The very act of "hushing up" or concealing the injustices and cruelties of modern life is what alienates heaven outside the realm of reality. Like the existential confrontation Greene nostalgically saw as the result of the Blitz, failing to recognize the hypocrisies of routines and "peace" perpetuate modern life—his version of hell.

While later recognized in the appropriately titled, *The Quiet American*, Greene attacked complacency and the egoism of peace almost a decade earlier. Throughout *The Heart of the Matter*, much of Scobie's disaffection comes from his corrupted sense of responsibility. His obligation does not come from compassion or empathy, but pity. In the end, the weight of this responsibility is what traps Scobie, and ultimately leads to his suicide. However, even though he is unable to refuse carrying the burdens of others, he is not altruistically helping. On the contrary, he acts begrudgingly. As he thinks back over witnessing the refugee child die, he thinks, "why me, [. . .] why do they need me, a dull middle-aged police officer who had failed for promotion? I've got nothing to give them that they can't get elsewhere: why can't they leave me in peace?" (173). As a concept, peace does not seem like something to criticize in 1946, when Greene was writing the novel. Yet, this theme is one of his most consistent and overtly political denunciations of postwar culture and the inherent selfishness of liberal resignation.

For Scobie, the burden of helping others intrudes on his greatest desire—peace. "For he dreamed of peace by day and night. Once in sleep it had appeared to him as the great glowing shoulder of the moon heaving across his window like an iceberg, [. . .] Peace seemed to him the most beautiful word in the language: My peace I give to you my peace I leave with you" (Greene

50). While the image of the moon suggests the unattainable, always out of reach beauty, the image of the iceberg implies a hidden danger lurking underneath the line of sight. In *The Heart of the Matter*, peace only comes in sparse moments when Scobie is alone. Even when he dreams of peace, he never shares his paradise with another. Peace, here, becomes a solipsistic pleasure that is only possible at the expense of our social responsibilities. Even more than requiring isolation, unadulterated peace remains in the realm of fantasy, as someone is always suffering somewhere.

In the postwar era, seeing the world as peaceful is only possible if one refuses to recognize the atrocities of history, as peace requires abandoning our relationships and responsibilities to others. This complacent, and often triumphant, reaction towards the horrors of the twentieth century is the same “war culture” Deer argues is repressing dissenting narratives. He uses the term “oversight” to describe the kind of commanding perspective sought by the war-machine during wartime, and projected to their citizens in official war culture” (Deer, his emphasis 4). Even though the war was “over,” the shadow of the recent events loomed pessimistically over Greene’s writing immediately after in 1946, and throughout much of the rest of his works.

After a young officer commits suicide, Scobie thinks, “What an absurd thing it was to expect happiness in a world so full of misery” (Greene 111). Likewise, Greene seems to condemn postwar celebration and moving on as selfish barbarity and insensitivity, traits similar to many of the Modernist’s pessimism and critical anger. Resembling the image of Deer’s “oversight,” postwar happiness only becomes possible by constructing blinders against the surrounding world. Happiness and peace exist fictitiously, and only at the expense of others. In this way,

Greene seems to be calling for melancholic responses to injustice. "Moving on" from trauma involves a mastery over the object and inherently suggests closure. However, the melancholic presumes closure is always incomplete, and demands constant confrontation and reworking.

For the author and the critic, these themes of compassion are imperative to address. My argument is not so much to point out various misreadings of Greene to elevate his literary status, or to paint him as the embodiment of the hero. In fact, his work is full of Orientalist perspectives, flat female characters, and clearly written from Western privilege. However, being unaware of war symbolism and political dissidence of this kind is in fact dangerous. We should not minimize the attempt to extend compassion beyond the borders of victors and victims. If we view Greene's work through the lens of war, we need to understand why this type of reading is essential, and what we can learn from a text that refuses to give any answers.

The Case for Normative Disruption, Not Normalization

The Heart of the Matter does not tell the reader how to exist in a world full of suffering. There are no moralizing conclusions on how to right past wrongs or how to justify them as necessary. Instead, it is a novel of how to live compassionately, and that is through the disruption of comforting narratives and engagement with difficult pasts. Greene's novel calls readers to confront injustice, and refuse to look away or move on. Such "closure" risks perpetuating similar injustices. To repeat the title section of the book, "*If one knew*, he wondered, the facts, *would one have to feel pity even for the planets? if one reached what they called the heart of the matter?*" (Greene, my emphasis 107). In this passage, the narrator questions whether knowledge necessitates engagement, an outcome I believe Greene

unsuccessfully attempts in his novel. He is not an author to read for answers. Instead, Greene is better at exposing the hypocrisies of popular narratives about innocence, responsibility, and war, and through awareness of these contradictions, calls for a more socially responsible and normative world.

Attempting to alter the discourses surrounding war and challenging the justifications used for violence, whether the attempt failed or succeeded, is not merely textual. It is resistance against the generalizations of a powerful war-machine, and it demands recognition so that we, in the humanities, can encourage and enforce this sympathetic rhetoric. Even if Greene failed as a writer to convey these themes well, we do not judge political dissidence, activism, or social responsibility on success, but rather on intent. As Reichman eloquently claims, "We are responsible beyond our intentions and our institutions" (163), and I would add, beyond the parameters of our successes and failures. In fact, failing to recognize Greene's sympathetic and counter hegemonic sentiments exposes the parochial view of individual responsibility and involvement in cultural memory and war.

Failure to focus attention on various conflicts or acts of political violence based on the categories of "war" and "peace" perpetuates similar elisions. On one side, the complete disavowal of these events breeds, as W. G. Sebald argues, "[a] perfectly functioning mechanism of repression" and "self anesthesia" (11-12). In turn, this refusal to acknowledge allows injustice to continue. Conversely, as seen with the contemporary "War on Terror," a constant label of "war," mixed with an almost non-existent sacrifice required to support the troops normalizes the violence, and creates a public tolerance for war (Dudziak 92). Clearly, the ability to separate the reality of "war" from personal life by turning off a television, radio, computer, etc., remains

reserved for the privileged spectators. Furthermore, as Judith Butler argues, stopping this perpetual atrocity requires confronting “the framework that silences the question of who counts as a ‘who’—in other words, the forcible action of the norm on circumscribing a grievable life” through distorted categorization and accelerated mourning (163).

Inherent within the greatest crimes in the history of humanity—slavery, imperialism, war, and genocide, among others—is necessary othering or “gross dichotomization” (Fussell 75-9). These narratives rely on complete simplifications of entire cultures, nations, and individual motives. In a sense, these war-machines, governments, etc., create caricatures to divorce their actions from the category of “evil,” and to keep the historical account clean. Torgovnick accurately describes this unfortunate trend. She explains, “cultural memory prefers to avoid ambiguities, especially on subjects like war crimes and crimes against humanity. It thrives on black and white, good and evil” (Torgovnick 69).

During 1948, when *The Heart of the Matter* was published, the enemies of war were the “unforgivable” and the massive number of civilian casualties the “unavoidable.” As Walter Benjamin famously addressed in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize [. . .] the answer is inevitable: with the victor” (256). His fear was the partiality of historical memory that excludes the narratives of the “losers.” Easily mourning and moving on from traumatic events, like the dead in the novel, participates in this amnesia. However, the productive melancholic reworks sites of past trauma for alternative narratives or histories that compassionately listen to the victims.

In order to enforce an “ethics of identification” instead of “objectification” as Torgovnick argues, difficult and bloody histories demand confrontation (xii).⁷ When analyzing the choice of

killing or reviving difficult memories, Khanna contends:

Clearly, when memory is called upon to claim or disclaim an official past, its resonance as counterfactual narrative becomes extremely important, especially in conditions of the suppression of truth. When official narratives show the state has chosen to forget the uncomfortable past of those it claims to represent, the political use of memory is to right a wrong, make visible the invisible, or give knowledge where ignorance has reigned. (13)

To right the wrongs of historical barbarism necessarily involves acts of resistance. To combat the narratives disseminated from the victors and war-machines fueled by caricatures of the other, normative authors must find a mode outside the dominant.⁸ In a sense, dissidents must “deterritorialize” history in order to allow a counter narrative to grow (Deleuze and Guattari). For Greene, this minor literature meant—like his Modernist forbears—to reinsert emotion into social responses instead of rationalism and justification.

The critical lens of a compassionate and active engagement with the past, and a creative and productive melancholia, serves as a valuable tool of analysis for combating social injustices from the amorality of international politics, the oppression of imperialism, and the atrocities of war. As Paul Gilroy argues in a plea for new sympathetic histories, “Only a restorative engagement with the political, economic and cultural history [. . .] will break the morbid spells of this identity politics. In that longed-for liberation lies a future we might even control instead of a painful past we’re condemned [. . .] to repeat” (202). Rather than subscribe to the loyalty of nations over the loyalty of humans, Greene’s responsibility as a writer, and his demand for his readers, is to extend compassion beyond our immediate social and political borders.

Combating violence in advance depends on a critical gaze toward the future. In his essay, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)," Jacques Derrida redefines the term "nuclear." He claims that in what he calls the "nuclear age," the stakes of violence and enactment of nuclear war would mean complete destruction. However, Derrida argues, "a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only write about it" (23). This claim is not a disavowal of the atomic bombs used during World War II. To Derrida, a nuclear war by definition means a totality of complete effacement. Nevertheless, this does not decrease the reality that even the threat of nuclear war is an act of violence. Because absolute obliteration of this magnitude would also nullify mourning, the work of grief must respond to the *anticipation* of violence, rather than the act itself.

Responding to violence in advance requires speed. Derrida argues that in the event of nuclear war, this conflict is a race, where "a gap of a few seconds may decide, irreversibly, the fate of [. . .] humanity" (20). Because nuclear war equates to complete destruction, critics of this violence must act in advance of the attack because there is no opportunity for post-nuclear action. Saint-Amour shows how in the nuclear epoch, the only way to avoid a nuclear war of total destruction is preemption. He states, "[in] a reversal of conventional sequence through speed: the threat of massive retaliation deters the first strike in advance; nuclear war must outstrip the laws of war that would interdict it; and griefwork, in its turn, must travel faster than war, must happen in advance of a war that might permit no survivable postwar" (309-10). Therefore, criticism must be faster than the bombs and mobilized by the anticipation of violence.

In our current political climate, these issues remain unresolved. Even though a Derridian

nuclear war never occurred, the excessive damage from small-scale skirmishes makes criticism vital. We are still in a nuclear age filled with the traumatic anticipation of violence. As Derrida brilliantly argues for the importance of the humanities:

So we are not experts in strategy, in diplomacy, or in the techno-science known as nuclear science, we are oriented rather toward what is called not humanity but the humanities, history, literature, languages, philology, the social sciences [. . .] We are specialists in discourses and in texts [. . .] in spite of all appearances this specialty is what entitles us, and doubly so, to concern ourselves seriously with the nuclear [. . .] inasmuch as we are representatives of humanity [. . .] given that the stakes of the nuclear question are those of humanity, of the humanities. (22)

Speed is critical, but not the speed of weapons or retaliation; on the contrary, the speed of compassionate rhetoric, of criticism, literature and the Humanities, concerning humanity, to resist the two-dimensional perspectives of conflict, and for dissidence through these mediums to anticipate and project an alternative future different than one of violence and perpetual inhumanity.

I see the failure to recognize the *The Heart of the Matter* as a political novel as a part of a larger problem surrounding the value placed on the lives of civilians, and even soldiers, of those beyond our immediate social and national circles. In order to attempt to alter the current cycle of perpetual violence and injustice, the categories of community, neighbor, and responsibility require revision. This is not a call for blind trust or uncritical acceptance, but instead, a call for a case-by-case approach toward sympathetic listening, and a rejection of two-dimensional reactionary hatred. Furthermore, the strict boundaries of periodization narrow

potentially productive readings of texts. We should not, in a Freudian sense, mourn and move on from texts as if we have mastered them. Instead, we should melancholically approach them for constant reworking and new associations.

To assume that normative literature or criticism could end all wars is certainly idealism. This is especially true because modern conflict has become more of war against abstractions and less face-to-face interactions. However, this is not the standard of ethical writing. The goal is to contribute to social and epistemological reconstruction that identifies and recognizes the narratives of victims through exposure. Through such an outlook, we can disseminate resistance to the normalization of war and gross dichotomization. As Torgovnick argues, “such impulses will not end all war [. . .] but they may prevent some wars some of the time: a modest goal and one realistic enough to aim” (145). Greene’s humanistic call to action and attempt to join this process clearly failed, as many similar efforts do. However, influencing and reversing hegemonic discourses never occurs from a single loud voice, but from many quiet and resilient voices who refuse to shrink from large odds and repeated failures.

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Notes

¹ For more on Greene's experience surviving the Blitz, see Greene *Collected Essays* (New York: Viking, 1969) 450, *Ways of Escape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), and Norman Sherry, *Life of Graham Greene: 1939-1955*. Vol. II (New York: Viking, 1994), 46-79.

² Here, I looked at *Dockers & Detectives*, Ken Worpole (London: Verso, 1983), *The Second World War in Fiction*, ed. Holger Klein, John Flower, and Eric Homberger (London: Macmillan, 1984), *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and Its Background, 1939-60*, Bernard Bergonzi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), *British Culture of the Postwar*, ed. Alistar Davies and Alan Sinfield. (London: Routledge, 1993), and *The Fiction of the 1940s*, ed. Rod Mengham and N. H. Reeve, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001). Only *Wartime and Aftermath* even mentioned *The Heart of the Matter*, and only that "the war is a background presence that intrudes at intervals" (Bergonzi 89).

³ As Vincent Sherry argues in *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*, the interwar modernist movement was largely a rejection of failed enlightenment ideals and liberal rationalism of the war. Many saw the paradigms of enlightenment style thinking—intellect, progress, technology, etc.—as realized in the worst possible scenarios—World War I. Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2003).

⁴ Here, I place "war" and "postwar" in quotations to draw attention to the problematic nature of these labels. Though I use the terms in this essay for simplification, I am particularly influenced by Mary L. Dudziak and Paul K. Saint-Amour's work on exposing the limitations and hypocrisies involved in placing an ephemeral quality or exact start and stop date on conflict. As each critic shows, "peacetime" is a privileged category reserved for those removed from hot spots, but does not usually mean an end to violence. For more on the limitations of the categories of "interwar," "peace," "postwar" and "war," see Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), and Paul. K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (New York: Oxford UP, 2015).

⁵ In *Bad Modernisms*, a collection edited by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, they explore "new modernist studies" in order to move away from the strict formalism of previous modernist scholarship, and to "[transform] the term from an evaluative and stylistic designation to a neutral and temporal one" which invites readings of "bad" texts across literary periods (1-2). Simply put, new readings of novels that fail to meet the lofty standards of true avant-garde literature can produce valuable insights into the intellectual and artistic temperaments of the time. Moreover, in building from various definitions of the term "modernism," Paul K. Saint-Amour shows modernism to "function as nonexclusive shorthand for works that display, even speculatively or intermittently, an anticontemporary or counterconventional temper" (38). Alternatively, as he summarizes Eric Hayot's definition

from *On Literary Worlds*, modernism is “the mode of negation and refusal’ in a work’s orientation toward ‘the normative world-view of its era’” (qtd. in Saint-Amour 38).

⁶ Modernist writers aimed for a sympathetic way to respond to the First World War that resisted barbaristic attempts to capture the experience of the dead. Authors, including Woolf, deliberately chose to set their novels at a distance from sites of wartime memory, such as famous battlefields or trenches. This turn to cosmopolitanism marked an attempt to expose the far-reaching epistemological effect war had on the home front. By using forms that were “evasive rather than descriptive or utopian,” modernist authors attempted to avoid the generalizations and enlightenment style thinking that supported “imperial triumphalism, heroic masculinity, and sexism” (Walkowitz, her emphasis, 123; Mao & Walkowitz 12).

⁷ I am also thinking particularly of Dominick LaCapara’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, in which he argues similarly for political and ethical memory work through a critical distance which “contributes to a cognitively and ethically responsible public sphere [that] makes possible a legitimate democratic polity in the present and future” (90-1). Dominick LaCapara, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

⁸ Here, I am particularly aware of John Keegan’s description of officer training, which attempts to “reduce the conduct of war to a set of rules and a system of procedures—and thereby make orderly and rational what is essentially chaotic and instinctive,” so that “an army can be sure—hopeful would be more accurate—of its machinery operating smoothly.” He argues that by “teaching the young officer to organize his intake of sensations, to reduce the events of combat to as few and as easily recognizable a set of elements as possible, [. . .] one is helping him to avert the onset of fear or, even worse, of panic” (*The Face of Battle* 20-22). Clearly, Keegan is not describing modern war-culture, though accelerated mourning, self-anesthesia, and a parochial sense of peace require a similar amount of “training” in compartmentalizing the difficult “intake of sensations” so the [war] “machinery” can operate smoothly. Here, I see the task of the normative novelist and critic as the opposite of Keegan’s officer training: to disrupt the sensations that restrict emotion, and in a sense, to induce panic at the state of the world. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking, 1976).