

DOUBLE VISION OF RELIGIO-POLITICAL DIVISION IN GRAHAM GREENE'S
THE HONORARY CONSUL

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ABSTRACT

The coral and chromatic theme of *The Honorary Consul* is generated from Graham Greene's unique and outstanding imagination that has two facets – religious and political. In *The Honorary Consul*, Greene's novelistic imagination is divided into two streams of religion and politics resulting in the reflection of double vision. Hence, his conception of composition can be called 'double vision of religio-political division'. In fact, he seems to accentuate that there is no real religion without its incarnation and presentation in politics, and there is no real politics without religious corroboration. Besides, he tries to illuminate that religion and politics, observably seen as antipathetic forces, are the components of the same reality. In this novel, he has presented 'double vision of religio-political division' through the triangular communication of the three prominent characters: Eduardo Plarr, a doctor who is sympathetic to the poor; León Rivas, a revolving and rotatory ex-priest; and Charlie Fortnum the mistakenly abducted honorary consul. All of them are modernistic exiles in search of an identity that is at once personal, political, and religious.

Keywords: Double, religion, politics, vision, division, imagination, church and consul.

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Graham Greene's 'double vision' has two terms – double + vision. Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines 'double vision' as 'the simultaneous perception of two images of one object'.¹ Thus, Greene's 'double vision' means the vision which includes perception of two images or imaginations at the same time. The vision of Greene's novelistic achievement is double as he unites both religion and politics simultaneously. In his interview with Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh and Maria Couto, he, unquestionably, states that both religion and politics may be blended and developed in an imagination. In *The Honorary Consul*, he has attempted to create an agreement between the two noteworthy streams – religion and politics. Undoubtedly, this agreement between religion and politics produces the remarkable status of 'double vision'.

The Honorary Consul recounts the despotism, debasement, terrorism, over-whelming poverty and religious rotation that are components of the Latin American political world at the extremity of the twentieth century. In its character progression and plot, the novel represents what has come to be known as liberation theology that has its main source in political ideology. In this novel, Greene's imagination is divided into two visions – religious and political. Therefore, the formation of 'double vision' is originated. Indeed, Greene has

tried to delineate the horrific poverty and persecution of the territory as well as the Catholic Church's participation in the contemporary struggle. In this reference, Mark Bosco's illustration is quite correct:

Christian praxis was interpreted through the lens of biblical patterns of justice – the narratives of slavery, exile, and liberation – so that the hierarchical relationship between God and the world is horizontalized: God – and God's people – fight alongside men and women of different views to bring an end to oppression. This renewed emphasis on Christian action had an analogous relationship with the Marxist hope for bringing about a just economic and political system. Furthermore, in both Christian and Marxist terms, there is the fundamental belief that the political struggle is a communal event that has stereological ramifications. Liberation at either the individual or the collective level is a type of ultimate liberation for all who practise justice and mercy now. The Nicaraguan priest-poet and government minister Ernesto Cardenal can thus make the imaginative claim in his poetry that Christ sacrifices himself on the cross in the struggle for the liberation of his people, just as the revolutionary guerilla is caught and tortured by the power elite of corrupt governments.²

It seems that the metaphor of double vision becomes a complicated thematic thread in *The Honorary Consul* combining together the issues of Catholicity, Christianity and religiosity that are established on the basis of political platform. So far as the matter of 'religio-political participation' is concerned, Grahame Smith comments rightly:

"With *The Honorary Consul* Greene moves on to a plane of achievement which develops and combines the interests of earlier work in a fusion that is both a summation and a new departure. Distinctions such as entertainment, faith, politics or allegory, which have a certain limited usefulness in discussing previous novels, lose their separate identity in becoming the seamless web of a subtly blended whole"³

Grahame Smith, further, states that there is a forceful and powerful compromise between Catholicism and Marxism prevailing in the political world:

"Broadly speaking, it might be said that Greene's first outstandingly creative period was marked by a visionary inwardness, a turning in on the self in order to make a fictional examination of spiritual issues. His second phase involved a move outwards the public world of international politics. Part of *The Honorary Consul's* distinction lies in its fusion of these interests. Greene's setting and choice of subject-matter are skilfully contrived to weave religion and politics into a unified whole."⁴

The Honorary Consul emerges after *The Quiet American*, *Our Man in Havana* and *The Comedians* in the contemporariness of its thematic involvement. Greene illustrates how he came to write *The Honorary Consul*:

"The origin of *The Honorary Consul* written between 1970 and 1973 lies in the cave of the unconscious. I had a dream about an American ambassador – a favourite of women and a good tennis player whom I encountered in a bar – but in my dream there was no kidnapping, no guerillas, no mistaken identity nothing to identify it with *The Honorary Consul*, except the fact that the dream lodged inexplicably in my head for months, the figures of Charley Fortnum and Dr. Plarr stole up around the unimportant ambassador of my dream and quietly liquidated him."⁵

On the surface level, *The Honorary Consul* is nothing but a mystery plot about fornication, treachery, political abducting, and a ferocious shoot-out. We come back vigorously to the geographical scene of Greenland but with a consciousness of the novelist's religio-political reflection. The status of religious dedication and devotion characterizes much of the novel's thematic concern, but here the religious discourse has a definitely different direction. It is more prolix and probative, less explicit and monumental, a religious journey set in a correlative conversation with the social and political realities of the synchronal scenario.

In fact, Greene's imagination of 'double vision' is visible through the discourse of the three main characters: Eduardo Plarr, a doctor who helps the poor; León Rivas, a revolutionary ex-priest; and Charlie Fortnum, the erroneously kidnapped honorary British consul. All the three of them are modern-day expatriates in search of a recognition that may be called religious or political.

Eduardo Plarr is a doctor surviving in both material and mental banishment in a border town in Argentina. His inheritance is a mixture of cultures and civilizations, half British from his father and half Spanish-Paraguayan from his mother. His father was a natal Englishman who had become so dedicated to rotatory and

revolutionary politics in Paraguay that he displaced his wife and fourteen year old son to Argentina for safeguard. Plarr adores his father's reminiscence and nourishes the expectancy that he is still spirited in a Paraguayan penitentiary. He perceives a compromised pleasure in his middle-class status, and, as a means of regarding his father, dedicates his medical profession to the poor: "In the barrio of the poor I am aware of doing something he would have liked to see me do."⁶ Besides, Plarr unites himself with a series of unloving kinships that are linked with married women.

When Plarr arrives at the placid, semitropical backwater town, he is familiarized with the only two English dwellers, an acrimonious English teacher, Humphries, and the Honorary Consul—Charley Fortnum, a divorced and self-pitying alcoholic. Plarr's other main familiar person is Julio Saavendra, a forgotten but prominent Argentine novel writer. Visiting Senora Sanche's bordello with Saavendra, Plarr is attracted to a beautiful girl, but she is taken by another man. A couple of years later, he is called to treat Fortnum's new wife. Plarr sees that she is the same girl from the bordello, Clara. Though Plarr regards himself as a cool, self-controlled Englishman, he finds himself becoming obsessed by Clara. Subsequently, he seduces her by buying her some sunglasses and they begin an affair, although he tries to remain emotionally distant from her. Even then she, later, becomes pregnant with Plarr's child.

His self-absorbed peace is shattered when he becomes an accomplice in a political kidnapping. A group of rebels from Paraguay plan to abduct the visiting American ambassador and hold him hostage in exchange for political prisoners. Plarr agrees to help them, in part because two of the rebels are childhood friends who assure him that his father is one of the bargained-for releases and in part because he supposes that little will come from a scheme planned by such novices. They end up kidnapping the wrong man, Charley Fortnum, who is an unimportant, honorary British consul travelling with the American ambassador.⁷ They take him to a squalid hut in a chancy town. Now Plarr tries to get Fortnum released, either as a result of diplomatic action from the UK or as a result of his school friends. But no-one listens to him. Saavendra and Humphries fail to help Plarr in his efforts. The police suspect that Plarr is involved in the kidnapping as they are well-acquainted with his affair with Clara. Besides they inform him that his father was shot dead in Paraguay while he was trying to run away.

Though Plarr considers his Catholicism a historical footnote of his Jesuit education, he is given the time and space in the rebel hideout to discover that faith might not be such an absurdity. Having given himself solely to the reasoning power of medical science, he ridicules the religion of his childhood, tormenting his friend León with metaphysical questions about his exotic theological views. Yet he realizes that what his loss of faith has really affected in him is a loss of hope in a more just future. As he envies León's commitment to a political-religious vision, he is equally envious of Charley Fortnum's genuine love for his wife, Clara, especially after Charley learns that she is carrying Plarr's child. Plarr sees Charley overcome his anger for the sake of Clara and the baby. Charley's commitment to love gradually permits Plarr to imagine the existence of God in the world, though a God whose mysterious actions are more like 'a great joker somewhere who likes to give a twist to things'.⁸

Accordingly, Plarr detects within himself a renovation of unadulterated love for Clara and the baby she bears. Whenever he considers the ways of his sexual needs, he reflects that Clara's pregnancy is the result of his carelessness. He plans to conk the child as "a useless part of Clara like his appendix, perhaps a diseased appendix which ought to be removed." Yet his frigid medical evaluation of the child soon becomes more contemplative and meditative: "The poor little bastard, if only I could have made some sort of arrangement for it." (*The Honorary Consul*, 265.) In the series of his sentiments the child gradually develops into an actual human being posited in the ties and cords that confine it:

"He thought of the tangle of its ancestry, and for the first time in the complexity of that tangle the child became real to him.... It joined the child to two very different grandfathers – a cane-cutter in Tucuman and an old English liberal who had been shot dead in the yard of a police station in Paraguay. The cord joined it to a father who was provincial doctor, to a mother from a brothel.... He would have liked the little bastard to believe in something, but he was not the kind of father who could transmit belief in a God or a cause." (*The Honorary Consul*, 225.)

If Doctor Plarr is Greene's incarnation of the doubting cynic thrust into conversion from unbelief to tentative belief, Father León Rivas is the postcolonial descendent of Greene's whisky-priest of *The Power and the Glory*. The flawed pacifist priest of the persecuted church of 1930s Mexico is transformed into the liberationist priest who preaches a gospel of freedom from the tyranny of the institutional Church, as well as from its alliances with capitalism and despotic regimes. Reared in upper middle-class comfort in Paraguay, Father Rivas rebels against his own politically compromised father as he searches for identity as a priest of the poor and the oppressed. Despairing from the Church and of his own effectiveness as a priest, he marries a peasant woman named Marta and becomes an amateur revolutionary. In Father Rivas, Greene captures the religious upheaval in Latin America and the development of liberation theology.⁹

No doubt, Doctor Plarr's impressive and heroic action is the indication of his subjective salvation. Similarly, Rivas's final action of bucolic and tender loving care for those around him signifies the practical righteousness of his religious belief, once again resounding Greene's theme of the priority of religious recitation over logical faith. In fact, Gutierrez declares the same:

"Liberation theology would say that God is first contemplated and practiced, and only then thought about. What we mean by this is that worshipping God and doing his will are the necessary condition for thinking about him."¹⁰

Father Rivas's philosophy reflects the tensions how Catholic belief could help transmute the Latin American political picture. He utters liberation theology's philosophical opening stage, the antagonism between the liberating term of the Gospel, the religious establishment and the political regime. In a long confabulation with Charley Fortnum, Rivas discloses:

"She (the Church) is a sort of person too... they claim she is Christ on earth – I still half believe it even now. Sometimes like you – *un Inglés* – you are not able to understand how ashamed I felt of the things they made me read to the people. I was a priest in the poor part of Asuncion near the river. Have you noticed how all the poor always cling close to the river? They do it here too, as though they plan one day to swim away, but they have no idea how to swim and there is nowhere to swim for any of them. On Sunday I read to them out of the Gospel..." (*The Honorary Consul*, 132.)

The guilty stream of the religious authorities overpowering the provincial state stimulates Father Rivas to give up his priestly profession, even if, he is unable to drop out his faith. Yet the novel evinces that his theological concentration on practical and religious righteousness is the prescriptive standard for reliable faith. In addition, Greene seems to suggest that his proper praxis is nothing but a noble and dignified reaction.

Thus, Greene's imagination of double vision widens the ways in which the presence of God is interposed. Yet in a very Greene-like manner, he spreads out the hieratic function into the three prominent characters of the novel, carrying out the role of priest for one another. Eduardo Plarr, Father Rivas, and Charley Fortnum, all, impartial or uninterested Catholics, perceive mentally that their communicational activities with one another have a priest-like shed. When Charley asks Father Rivas about why he got married; he responds in a low voice, "I think it was anger and loneliness, Señor Fortnum."

Charley notices the irony of the priest's acting "as though it were the penitent (Rivas) who stood now by the coffin." As the time of spiritual death approaches, Father Rivas requests Charley to receive the confessional sacrament, unwittingly also confessing his sins to Charley and thus, Rivas finally receives his absolution in the last instants of his life. In fact, both Rivas and Charley shares the mediation of God's grace that is nothing but an ironic representation of the "priesthood of all people." God's grace and blessing is thus astonishingly displayed on both the perpendicular plane of the spiritual profession and the parallel plane of a "priestly people" who are exhibiting care for each other.

In *The Honorary Consul*, the dogma of Christ is executed more in terms of the human struggle for justice. A kind of Christology is revised and it is the general Christological emphasis of liberation theology that is emphasized. Rivas posits "Christ was a man, even if some of us believe that he was God as well. It was not the God the Romans killed, but a man. A carpenter from Nazareth" (*The Honorary Consul*, 232.) Both the mental recollection and praxis of Jesus become the standard in which one's faith is exercised in this universe.

Theological discussion is most clearly revealed in the formalistic communication between Father Rivas and Dr. Plarr. Rivas elucidates to Plarr that he had obeyed his inner-self against the outright hypocrisy and

complexity of the organizational Church. Nonetheless, he is a man of some religious belief: "I never left the Church. Mine is only a separation, Eduardo, a separation by mutual consent, not a divorce. I shall never belong wholly to anyone else. Not even to Marta." (*The Honorary Consul*, 232.)

Rivas, further, illustrates a deep apprehension of the church: "How can I leave the Church? The Church is the world. The Church is this *barrio*, this room." (*The Honorary Consul*, 213.) Far from being diminished and absent, the Church is made basically present and perceptible in the ordinary life and a source of salvation for the whole human race.

Greene suggests that it is precisely as a Catholic priest that Father Rivas brings a worthy contribution to the revolution, fostering religious faith embodied in the popular religious rituals of the poor and of the celebration of the sacraments. The practice of the faith of the poor is the ideological check on any overtly Marxist ideology. He celebrates the Mass in the final hour before the police storm the hideout. Ironically, Father Rivas utters the words *Ite missa est* ("the Mass is ended, go you are sent") just before he meets his own death. Plarr's attempt to mediate a truce between the rebels and the police ends with a bullet in the leg by a military sniper. He crawls out after him in one last priestly act to minister to Plarr and is killed.... The end of the novel offers a nuanced criticism of liberation theology, for if its goal is to effect positive political transformation for the benefit of the poor, Greene's text refuses such a possibility. Politically, nothing has changed in the final pages of the novel; superficially, that both Plarr and Rivas die points to the futility of such worthy dreams of justice and liberation. But if the novel's political geography has not changed, the religious landscape has undergone a subtle transformation. Plarr's religious imagination is galvanized by his exposure to Father Rivas's commitment and Charley Fortnum's selfless love for his wife; likewise, Father Rivas's identity as an effective witness to a just society is disclosed finally in his ministry as priest. The end of the novel emphasizes two places in which the religious and the political imagination intersect: hope and love. Human hope can ground political belief only when it is experienced in a personal commitment to others, and human love has a stake not only in creating communities of commitment but also in the evolutionary union of humanity with God.¹¹

In this way Greene interlaces religion and politics as informative analysis to grasp the human factor in the strife for liberation. Besides, the epigraph of the novel, extracted from Thomas Hardy, imparts a Teilhardian occurrence and convergence through history: All things merge with one another – men who are good are led to do evil, those who are generous are driven to destroy others in their relentless pursuit of justice, and those who are religious are forced into political action.

Several themes of Greene's earlier novels – love, sex, pity, fear, despair and salvation – are observable in the structure of *The Honorary Consul*. "What is new in this novel, however," says J.P. Kulshrestha, "is the question of political commitment by men of religion who cannot shut their eyes and ears to the realities of the human situation. The question has engaged the attention of people all over the world, particularly in Latin America where political tyranny and social injustice thrive. The movement known as *Conscientiasation* inside the Church in Latin America focuses attention on the victims of an unjust system and on the duty of the Church to succour them. It is a movement of protest against conniving at or acquiescing in oppression. While it is largely in favour of non-violence and the way of Christ, there are some ardent spirits (Father Paolo Frere, Father Torres, et al.) who resort to direct political action in order to fight the iniquitous social and political order, as Leon Rivas does in this novel."¹²

In the same sequence, Roger Sharrock in his book – *Saints, Sinners and Comedians* seems to verify the religio-political nature of the double vision that is reflected in the core of the novel – *The Honorary Consul*: "The theme of political commitment and the political duty of a Christian in an unjust society is even more to the fore in *The Honorary Consul* than in *The Comedians*. Father Rivas is a Catholic priest who has become a Marxist revolutionary, and his school friend Dr. Plarr, the representative of indifference, takes sides for the sake of Rivas."¹³

Moreover, Robert Hoskins meditates and states: "*The Honorary Consul* is often referred to as a "political novel," and while that description is not a misnomer, it is equally correct to describe the work as a mature expression of Greene's continuing concern with the nature of love, and in that regard as well as its self-reference it can be seen as a logical successor to *Travels With My Aunt*."¹⁴

Finally, it is just and suitable to argue that Greene's view of his novel – *The Honorary Consul* is an unconditioned illustration of the double vision having a living status of religio-political division. His intense understanding of international politics and perception is invaluable when transported into his novels as the reality of the contemporary world. The detailed study of the novel – *The Honorary Consul* proves that Greene's imagination has two poles – the first one is situated in the territory of religion and the second one is located in the province of practical politics. The remarkable fact is that he has tried to interpenetrate the spiritual with the political – the city of God with the city of politics.

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