

**A Critical Essay on Graham Greene's  
*The End of the Affair*  
by  
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Many of you, perhaps, have taken a train from Victoria Station or Charing Cross or Waterloo and stopped briefly at the station at Clapham Junction, whose platform signs once proudly announced that it was Britain's busiest railway station--a designation, you may have thought while your train paused there, that seemed like it could not have been true; for while you surely saw the limitless plain of various platforms in all directions under the station's vast Victorian canopy of iron and glass, you likely did not see many people. Clapham Junction was Britain's busiest railway station based solely on the numbers of trains that arrived and departed on their respective ways to and from those three mainline stations in Central London, not on the basis of the numbers of passengers boarding or alighting. Or perhaps you have heard of that fictitious man on the Clapham omnibus, or, if you are a lawyer, you have invoked him in defence of a charge of negligence. You might not otherwise have had a reason to have heard of Clapham; and, unless you had a personal interest in one of its mildly famous but mostly bland residents, you probably would not have had a reason to visit the town that began as a farmstead in pre-Norman times, but which had, by the beginning of the twentieth century, become the most ordinary of ordinary London suburbs.

When I was an undergraduate it was my interest in one of those past residents--or, really, a diversion I took in order to

learn to manufacture an interest in one of its past residents about whom I was meant to be writing a paper--that caused me to find myself at the top of the staircase leading from the way out of the Clapham Common tube station on an uncharacteristically sunny and warm afternoon in July 1986. I was there to visit Holy Trinity Clapham church, the base of the Clapham Sect that introduced a strain of Evangelicalism into the Anglican church and whose members included William Wilberforce, the great abolitionist parliamentarian who introduced the Slave Trade Act of 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, and the man who was also the purported subject of that history paper whose due date was looming large in my imagination. I turned right out of the station, and there was the eighteenth-century church building, with its elegant portico facing across Clapham Common, a pond in the foreground, the bandstand, which in subsequent years has become somewhat famous in its own right, standing at some distance further down behind the rows of plane trees. After exploring the church and learning that Mr. Wilberforce's London home was a short walk away, I headed in that direction, down the High Street and left at Clapham Common North Side.

By coincidence--or perhaps it was by divine inspiration--I had been taking a course on modern British prose at the same time as this history class at a different university, and *The End of the Affair* had been one of the books we had read; **[and the presence this evening as our guest my professor from that class may well restrain my comments here]** and so it was that I passed Wilberforce House without noticing it the first time, so keen was I to see the little tell-tale blue disk placed by English Heritage that I managed to miss it altogether, until I stumbled into the Cedars Road where it ends at Clapham Common. And that is when it occurred to me, when I had the epiphany that

"The Common" where Maurice Bendrix saw Henry Miles walking in the rain one night in January 1946 was really this Clapham Common, that Clapham Common North Side was the North Side where Henry had lived with Sarah at No. 17, that Holy Trinity Clapham was the eighteenth century church that had stood like a toy in an island of grass on the summer evening Maurice had first met Henry's wife, from under whose porticos Maurice had watched for Sarah's door to open and where she had sought shelter from the rain that night Maurice had seen Henry when he perhaps had felt the hand plucking at his elbow encouraging him to go speak to him. I turned around and began to search for No. 17; Mr. Wilberforce receded in my imagination.

It turns out that there is no No. 17 Clapham Common North Side. Wilberforce House--for there it was, there was the blue sign--is a double house at No. 15. The houses that face the Common on the North Side all have odd numbers, but because No. 15 is doubled, the next number is No. 19. The fictitious Mileses lived in the far half of the house where Wilberforce had lived at the turn of the previous century with his wife and six children. It turned out everything else as Graham Greene had described likewise was almost there: the house at No. 14 Clapham Common South Side had been partially rebuilt in a style reminiscent of the postwar utilitarianism of the 1950s--perhaps having been rebuilt after a bomb exploded on its front steps, leaving only a Victorian transom window of such hideous color and design that it seems impossible that it ever could have been fashionable; the largish house at No. 16 Cedars Road that appeared to have been divided into flats sometime long before its neighbors had been; the Roman Catholic church of St. Mary in Clapham Park Road, on the other side of the tube station from which I had emerged that summer afternoon; and, in town, the

newish buildings that had been built in the 1960s along the Paddington side of Leinster Terrace which obviously had been built after the hotels of Arbuckle Avenue had been destroyed in the war, that place where Sarah and Maurice had first made love that, by the time Bendrix is writing about it, had been made a patch of air, and the Roman church in Maiden Lane downhill from where there is a grating in the pavement over a vent from the Underground. Greene has skewed some of these details, of course; not only does he never name Clapham, and he changes Cedars Road to Cedar Road, Corpus Christi Roman Catholic Church in Maiden Lane is in the opposite direction from the National Portrait Gallery, where Sarah first heads after she parts from Maurice after their first lunch in almost two years--which means that the geography as Parkis describes Sarah's movements in his first report is not actually correct. But as the teenager I was, the perfection of the detail that Greene so accurately did describe, and the systematic way he seemed to have changed it in order to fictionalize it, was overwhelming.

It is this perfection of detail that has continued to attract me to this novel more than thirty years later. As I have told some of you from time to time, this is one of my top favorite two or three novels of all time. When I was an undergraduate, I found the accessibility of the text enthralling; and I think we have discussed in this club in the past when we have read Greene that one of his gifts--his own "technical ability," if you will--is how he uses language to draw his readers into the action of his stories: this is not *The Sound and the Fury*, even if it was William Faulkner who described *The End of the Affair* as "one of the most true and moving novels of my time in anybody's language." Rereading it

sometime later, I was struck by its allusions to the saints--its explicit reference to Sta. Teresa de Ávila where Bendrix says

The words of human love have been used by the saints to describe their vision of God; and so I suppose we might use the terms of prayer, meditation, contemplation to explain the intensity of the love we feel for a woman. We too surrender memory, intellect, intelligence; and we too experience the deprivation, the *noche oscura*, and sometimes as a reward a kind of peace. . . ,

or Father Crompton's quoting St. Augustine at the end of the novel where he says

. . . [t]ime comes out of the future which didn't exist yet, into the present that had no duration, and went into the past which had ceased to exist. . . ."

And maybe sometime later, sometime after I had made a more thorough study of *The Confession of St. Augustine*, I came to have an appreciation for Greene's handling of time in telling his tale. The first couple of occasions I read *The End of the Affair*, I was so caught up in the action of the plot--the aspect time of the account, if you will--that I failed to give much consideration to the narrative time. "Arbitrarily," Bendrix tells us in the first paragraph, he chose a night in January 1946 as the time to begin to tell his story, which, at the beginning of the second chapter of Book One, he tells us was three years before the time he was writing. Sarah's last diary entry was February 12, 1946; fewer than two weeks pass after this last entry before Sarah has died, and the narrative time is less than another month after that. In other words, the narrative time of the novel is about two months--from January until March of 1946--told in retrospect three years later, in 1949, but describing events which had occurred as early as 1939, which had been the beginning of the affair. Greene's fluid handling of aspect time, which often changes from paragraph to

paragraph, underlines an Augustinian approach to time, that time begins where nothing exists and goes to where nothing has continued to exist and the suggestion that Augustine himself makes in his *Confession*, but which Greene only points at indirectly, that eternity is not so much the infinity of time, but the absence of time altogether.

In 1980 Greene wrote in *Ways of Escape* that while writing *The End of the Affair* he found himself "continually reading and rereading" *The Good Soldier* by Ford Madox Ford, whose narrator, like Maurice Bendrix, slides seamlessly from one aspect time to another. Indeed, Ford's narrator slides from narrative time to narrative time almost as easily as he slides from aspect time to aspect time, much as Faulkner allows Benjy Compson to do in the opening to *The Sound and the Fury*, and with similar confusing effect on the reader. But while manipulation of time in *The Good Soldier* may suggest to the reader that the narrator has no understanding of his own experience, Bendrix believes he understands his experience all too well; his own shifts in aspect time underscore the irony that he does not understand his experience at all.

Of course, I am omitting here, in my discussion of what I find most remarkable about this novel, the central question it forces us to ask. What was it that happened to Maurice when the bomb exploded at No. 14 South Side? Many critics of *The End of the Affair*, who otherwise have found substantial literary merit in it, have complained about the "miraculous" characteristics of it: Greene demands not only that we suspend disbelief in the way that we always must do when reading fiction, but that we believe in a specifically religious context. They are offended by the notion that an infant's baptism is something like a vaccine, something that a parent does to his child against her will,

ostensibly in order to protect her, but which "vaccine" comes to take the form of something irrational (notwithstanding that this prophylaxis is entirely logical to the believing Catholic). They are put off by what they interpret to be Sarah's performing miracles after her death--or, to put it another way, the intervention of a non-existing god into the ordinary affairs of mortals: mid-century modern fiction in the English-speaking world, they argue, is not Greek drama. And the idea that Sarah would willingly end her temporal happiness by ending her affair in order to save the life of her lover through prayers to a deity in whom she did not believe requires a suspension of disbelief that is entirely beyond the normal boundaries a twentieth century writer should expect of his audience. As one critic remarked, the anger that he felt about having to accept that the dead Sarah was intervening in human affairs was exactly to the same degree that he had earlier felt emotional engagement with the characters; and that this transformation had exasperated him to the extent that his only reaction was reflexively to chuck his volume against the nearest most fragile object that would be destroyed by the impact.

With all due respect, I think this reaction is a little overwrought. I would admit, myself, that the coincidences that occur toward the end of the novel might have something of a *deus ex machina* quality. But at no time does Greene insist that we believe. Greene leaves intentionally unanswered the question of whether Sarah's intense prayers to the God in whom she did not want to believe were answered, or whether Maurice merely came to after having been briefly struck unconscious. Bendrix's own description of what happened to him is, to my mind, one of the most beautiful and suggestive passages I have read:

. . . I woke after five seconds or five minutes in a changed world. . . . My mind for a few moments was clear of everything except a sense of tiredness as though I had been on a long journey. I had no memory at all of Sarah and I was completely free from anxiety, jealousy, insecurity, hate; my mind was a blank sheet on which somebody had just been on the point of writing a message of happiness. I felt sure that when my memory came back the writing would continue and that I should be happy.

If we were to suspend disbelief and imagine that Sarah's prayers had been answered, then Maurice's experience might be that of entering the afterlife: he has no conception of how long he has been asleep--five seconds, five minutes, five millennia perhaps--because, of course, eternity exists in the absence of time. He has the impression that he has been on a long journey, perhaps because he was en route to that heavenly Jerusalem, that undiscovered country. And he has neither anxiety nor jealousy nor insecurity nor hate, and there was something having to do with a sense of happiness that had been just about to happen before he awoke. Or is it that he awoke after having been knocked unconscious, after he had briefly slipped out of temporal experience and returned not knowing how long he had been down, during which time he had been able to forget whatever had been causing his insecurity and anxiety? The fact that he then reports that he had been bruised from shoulders to knees by what must have been the shadow of the door that had caught itself on other debris and prevented its landing fully on him suggests something miraculous may have happened; on the other hand, when one is knocked unconscious in an accident, he would not really remember how or why he had sustained any of his injuries. The subtlety of this unanswered question is what, in my opinion, makes this novel so remarkable: this is not *Ben Hur* or *Quo Vadis*; believers are apt to read the account of Sarah's miracles and of Maurice's change from one who had not believed

in a God in January 1946 to one who believed enough in Him by March of that year to implore him to leave him alone forever, and find themselves reading an intensely religious novel; meanwhile non-believers are apt to read about odd experiences that the characters in this entertaining but unreal story have had and conclude that they must really be suffering from some kind of a glandular deficiency. As for those who read it and want to use it to destroy some delicate object, those who may read it in unbelief while at the same time refusing to suspend disbelief, I offer the advice that Maurice gives to himself and takes--that they should quickly hang up the receiver before they hear uttered that foolish newspaper word that is the alternative to "coincidence." And as for those who find the believers' interpretation to involve too much superstition, Father Crompton may well provide the beginning of the answer: "Superstition," he says, "gives people the idea that this world is not everything. It could be the beginning of wisdom." The Father suggestively omits the first half of this direct quote from Chapter 9 of the Book of Proverbs, that it is the fear of the LORD that is the beginning of wisdom.

If I (together, perhaps, with William Faulkner) am alone in believing that *The End of the Affair* is among the greatest novels ever written, I am certainly not alone in believing it is Graham Greene's best work.