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“Memory Cheats”: Deception, Recollection, And The Problem Of Reading In *The Captain And The Enemy*

Frances McCormack,

The 2013 Graham Greene
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The Captain and the Enemy is one of Greene’s least well-known and least loved novels. It has received little critical attention, but that is hardly any wonder: it is a frustrating, perplexing, and ultimately unfulfilling read. Greene himself had great difficulty completing it. Leopoldo Durán, in *Graham Greene: Friend and Brother*, notes that

the revision of *The Captain and the Enemy* almost drove him to despair. He did not like it. He never had liked it. He returned the typescript several times; on various occasions he told me: ‘at last it’s finished.’ And yet, on 9 November 1987, he was still working on this stubborn novel. And to think he had kept it in the drawer of his table for fourteen years.¹

Despite the challenges of its composition, Richard Greene cautions us against allowing

our knowledge of Greene’s difficulties with the text to shape our reception of it:

Greene’s dislike for his own books is not to be taken seriously. *The Captain and the Enemy*, though on a smaller scale than the great works of his mid-career, may be an unnoticed masterpiece. It is at the very least a scourging of the rag and bone shop of the heart.²

Deeply emotive, dark in its comedy, evasive and narratively untrustworthy, full of lacunae and contradictions, this is, despite (or perhaps because of) its many frustrations for the reader, a provocative and compelling read. Although it is a four-part narrative with a fragmented structure and little continuity between the parts, with a meandering plot and an ultimately unlikeable narrator, it warrants more attention than has been afforded by both Greene scholars and lay aficionados.

The plot defies any kind of structural or narrative unity. It is set in four different time periods: Baxter’s distant past, his immediate past, his present, and the time in the immediate aftermath of his death. It takes place in Berkhamsted, London, and Panama. It raises questions that remain unanswered; it follows narrative threads a certain distance before abandoning them; and it leaves the reader without any substantial understanding of characters or their motivations. In his *Preface to Greene*, Cedric Watts notes that

The structure is loose, and the work as a whole seems rather weakly derivative from previous materials; it gives a sense that a social narrative of a considerably earlier period (concerning the Captain,

¹ Leopoldo Durán, *Graham Greene: Friend and Brother*, Broadway: Harper Collins, p. 205.

² Richard Greene, ed., *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters*, New York: W.W. Norton, p. 399 n21.

Liza, and Baxter as a boy) is being grafted onto a tale of current politics.³

It appears, indeed, that Greene himself had great difficulty with its composition. Jon Wise and Mike Hill, investigating the Greene archives at Georgetown University, have uncovered what they describe as a “messy” process.⁴ These archives contain one autographed manuscript and two typescript drafts. The autographed manuscript has dated sections after every few thousand words with the earliest section dated to January 1976. The page numbers are erratic; the narration shifts from first-person to third-person and back again; and on a cover note to the containing folder, Greene has written “Needs arranging.” The typescript drafts are equally erratic. The first, dated January 1985, is written entirely in the first person, and is reworked extensively in Greene’s hand. The second is undated and incomplete, again with corrections and additions. Wise and Hill conclude, therefore, that the novel was “begun sometime in the mid-1970s, added to quite slowly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, then brought to something like a finished product by 1985, but perhaps recast once more before publication in 1988.”⁵

The title of the novel was not any less problematic for Greene: originally, *Getting to Know the Captain*, Greene altered the title to *Knowing the Captain*, before settling on the title taken from George A. Birmingham’s novel *Hyacinth* and used as an epigraph to Greene’s novel: “Will you be

sure to know the good side from the bad, the Captain from the enemy?”⁶

Intriguingly, the autographed manuscript is accompanied by an “Apologia” (revised over two drafts) in which Greene attempts to give an account of the process of composition of the novel. Originally, he intended to publish this with the novel as an explanatory note, but later changed his mind. In the “Apologia,” Greene explains that the novel was begun in Antibes in late 1974, two years before he visited Panama. Soon, he abandoned it to resume work on *The Human Factor*, and picked it up again, by strange coincidence, exactly four years later in the exact same spot. He writes:

I prayed last night my usual prayer for those I love or have hurt and without conviction one prayer this time for myself—that I could work again. For the first time in months I woke without melancholy [. . .]. Whatever happens now it has given me a happy day. If only this book could continue to my end.⁷

The process of composition continues in fits and starts, according to the “Apologia,” with the concluding note dated November 22, 1987:

Finished the first complete draft of *The Captain and the Enemy*. I will try not to ask the question which haunts me nearly always at the end of a book: was it worth the trouble?⁸

3 Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Greene* (Harlow: Longman-Pearson, 1997), p. 82.

4 Jon Wise and Mike Hill, *The Works of Graham Greene, Volume 2: A Guide to the Graham Greene Archives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 208.

5 Ibid.

6 George A. Birmingham, *Hyacinth* (London: Edward Arnold, 1906), chapter 20.

7 “Apologia,” from the autographed manuscript of *The Captain and the Enemy*, Georgetown University Library Archives, cited in Wise and Hill, *The Works of Graham Greene, Volume 2*, p. 210.

8 Ibid., p. 210.

The problems Greene faced in writing the novel may help to explain some of its apparently deliberate frustrations of the reader's attempt to decode it. This is a novel that calls into question the role of the author, the nature of autobiography, the reliability of recollection, and the process of searching for meaning in a text mediated by a first-person narrator (and one who, at that, has been raised by a confidence trickster). It interrogates the value of fiction and asks us to reflect on our own role in the reception of the text. Its readers are often left floundering, trying to construct or determine meaning, attempting to navigate the text's various obstacles and obfuscations, endeavoring to understand the essence of a text that is often obscure, disjointed, and as resistant to attempts to read it as it was resistant to its own composition.

Baxter, as a narrator, is notoriously unreliable: setting down his text as an autobiography, there is a self-consciousness to his composition that is absent from conversational first-person narration; it is crafted rather than spontaneous, and at many points Baxter reflects on what he is writing and how he is writing it. Throughout the text, he calls attention to the capriciousness of memory. The word *remember* is used 66 times in total throughout the novel, and *memory* fifteen. *Remember*, when it occurs, sometimes marks Baxter's surprise at his memory for minor details of his past (for example, "I can still remember the wetness of the gravel under my gym shoes,"⁹ "I still remember a few of the entries,"¹⁰ "I can remember

the exact phrase she used to this day"¹¹). At other times it is employed in imperatives uttered by the Captain to Baxter (or others) to remember details ("You'll remember, won't you, that I've left my suitcase behind the bar,"¹² "Remember that it's never too late to learn from a man like myself,"¹³ "Now remember what I told you,"¹⁴ "Finding's keeping—remember that"¹⁵). Elsewhere, however, Baxter uses the word *remember* to abdicate responsibility from telling the truth:

I don't pretend that I can remember correctly the details of this conversation. There are certain words which I do remember, but I invent far more of them, in order to fill in the gaps between their words, because I want so much to hear in my ears again the tone of their two voices. Above all I want to understand the only two people in whom I could recognize what I suppose can be described as a kind of love, a kind which to this day I have certainly never felt myself.¹⁶

The repeated emphasis on memory suggests that the reader place this faculty at the center of their interpretation of the book, and yet Baxter's flawed memories and his substitution of invention for memory cause that same reader to become distrustful of the faculty as it manifests itself throughout the novel. Memories ought to arouse the reader's suspicion; Greene reiterates, throughout this text and others, that they are unreliable, uncertain, precarious.

Greene is quoted by Robert Olen Butler as having said that "all good novelists have

9 Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, p. 9.

10 Ibid., p. 32.

11 Ibid., p. 43.

12 Ibid., p. 16.

13 Ibid., p. 16.

14 Ibid., p. 26.

15 Ibid., p. 31.

16 Graham Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy* (Penguin, 1989), p. 17.

bad memories. What you remember comes out as journalism; what you forget goes into the compost of the imagination.”¹⁷

The realm of autobiography, it seems, should lie somewhere between the two extremes of the setting down of vivid memories and the reconstruction of those that are more faint. James Olney, writing on the autobiographer’s task in the twentieth century in particular, remarks that

an agonized search for the self, through the mutually reflexive acts of memory and narrative, accompanied by the haunting fear that it is impossible from the beginning but also impossible to give over, is the very emblem of our time.¹⁸

In *The Captain and the Enemy*, Baxter sets out to narrate his life, to make sense of his past, but his experiences are filtered through the amorphousness of memory. He is conscious of the problematic nature of autobiography, and so allows himself the liberty of fictionalizing details of the past in order to make sense of the present. He asks himself “Is it only with today’s eyes that I seemed to see at that moment a certain shiftiness in his? Memory cheats.”¹⁹

Greene himself displays a consciousness of the fragility and unreliability of memory in *A Sort of Life*. He thinks back to his earliest memory of sitting in a pram at the top of a hill with a dead dog at his feet, and works backwards to try to reconstruct the facts: the dog was a pug owned by his older sister; it was run over, perhaps by a horse-carriage,

and killed; and his nurse thought that the best way to bring the cadaver home was by placing it at his feet in the pram. He notes that “The memory may well be a true one [...]” and relates his mother’s recounting of this narrative and his early utterance of “poor dog” as evidence, leaving that memory partially reconstructed, untested, and filtered through his mother’s own recollection.²⁰ He acknowledges, just a few lines later, the uncertainty of what is genuinely remembered and what is imagined, and throughout this autobiography he asserts the autonomy and intangibility of the workings of memory as he talks of his memory as operating somewhat independently of himself:

Memory is like a long broken night. As I write, it is as though I am waking from sleep continually to grasp at an image which I hope may drag in its wake a whole intact dream, but the fragments remain fragments, the complete stories always escape.²¹

A Sort of Life is as much Greene’s attempt to navigate his own memory as it is an attempt to navigate his past. “Memory often exaggerates” he says at one point, before admitting that he abandoned a novel about a school because he could not endure living in that environment in his memory.²² This consciousness of the vagaries and the sensitivity of memory leads him to create, in *The Captain and the Enemy*, a novel about the relationship between narrative, memory, and fiction in the construction of autobiography.

¹⁷ Robert Olen Butler, *Conversations with American Novelists: The Best Interviews from the Missouri Review*, eds. Kay Bonetti, Greg Michalson, Speer Morgan, Jo Sapp, and Sam Stowers (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1997), 201-16, p. 205.

¹⁸ James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. xiv-xv.

¹⁹ Graham Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, p. 35.

²⁰ Graham Greene, *A Sort of Life* (Vintage, 1999), p. 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Baxter warns us at many points throughout the *The Captain and the Enemy* that we ought not trust his memory, but he makes certain to defend his text. At points, he blames the nature of memory itself:

I am doing my best to describe a typical lesson which I received from the Captain, but I realize only too well that my description cannot be factually accurate. It has passed through the memory and the memory rejects and alters [. . .].²³

He abdicates responsibility from his alterations—they are an inevitable part of any narration of past experience. Elsewhere, though, he asserts that truth must take a subordinate role to his impulse to write:

I cannot pretend that all these details which I am trying so hard to reconstruct from my memory are necessarily true, but I feel myself today driven by a compulsive passion now that we are separated to make these two people live before my eyes again, to bring them back out of the shadows and set them to play their sad parts as closely as possible to the truth. I am only too well aware of how I may be weaving fact into fiction but without any intention of betraying the truth. I want above anything else to make the two of them clear to myself, so that they will continue to live as visibly as two photographs might seem to do propped up on a shelf beside my bed, but I don't own a single photograph of either of them.²⁴

Here, the creation of fiction is centered on reconstructing, excavating, filtering, retrieving, and is in this way related to what we know about how memory operates.

The functions and operation of memory demonstrate that Baxter's "recollection" is far more contrived than he would have us believe. There are three main functions to the information-processing element of memory: encoding (receiving information), storage (holding this encoded information in the form of internal representations), and retrieval (recalling the information, based on some prompt or cue, or recognizing something once presented with it again). In terms of memory, encoding means more than just experiencing or perceiving the information: it involves interpretation—converting the information from one form to another. We see a word not as a string of individual letters, but we recode it into a meaningful unit. In the same way, fiction encodes and recodes events semantically, making sense of them, forming them conceptually into a particular shape. Retrieval can be of short-term memories or of long-term memories. The former are stored and retrieved sequentially; the latter are retrieved by association. Recollections of long-term memories tend to be disjointed, out of chronological narrative sequence, apparently random but linked by affiliation. It would be apt, then, if Baxter's narrative—disjointed as it is—were a conversational, stream-of-consciousness recollection of events. As autobiography, though, the lack of order in his recollections is suspicious. He is content with merely recalling—or at least giving the impression of doing so—without imposing a narrative structure, not entirely plausible given his repeated assertion that his autobiography is a fulfillment of his desire to write.

None of this, however, explains the repeated attention that Baxter draws to his

²³ Graham Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, p. 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

failed or misshapen recollections. There are four main theories of forgetting in psychology. Decay theory²⁵ holds that memories that are not used fade over time, but this theory is generally discredited as a factor in the forgetting of long-term memories. Benjamin Lahey asserts that

Memory “traces” appear to be “permanent” once they make it into [long-term memory]. Forgetting does not seem to happen in [long-term memory] because of disuse over time but because other factors, particularly *interference*, make memories irretrievable.²⁶

Interference theory asserts that other memories interfere with the retrieval of what the individual is trying to recall.²⁷ It seems, though, that this interference primarily affects the retrieval of information, rather than of experience. Freud believed in what psychologists now refer to as motivated forgetting, holding that the conscious mind often dealt with unpleasant memories by pushing them into the unconscious to repress them.²⁸

More fitting to the problem of memory in *The Captain and the Enemy*, however, is reconstruction theory,²⁹ which suggests that the information stored in long-term memory is not forgotten, but just recalled in a distorted way. When Quigley tells Baxter about the credit that has been arranged

for him at the Continental Hotel, Baxter’s reconstructive memory jolts into operation:

A great many years had passed since I last saw the Captain, but I remembered again that other chit which he signed after the smoked salmon and the orangeade.³⁰

Baxter forgets (or neglects to mention) the pork chops that were also served at the meal, perhaps because it was the salmon that had made him thirsty and therefore impressed itself on his memory. His recollection of the event from his distant past that he relates in part one of the novel changes shape, albeit only slightly, in the retelling.

Psychologists have insisted that long-term memory stores meaning better than it does episodic detail, so we are likely to remember the substance of an event, but we may distort or add details to be consistent with the general idea of the memory. An experiment conducted by Johnson, Bransford, and Solomon in 1973 tested this theory. Research participants listened to the following passage:

It was late at night when the phone rang and a voice gave a frantic cry. The spy threw the secret document into the fireplace just 30 seconds before it would have been too late.³¹

Later, participants were asked if they heard the following sentence:

25 Cf. Robert S. Woodworth, *Experimental Psychology*. Oxford: Holt, 1938.

26 Benjamin Lahey, *Psychology: An Introduction*, 11th ed., pp. 243-4.

27 Benton J. Underwood and Leo Postman, ‘Extraexperimental Sources of Interference in Forgetting’, *Psychological Review* 67 (1960): 73-95.

28 Cf. Sigmund Freud, ‘The Aetiology of Hysteria,’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. III: 1893-99 (London: Hogarth Press).

29 Frederic Charles Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

30 Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, p. 115.

31 M.K. Johnson, J.P. Bransford, and S. Solomon (1973), ‘Memory for Tacit Implications of Sentences,’ *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 98 (1973): 203-05.

The spy burned the secret document 30 seconds before it would have been too late.

The original passage had said nothing about burning the documents, but most participants said that they had heard the second passage. The results of the experiment demonstrate that the subjects had based their memory on inferences that they created from the spy throwing the document into the fireplace. Subjects had retrieved the meaning of the sentence from their long-term memories, but had distorted the details because of their own inferences. It certainly seems that in *The Captain and the Enemy*, Baxter's recollections are influenced by association. For instance, when he sees the Captain and Liza kiss, he is reminded of another kiss he witnessed:

They kissed each other at last—not the kind of passionate kiss which I had seen only once on the screen at *King Kong* and remembered ever after, but a small timorous kiss on either cheek, as though even that gesture was something which could be dangerous to the loved one, like an infection.³²

This fictional kiss—the one that is part of Baxter's initiation into the experience of love that has previously been denied him—becomes the template against which he measures all other such expressions of affection. Having measured the kiss between the Captain and Liza against the love represented in the film, he concludes that their kiss is cold and tentative. But how are we to believe to be a credible witness a boy who perceives the world around him through the lens of either fiction or fantasy?

Later, however, Baxter reveals that it is not memory that gives rise to associations. He often recalls details not because of their occurrence but because he has crafted them into a meaningful text:

It was a good many years since I had last seen the Captain, and I felt as though I were waiting for a stranger or indeed a character existing only on the pages of that youthful manuscript of mine, on which I am still working. He existed there better on paper than in memory. For example if I tried to remember the occasions when he had taken me to a cinema it was only *King Kong* which came to my mind because I had recorded that memory in writing. When I thought of his previous arrivals after a long absence—only too frequent during our life together—it was the unexpected one with a bearded face which I saw in my mind's eye, because I had described it in words, or the stranger talking to the headmaster, the one who had afterwards fed me with smoked salmon. It was again because I had tried to recreate this character in my sorry attempt to become a 'real writer'.³³

The story of *King Kong* becomes a leit-motif in the novel, and although memory impinges upon its retelling, it shapes so much of our reading of the text. Even Baxter's memories of the film are tarnished. When he recounts his first viewing of the film he doubts even its title:

it was I think called *King Kong* [. . .] King Kong, if it was King Kong, clambered about the skyscrapers with a blonde girl—whose name I don't remember—in his arms.³⁴

³² Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, p. 59.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 125-30.

³⁴ Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, pp. 43-4.

Not only does he have difficulty attempting to recall the title of the film and the name of its eponymous protagonist, but he also misremembers details. For most of the Empire State Building scene, Ann Darrow lies at the top of the tower. King Kong picks her up twice and gazes on her lovingly, before placing her down again on the relative safety of a ledge, out of the line of the machine-gun fire.³⁵ One of the key details to adhere to Baxter's memory is of the female lead kicking violently at the ape. At all of the points in the movie in which she is held, she kicks her legs in protest, but in a terpsichorean fashion, and never makes contact with the ape. Baxter's memory of the film has been shaped, like the spy story in the experiment performed by Johnson, Bransford and Solomon, by his interpretation of the kicking, rather than by the image of the kicking itself. But just as the narrative of *King Kong*, as it appears in the novel, is fashioned by Baxter's reconstruction of it to suit his frame of reference, so too does narrative come to fashion his memory: characters are more clearly drawn in his writing than in his imagination, and so his narrative serves as the cue for his recall.

Narrative shapes Baxter's memory, and it also allows him to make sense of past experience. The American psychologist, Donald E. Polkinghorne, writes:

Narrative meaning functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units. It provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions. It is the primary scheme

by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful.³⁶

For Baxter, then, the desire to write could be seen as a way of making sense of past events, and of making "these two people live before [his] eyes again, to bring them back out of the shadows and set them to play their sad parts" by structuring these past events into a broadly coherent shape. His consciousness of the problematic nature of memory could be a genuine expression of the frustration of the effect of time on the ability to recall.

But why Baxter should want to bring to life two characters to whom he has no emotional attachment is at first perplexing. He explains:

It's not for any love I feel for them. It is as though I had taken them quite cold-bloodedly as fictional characters to satisfy this passionate desire of mine to write.³⁷

His is a narrative in which the desire for recollection competes with the desire to make sense of the past. Making sense of the past involves both interpretation and interpolation: he can only understand by filling in some of the details. However, the suggestion of his "passionate desire" to write is ambiguous, and leaves us to wonder whether we should read the text as an autobiography with elements of fiction or as pure fiction within a fiction. As Brian Moore writes, in his *New York Times* review of the novel:

The chronological setting is in the 1950s, but the atmosphere is like that of prewar England when the future held no promise and despair fell like rain on the grim

35 Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack, David O. Selznik (Producers), Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack (Directors), *King Kong* (United States: RKO, 1933).

36 Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 11).

37 Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, p. 51.

streets and squares. This fudging of precise dates is deliberate and heightens the dichotomy between what the narrator thinks he remembers and what he is inventing in his role as a writer. Thus, the unreliability of memory as a guide to our true feelings becomes one of the themes of the book.³⁸

It is not only memory that is unreliable, though: the text as a whole is unpredictable and ultimately untrustworthy. Characters' identities are fluid: the Captain assumes a number of names, and signs his last letter "The Captain, the Colonel, the Major, the Sergeant, Señor Smith'" with an exclamation mark after each name.³⁹ One's name sets the standard for one's life in the novel; Liza tells Jim how when she met the Captain he was called Colonel Claridge, but he changed it soon when he realized that he couldn't live up to it. Baxter notes:

there is a strange importance about names. You can't trust them until you have tried them out.⁴⁰

He is surprised by his own failure to have realized that he could easily have changed his hated name simply by adopting a new one.⁴¹ He asks a question that could be as much on the reader's behalf as on his own:

Would I ever cease to be a stranger in this region of the world where I was at a loss to remember all the names?⁴²

We, as readers, are strangers in a text in which names are unreliable, and identity

is fluid, constantly searching for signposts of meaning, indicators of truth, something solid within the text that we can use as a cornerstone for our interpretation. The novel repeatedly asks us to interrogate how we read it and how we extract or construct meaning.

Even language is shown by the novel to fail to stand up to any scrutiny of its reliability. The Captain uses words whose sounds he likes, but which he doesn't fully understand, and this quirk is attributed to a highly implausible story in which the Captain has in his possession in a prison camp only half of a dictionary. "The other half had been used as a bum wiper,"⁴³ the Devil tells Baxter, perhaps echoing the cavalier attitude to language that permeates the novel. Meaning is defined in the novel by the speaker with no regard for the hearer (or reader), and so language becomes as fluid as identity, constantly shifting, always out of reach. We experience some of the problems of reading through Baxter's own attempts to engage with texts—whether those he has composed himself or those written by others. He uses reading to avoid his tedious Bible lessons with Liza, by choosing either inexplicable or unsuitable passages. He reads the letters written by the Captain and intended for Liza—she wants them destroyed lest they fall into the hands of strangers—while reassuring her that he has destroyed them without reading them. His readings are often superficial and unsystematic; he scours the letters for the word *love*, notes its absence, and remarks on the Captain's unusual use of language. But when he does engage with a text, it

³⁸ Brian Moore, 'Father Lost me in a Backgammon Game,' *New York Times*. October 23, 1998.

³⁹ Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, p. 168.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

often creates a sense of disorientation for him because it does not tally with his own experience or perceptions:

I read the letters several times. It was as though I was looking through someone else's eyes at the dying woman who had been my substitute mother, and as I seemed to peer at her between the lines, the mystery grew. [. . .] but when I read the Captain's letters I found myself in a foreign land where the language was totally strange to me, and even when a word was identical in my own tongue, it seemed to have a quite different meaning.⁴⁴

The novel is largely metafictional: it uses self-referential narrative devices to repeatedly remind us that what we're reading—even Baxter's autobiography—is a fictional construct, and to ask questions about why writers write and how readers read. Yet, that the novel, and the autobiography contained within it, make such heavy demands of the reader, is hardly surprising. Obscurity, in this case, is key to compelling us to attempt to understand how, in a text that relies on the construction of memories and the tenacious connection between recollection and truth, that text itself constructs meaning.

The use of language in the novel is another device used to compound the self-reflexivity of the text. David Crystal, who bases an essay on his assertion that "Explicit reference to language is a major (albeit neglected) element in Greene's narrative artistry, inevitably conveying danger signals,"⁴⁵ notes that

The Captain is an ambiguous character. He does not treat language with respect. He makes up words—a very bad sign. Not that the child is totally innocent. He has made up words too [. . .]. This is language as mystery. Language, for Greene, is a bit like a mysterious maze, which has an entrance but not necessarily an exit, and in which one might get lost forever.⁴⁶

Language, names and identity are in a permanent state of flux in the novel, thereby enhancing the disconcerting nature of the eccentric narration, unreliable memories, and characters who are only shifting shadows without fully realized identities—just snapshots on a bedside shelf. Even the title of the novel is vague and ambiguous; Leopoldo Durán recounts his attempt to understand the title:

Without ever having delved very deeply into this novel, I expounded my view about the Captain's 'enemy'. For me, it was both the 'Devil' and the Americans, as Pablo affirms in the novel. 'That's Pablo's view,' Graham said to me. 'It's more philosophical than that.'⁴⁷

Greene revealed nothing more; through the novel the reader is left to mold these formless identities into some sort of shape—to read between the lines of Baxter's text, to attempt to determine truth from failed memory and fiction, and to try to decipher, as the epigraph puts it, the Captain from the Enemy.

44 Ibid, pp. 89-90.

45 David Crystal, "Going Especially Careful: Language Reference in Graham Greene," in *Dangerous Edges of Graham Greene: Journeys with Saints and Sinners*, eds Dermot Gilvary and Darren Middleton (Continuum, 2011): 128-48, p. 128.

46 Ibid, p. 136.

47 Durán, *Graham Greene: Friend and Brother*, p. 185.

The reader's task is not made any less complicated by Baxter's own insistence on the fictional elements of his writing. He often does not trust his own perception, let alone his own imagination:

I thought he winked at me, but I could hardly believe it. In my experience grown-ups did not wink, except at each other.⁴⁸

The novel is saturated with suggestions of self-consciously flawed interpretations, of half-truths and of lies—whether those of the narrator or those of the characters who surround him. Baxter repeatedly cautions us to distrust textual authority: he tells us how, as a child, he had always taken for granted that newspapers contained what he defined as "the gospel truth." Texts, this text cautions us, are where secrets are hidden (the newspaper containing the story of the jewelry robbery, for instance) and where lies are told. Baxter tells us of his first job as a newspaper reporter:

having gained the job in spite of my youth by a very readable account of a bizarre accident which never really happened. Perhaps the title I gave the piece had caught the editorial attention—"The Biter Bit." I feared the editor might check up with the source which I falsely claimed, but I timed my piece well, the paper was just going to press, and the editor was anxious to get it in the first and only edition before the story could hit the headlines of the giants, the *Mail* or the *Express*. I had been innocent enough before then to share Liza's belief that what counted for a newspaper

was truth rather than reader-interest, and my success helped to cure my innocence.⁴⁹

Here, Baxter shapes his own metafictional text—the title, "The Biter Bit" refers not only to the unrevealed bizarre accident, but also to the gullibility of the reader of his story: the fictional reader of his journalism and the actual reader of his auto-fiction. Reader-interest, and not truth, he comes to believe, determines the nature of a text, and so he suggests that he is a master of creating the text that he thinks will most pique the reader's interest. Readers, Baxter insists, determine the level of the text's truth value—a truth, that he asserts is hidden "deeper than any grave"⁵⁰—through what we demand from it; the author merely supplies what we want. Just as the reader may mistrust the fictional author, then, so too does he mistrust them.

Through Baxter's narration, even the sincerity of the Captain's letters to Liza become suspect. Baxter's perception mediates the Captain's spasmodic and indecisive composition of these letters from Panama, as though the latter is a schoolchild completing a particularly difficult exercise. Even Baxter's own partially formed narrative jars with him in part two of the novel, and he fails to recognize his own handwriting:

I was taken a little by surprise when I came on this unfinished story—fiction, autobiography?—which I have written here. [. . .] There had been a period in my youth when I had nursed the vain ambition to become what I thought of as a 'real writer', and I suppose it was then that I began this fragment.⁵¹

48 Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, p. 10.

49 Ibid, p. 87.

50 Ibid, p. 128.

51 Ibid., p. 84.

We are continually reminded that this text is not to be relied upon, that it is a fiction within a fiction, and that our construction of its meaning is what will give the text its ultimate shape.

The text shifts from one literary mode to another: from fiction to autofiction, from epistolary novel to travel writing, from mystery to fabulation, and the reader is repeatedly called upon to help create meaning, as the reader is left to wonder whether there is any way to get to the essence of the text. Yet, in order to verify and validate our reading, we have to search for something within the text that is, in itself, verifiable. When, in part four, we step outside of Baxter's narration, we are left in the hands of an objective omniscient narrator, someone with no vested interest in the game of constructing meaning—a narrator we can trust. In part four lies the locus of meaning of the novel. Part four is again metafictional—about the act of reading, rather than the act of writing, as Colonel Martínez attempts to make sense of Baxter's discarded manuscript. Martínez refers to the text as a novel, rather than an autobiography, suggesting that he is a far more astute reader than we. There is, though, one final puzzle to be solved:

He touched the papers piled on his desk as though the mere feel of them might convey some answer to his question and then he spoke his thoughts aloud: 'King Kong. It haunts me that name King Kong. King Kong is the only clue we have. Could he be a name in some elementary book code which is all they would have trusted to an amateur like that? A character in Shakespeare, perhaps. Some famous line that even the gringos would recognize. Well, the boy's gone. He can do no harm

to us. All the same . . . how I would like to break that code of his. King Kong.'⁵²

The final line of the novel, narrated by Martínez, reads almost like a demand to the reader to supply the answer: "what or who is King Kong?" As readers, we are given the key to understanding the novel: we must decode what King Kong means to Baxter. In the fiction constructed around Baxter's autobiography, Greene has cautioned us against believing anything Baxter writes. The reference to the content of *King Kong* is true, though, because it lies outside of the fiction, and can be independently verified by us. It may be reshaped by Baxter's flawed memory or by the fictional tier of his narrative, but it remains independent from the text because it exists in the real world. Let us look again, then, at some of the details of Baxter's engagement with this fictional work.

Baxter's viewing of the film is dominated by his failure to comprehend, not understanding why the ape does not abandon the unwilling object of his affections. The Captain, who is brought to the brink of tears by the film, on the other hand, attempts to explain the interconnectedness of love and pain, but since only pain—not love—lies within the scope of Baxter's experiential frame of reference, he is at a loss to decipher the motif that he will forever associate with love. Indeed, much of the novel is Baxter's attempt to make sense of the peculiarities of human love. His knowledge of interpersonal relationships is shaped by his school experience of being an Amalekite: of being an outsider, picked on by the other students, having to remain constantly on guard. When the Captain tells him about Liza in advance of their meeting, Baxter can only understand her suffering in terms of his own:

⁵² Greene, *The Captain and the Enemy*, p.188

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

The word 'suffer' meant to me at that time the splashes of ink upon my face which still remained there [. . .], the visible sign of being an Amalekite, an outcast.⁵³

Baxter reiterates throughout the text that the word *love* is meaningless to him. He questions whether he feels any love for either the Captain or Liza (and whether they do for each other,) but he does not have the experiential frame of reference to answer his own questions. As a child he equates love with fear: Liza is afraid of life without the Captain, and he of life without her. Love, for him, ought to be passionate:

Even in later years, when sexual desire began to play its part, I would find myself wondering, do I love this girl or do I really only like her because of the pleasure that for the time being we share?⁵⁴

His understanding of love is not experiential, but fictive, based on the martyrology of King Kong for an unattainable and unrealistic love. All experience comes to be measured against this fiction, and so Greene creates a hermeneutic merry-go-round—a dizzying spinning of interpretation—where meaning is defined by fiction over experience, but where neither fiction nor memory of experience can be trusted. I write in "The Later Greene" that

Jim's flaw is his blindness to, and disinterest in, the virtues that surround him; he refuses to believe in the Captain's love for Liza—a love that is poignantly proven in the final line of the novel. As he

remains blind to the Captain's virtue—especially in his capacity for love—he spins for himself an intricate web of deceit from which he can only escape by attempting to determine where he stands in the Captain's affections. The second part of the novel—the part that echoes the tone and techniques of Greene's earlier entertainments—functions for the reader as a deliberate obfuscation of the theme of the redemptive power of human love that permeates it.⁵⁵

Greene masks what I consider to be the true message of the novel—the ennobling power of love—because love, as the novel shows, is indefinable, impossible to pin down, and constantly shape-shifting. But the discussion of love in *The Captain and the Enemy* is for another speaker on another occasion. What matters in this discussion is that experience, recollection, and the shaping of meaning through textuality might overlie, but never fully conceal, the reader's search for meaning.

And so, Greene creates a narrative that is at times exasperating, where names are what Snyder refers to as "fictions of convenience," where identity is fluid, and where memories are untrustworthy.⁵⁶ This text shifts the responsibility of finding meaning on to the reader, and makes us toil to extract some kind of hermeneutic sense. We're made complicit in the obfuscation of meaning—reading is depicted in the novel as being a process shaped by subjectivity, by experience and perception, and texts are unreliable. But towards the end of the novel the author

54 Ibid., p. 47.

55 Frances McCormack, "The Later Greene: From Modernist to Moralist" in *Dangerous Edges of Graham Greene: Journeys with Saints and Sinners*, eds Dermot Gilvary and Darren Middleton (Continuum, 2011): 263-76, p. 275.

56 Robert Lance Snyder, "'What or Who is King Kong': Graham Greene's *The Captain and the Enemy*", *Renascence* 65:2 (Jan 2013): 125-139.

gifts us with a small token that can help us make sense of the whole. *The Captain and the Enemy* deserves a second reading, and a third. Greene's final novel may be frustrating, but what better prize could he have left us with than a novel that proves that meaning is made not just by the author, but by the author in dialogue with his readers?

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