

THE QUIET AMERICAN AND THE NOVEL

Douglas Kerr. Studies in the Novel. Denton: Spring

2006. Vol. 38, Iss. 1; pg. 95, 13 pgs

People: Greene, Graham (author)

Author(s): Douglas Kerr

Document types: Commentary

Document features: References

Publication title: *Studies in the Novel.* Denton: Spring 2006. Vol. 38, Iss. 1; pg. 95, 13 pgs

Source type: Periodical

Text Word Count 6532

Abstract (Document Summary)

Kerr elucidates some of the genres in Graham Greene's Vietnam novel *The Quiet American*, focusing on the theme of writing through which the novel undergoes a process of inventing itself and emerges as an instance of a kind of writing that is both critical and self-critical. The novel is about writing and that the auto-criticism of discourse is indeed a constitutive of the novel form itself.

Full Text (6532 words)

Copyright University of North Texas, English Department Spring 2006

Graham Greene's Vietnam novel *The Quiet American* (1955) tells the story of a jaded English reporter, an idealistic American diplomat, and an inscrutable Vietnamese dancer who likes to go to the cinema. Or, to put it differently, it is about a man who writes reluctantly, another man who reads too eagerly, and a woman who apparently does not read or write at all, but who is also unreadable. This is a novel much concerned with reading and writing and the relation of both activities to reality. It considers and exemplifies different genres of writing—such as news reports, political journalism, poetry and private letters—and different genres of speech—such as debate, gossip, courtship, interrogation, and confession. Appropriately, it is also a text in which different modes of writing mix and jostle for supremacy—the epic story of war and the romance story of love, grimy policier, exotic orientalism, topical reportage (some of it lifted more or less wholesale from Greene's own journalism), existential fable, the monodrama of faith and unbelief. It is also in intertextual dialogue with a whole library of other novels from *Don Quixote* to Greene's own *The End of the Affair*.¹ This essay will begin to disentangle some of the genres in *The Quiet American* by focusing on the theme of writing through which, I will argue, the novel undergoes a process of inventing itself, and emerges as an instance of a kind of writing that is both critical and self-critical. I want to make the case that this is a novel about writing, and that this "auto-criticism of discourse" is indeed, as Bakhtin argued in "Discourse in the Novel," constitutive of the novel form itself. "This auto-criticism of discourse is one of the primary distinguishing features of the novel as a genre. Discourse is criticized in its relationship to reality: its attempt to faithfully reflect reality, to manage reality and to transpose it (the Utopian pretenses of discourse), even to replace reality as a surrogate for it (the dream and the fantasy that replace life)" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 412).

Bakhtin was not really sure whether the novel was a genre at all, since he saw it as a consciously structured hybrid of languages created out of a voracious

appetite for swallowing other forms of language. "It is...best conceived," Michael Holquist suggests in his Introduction to the essays in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "either as a supergenre, whose power consists in its ability to engulf and ingest all other genres (the different and separate languages peculiar to each), together with other stylized but non-literary forms of language; or not a genre in any strict, traditional sense at all" (xxix). The only great genre that is younger than the book, the novel is not a good neighbor, but is often skeptical and disrespectful of others, as Bakhtin explained in "Epic and Novel." "The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, re-formulating and reaccentuating them" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 5). Above all, and by virtue of what Bakhtin calls its "zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness" (11), the novel subjects other genres to the critical test of contact with what it claims to know as the real.²

Of course, for Bakhtin one of the great exemplars of this process was Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, "the classic and purest model of the novel as genre" (324), which maintains a running dialogue between the exaggerations and delusions of romance and the robust disenchantments of a contemporary actuality; and when we think of the Bakhtinian novel—the novel that seems to answer most productively to a Bakhtinian approach—we may be inclined to invoke big fat garrulous fictions, from *Don Quixote* to *Little Dorrit* to *The Brothers Karamazov*, novels with a large cast of talkative characters, and a complex dialogue among institutions and discourses and styles and traditions as well as among individuals. In seeking to apply this kind of analysis to a relatively lean, laconic, and humorless fiction like *The Quiet American*, with its homogeneous first-personal narration, I am encouraged by the initial observation that it is not only about a writer, but also about many kinds of writing, and their relation to experience. "Whenever Bakhtin spoke of dialogism he was silent on narrative," Ken Hirschkop has observed, "and whenever he spoke of narrative, he forgot to mention dialogue, as if the flourishing of one principle entailed the reticence of the other" (225). To pay attention to the thematization of writing in a novel is one way of closing that gap, with due respect to the inseparability of the representational and the dialogic in fiction.

To be sure, although it has a writer for a central character, *The Quiet American* is far from a romantic celebration of the writer as hero. The English journalist Thomas Fowler appears to take no pride, and not much interest, in his own writing, which is valuable to him in providing him a professional reason for staying in Vietnam. His reporting of the colonial war in French Indochina is subject to censorship and he has been careful not to risk expulsion by filing news that would displease the French authorities. In any case, war reporting, it seems, is a speech genre not always dependable for truthfulness;³ when Bill Granger is congratulated for a graphic action report headlined "Highway to Hell," he says he never went anywhere near it (*The Quiet American* 35-6). No wonder Fowler is

skeptical about what can be learned from writing. "You know, if you live in a place for long you cease to read about it," he tells Alden Pyle (24). Pyle, who is the "quiet American" of the title, replies cautiously-"Of course I always like to know what the man on the spot has to say"-but this difference of views about writing is the first of the defining gaps that open up between the older and younger man.

For Pyle is intensely bookish. He has an enormous respect for what he calls serious writers (this excludes novelists, poets, and dramatists). Above all he venerates York Harding, author of *The Advance of Red China*, an American diplomatic correspondent and cold warrior whose ideas about Southeast Asia will inspire Pyle's own intervention, in the name of a Third Force in Vietnam, with its tragic results. (Pyle supplies explosives to a Vietnamese warlord, which are subsequently used for a terrorist bombing in which civilians are massacred.) Leaving aside their rivalry in love for the beautiful Phuong, there is certainly in Fowler's exasperation with Pyle some of the old colonial power's bilious resentment of the arriviste hegemon, and something else of the scorn of the old hand for the metropolitan theorist, which goes back to Kipling's satire on Pagett, M.P.⁴ But more fundamentally there is a difference here between faith and faithlessness in writing itself. Fowler thinks York Harding's political theory has no attachment to the complex local realities in which he himself is experienced, but indeed he inhabits a universe in which writing in any case has a weak grip on reality. The early chapters make this point in what seems a systematic and polemical way.

In the intricately time-shifted narration of *The Quiet American*, Pyle is killed at the very beginning of the book. His murder—a political assassination in which Fowler himself has been accessory—takes place during the action narrated in the book's first sentence, although it is not entered into the narrative record at that point. This aporia will turn out to be an ominous signal of the discrepancy between writing and reality, but the early pages soon furnish plenty more. One of the first things Fowler does, after being questioned by the police about Pyle, is to file his story about Pyle's death, "American official murdered in Saigon." We can assume that the story conceals its author's guilty knowledge of the crime; Fowler textualizes and falsifies Pyle in the same act of writing. The police, it turns out, are doing the same. Fowler asks his friend Vigot, the French *Sûreté* officer investigating the death, if he is really looking for Pyle's killer, and he says no: "I'm just making a report, that's all" (27). Once again, writing seems to be a sort of substitute for or evasion of real action. The American Economic Attaché, Pyle's boss, tells it differently, but just as questionably, in a telegram to Pyle's parents. "Grieved to report your son died a soldier's death in cause of Democracy" (31). The case against writing is made on the grounds of its distance from the real, either as ignorant theory or knowing lies. It seems to have, as Bakhtin might put it, minimal "contact with the present (with contemporary reality)."

Even when it does have a measure of accuracy, writing seems in this novel to be an inadequate response to experience, or even an alternative to it. Not to be

involved is an article of Fowler's creed. "My fellow journalists called themselves correspondents; I preferred the title of reporter. I wrote what I saw. I took no action" (28). We can understand Fowler's refusal to be engagé in the context of the diffusion of existentialist ideas into British fiction in the early fifties, when Sartre and above all Camus were held in high regard, but Greene was also rehearsing the kind of preoccupations that had exercised writers in the 1930s, the decade of the United Front and the civil war in Spain. Here the locus classions of writerly involvement for the British was the pamphlet *Authors take Sides on the Spanish Civil War*, published by the magazine *Left Review*. Only sixteen of the 149 authors listed were reported to be Neutral: for whatever reasons, as Valentine Cunningham puts it, "Graham Greene equivocated enough not to reply" (33). For reasons of his own the fictional Fowler too, in a later war, avoids political engagement. He sees the necessary detachment of his profession as a sanctuary from demands for involvement. This saves him from the mistakes of Pyle. "He was young and ignorant and silly and he got involved," says Fowler, and this was because Pyle, the son of a scholar, had not understood that writing was different from and even the opposite of the real: "He never saw anything he hadn't heard in a lecture-hall, and his writers and lecturers made a fool of him" (31, 32). If he felt obliged to read, Fowler thinks, Pyle would have been much better off with reading material that would keep him at home—he would like to have seen him "reading the Sunday supplements at home" and "safe with a standardized American girl who subscribed to the Book Club" (32). For Fowler, with a characteristic mixture of cynicism and old-world snobbery, the kind of reading material sanctioned and propagated by the Sunday supplements and the Book Club may be left to reinforce the conformism of bourgeois family life for those who are suited to its naïve and limited horizons. Fowler seems to suggest that writing of this kind is as harmless and uninteresting as domestic furniture.

Although political science, official communiqués, and press reports are all wide of the mark in different ways, there is another kind of writing that, Fowler seems to allow, is capable of capturing what Vietnam is really like, and this is the literary writing expressly dismissed by Pyle as being not serious. As he sinks into an opium lassitude, Fowler finds the words for his mood in the French of Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au Voyage" ("Mon enfant, ma soeur"), which not only seems perfectly evocative of his enjoyment of opium and the girl Phuong together, but also releases his mind on an associative and synaesthetic drift that takes him from the fragrance of opium and the girl to the flowers and canals of the north, curling back to his feelings of contentment and inertia, and his desire never to go home (14). Baudelaire's lyric seems to activate in Fowler a metaphorical power which is the only way language—a Western language, at least—can adequately represent the experience of Vietnam. Something similar is rehearsed in Fowler's briefing of Pyle, when the new arrival has earnestly asked him about the country. Willingly enough, he gives the younger man what he calls "arid bones of background" about Vietnam, while admitting that Pyle will have to learn for himself "the real background" of more subjective impressions (25)—and

this is then invoked in a lyrical catalogue of images ("the gold of the rice-fields under a flat late sun: the fishers' fragile cranes hovering over the fields like mosquitoes," and so on), this impressionistic inventory being a favorite trope of Greene's own travel writing. There is a quite similar example in Greene's evocation in *Ways of Escape* of the "spell" of Indo-China, cast "by the tall elegant girls in white silk trousers, by the pewter evening light on the flat paddy fields" (154) and so on.⁵ Almost invariably given in present tense or participles, or verbless, such catalogues can be seen as a dehistoricizing trope, and in this case a version of the Orient as pastoral; as such their "Occidentalist" equivalent in the novel is the glossy pictures in Western magazines pored over by Phuong. This essentially poetic sensory inventory of the country is something vouchsafed only to the experienced, and is to be collected only at first hand. Neatly enough, this kind of writing, which is advanced as being able to convey the emotional truth about the experience of Vietnam, can never be available to Pyle since it is inscribed in the narrative record that is the story of his own death.

Meanwhile, the closest Fowler seems to come to sincerity in his own writing is in the letter he sends his wife in London, begging for a divorce and frankly acknowledging his entirely selfish motives, since he has nothing to lose (80-1). He does not ask her to be reasonable, or merciful, but to act out of affection for him, irrationally, although he does not deserve it. But this burst of truthful communication is such unaccustomed exercise, for the practiced hack Fowler has become, that he is obliged to lie down afterwards, "as though I had run a long way and strained unconditioned muscles" (81). This little oasis of sincere writing-if that is what it is-belongs strictly within the private life. The letter is entirely in a domestic, marital register and does not even mention Vietnam.

If we consider this novel's part in the generic mission of the "auto-critique of discourse" through exposure to "contemporary reality" (in Bakhtin's terms), the diagnosis is not encouraging. This matters, because the reality in question-Vietnam in the 1950s-had a serious political dimension: in the classic pattern that would be described by Said in *Orientalism*, a discourse of Western "knowledge" about what Vietnam was really like, and what it really needed, was being constructed, and this knowledge had already had deadly consequences and would lead to more. But in much of *The Quiet American* there is a strong sense of the illegibility of Vietnam and its people-most obviously of Phuong herself, who is disadvantaged in relation to these Western men not only economically but also by her limited knowledge of French and English, but who nonetheless moves in a Vietnamese language environment entirely closed to Fowler and Pyle. This goes some way beyond the clichéd inscrutability of the Orient, for although others may lie to her, Phuong is startlingly simple and transparent in her conduct. Mendacious English is shadowed by simply incomprehensible Vietnamese. Pyle attempts to fill this cognitive emptiness by projecting a romantic narrative in which Phuong is a helpless childish innocent and he the heroic rescuer. Fowler supposes her tough, pragmatic, and virtually lacking interiority-"she'll never suffer like we do from thoughts, obsessions"-but has to admit that this too is a fiction,

and "I was inventing a character just as much as Pyle was" (133).⁶ For her inner life is a blind spot to these Western men, a linguistically impenetrable hinterland that is beyond representation. She is a bird who escapes the net. (There is a symbolism in their names. *Phuong* means phoenix, and *Fowler*, a hapless Papageno, wants to capture her for himself.) "I wanted to read her thoughts," says *Fowler*, "but they were hidden away in a language I couldn't speak" (140).

Phuong is garrulous enough in her own language-when speaking with her sister for example-but what she has to say is not open to transcription in *Fowler's* record, where her speech is represented only in simple and uninteresting utterances in schoolgirl French. For *Phuong* and *Fowler* converse in French-though apart from a few phrases, their conversation is given in English in the narrative; *Fowler's* French is better than *Phuong's* and she cannot understand him when he speaks ironically (11): on the other hand, he cannot understand her when she speaks Vietnamese. The same goes for the gossiping old women on the landing of the stairs in *Fowler's* building. They are themselves texts, for they carry fate "in the lines of their faces as others on the palm"; they "were silent as I passed and I wondered what they might have told me, if I had known their language, of what had passed while I had been away" (115). It seems there is a book of Vietnam, but it is closed to *Fowler*.⁷ It is to be glimpsed again when *Fowler* visits the communist agent *Mr. Heng*, and is ushered into a little inner room at the back of a funeral parlor. "I had the sense that on this occasion the chairs had been employed, for there were five little tea-cups on the table, and two were not empty" (173). This is where the real story of Vietnam is being made, and *Fowler* is not privy to it. It remains unreportable, at least in a Western language.

Before invoking the modernist crisis of representation (and noting that one of the factors that precipitated it was an encounter with problematic alterities through the activities of the European empires),⁸ there are distinctions to be made. *Fowler* is different from *Pyle* in that at least he is aware of the inadequacy of attempts to capture Vietnam in the nets of language, and of the dangers of mistaking a romantic, theoretical, quixotic, bookish image of the world for the real thing. This is one version of the old story in which the worldly *Sancho* helps to arrange the murder of the idealistic *Quixote* to prevent him from doing any more harm. But the opposition is not simply between the bookish and the worldly, the book and the world. The Vietnamese people in the story are enigmatic, but (or therefore) virtually all the Western characters are involved in writing as a heuristic applied to that enigma. The very reticence of the Orient seems to elicit writing, an inscription of knowledge-power on the body that will force it to give up its secret. This receives a disturbing if not entirely surprising inflection when *Fowler* describes his lovemaking with *Phuong*. "Even my desire had been a weapon, as though when one plunged one's sword towards the victim's womb, she would lose control and speak" (134). The sword, the penis and the pen go about the business of Western masculinity, and the violence of *Fowler's* imagery appears to be an admission of his complicity with *Pyle* and the rest, the forces of literacy

and domination, even as he seems to resist and disavow them. "This Third Force," he says to Pyle "-it comes out of a book, that's all" (157).

Western man is a literate animal, it seems, though Oriental woman, if we are to judge by Phuong, prefers to look at the pictures. Phuong's "Occidentalism" is erected on an archive of visual images, of things like the Empire State Building and the Royal Family she has seen depicted in magazines, and on American movies, of which she gives an almost entirely visual report. "'It was very sad,' she said, 'but the colours were lovely'" (187). It seems that these pictures of the West are as unlikely to tell her what the place is really like as the novel's many unreliable discourses about the East are. (Interestingly, Greene was sent to Vietnam in the autumn of 1951 to report on the war for Life magazine, though the resulting article was eventually published by Paris-Match; both these magazines were at least as famous for their pictorial content as for their writing.)⁹ The foreigners meanwhile are busy readers as well as writers in several genres. Fowler remembers Baudelaire, Pyle defers to York Harding, Vigot the melancholy policeman has a copy of Pascal open on his desk. They produce their briefings, their reports, their "copy." Vigot's report will bury the truth about Pyle's murder. Fowler's copy about the war is bleached to colorlessness by censorship and his own fastidious refusal to express or even have opinions; it may be factually accurate as far as it goes but the cold heart of reportorial objectivity freezes out sympathy, imaginative or emotional.¹⁰ When he witnesses the bomb outrage, which does finally move him to pity and anger, he is unable to file a story for his paper at all, and tells his subordinate to work one out for him, recognizing perhaps that his own writing is a fallen language, no longer capable of sincerity (175). The French military at press conferences are obliged to go on reporting victories nobody believes in. And Pyle's analysis of the situation is a fantasy that will only end in tears. Fantasy and lies seem to be the only currency of discourse.

Among all these false and failed narratives in different genres, Fowler's own story, which contains them all, now requires attention, for in the hierarchy of discourses this is the privileged outer frame. Any novel, as Bakhtin said, is more a receptacle of genres than a genre in itself, but *The Quiet American* is generically complex even by the standards of Greene's fiction. He did not call it an "entertainment," although it has intrigue, romance of a kind, mystery and violence, the ingredients of a thriller. It is a political novel, but its politics are somewhat ambivalent on the subject of colonialism.¹¹ "The wartime atmosphere is brilliantly conveyed, as one would expect from Greene after his long visits to the country," Michael Sheldon concedes. "Novels, however, are not travelogues" (402). Since there is a dead body in the first chapter, we might expect a detective novel, but there is very little detection. There are two interviews (they are perhaps too polite to be called interrogations) between the policeman Vigot and Fowler, and here perhaps we have the most important clue to the genre of Fowler's discourse.

A heavy clerical odor adheres to the descriptions of Vigot, with his copy of Pascal, his gentle probing questions, his air of tragic wisdom, and his habit of falling silent as if in prayer. He clearly understands that Fowler was involved in Pyle's death, and although he shows little interest in unmasking the culprit, he seems to want him to unmask himself, as though his own interest in the case is not criminological but moral, even religious. Fowler is wary, sticks to his version of events, and refuses to tell the story that Vigot solicits. But the second interview between these two is enough to make plain the generic secret that Fowler's narrative was concealing from us when it began. The agenda of this writing is after all not to understand something-some other-but to be understood. If understanding is possible, then so is forgiveness. The narrative is the confession Fowler declined to make to Vigot. But it is an atheistic confession.

Wouldn't we all do better not trying to understand, accepting the fact that no human being will ever understand another, not a wife a husband, a lover a mistress, nor a parent a child? Perhaps that's why men have invented God-a being capable of understanding. Perhaps if I wanted to be understood or to understand I would bamboozle myself into belief, but I am a reporter; God exists only for leader-writers. (60)

Although God does not exist and cannot be prayed to, Fowler's prayers seem to have been answered nonetheless. His part in Pyle's death has secured him a "happy ending" with Phuong, and the removal of his rival coincides, with something like poetic injustice, with his estranged wife's unexpected decision at last to give him a divorce so he can marry his mistress.

Fowler is granted his heart's desire; but the last words he writes are "I wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry" (189). Since he cannot unburden himself to priest or police, the only person who can fulfil this perlocutionary task for him is the reader of his narrative, which as a confession is, of all the genres of speech and writing contained in the novel, the only one that lies under an absolute obligation to tell the truth. Though Fowler's confession has no warrant in either law or ritual, and in any case takes place in virtual space outside the fictional world he inhabits, it rests on the truth claims of a genre of romantic writing. The confessional narrative becomes the story that Fowler is unable to tell to anyone in the real (that is, the fictional) world of the novel-unable to tell it, because it is true. Other genres of speech and writing in *The Quiet American* are compromised and false. Here we may return for the last time to Bakhtin, and recall his description in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" of a moment in the history of autobiographical writings of "a translation of whole spheres of existence-within the individual himself, as well as in the world outside him-onto a mute register, and into something that is in principle invisible" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 134). The novel's "auto-criticism of discourse" ends by suggesting that the only adequate representation of the actual world is one that cannot be heard or seen. But this is also where it begins.

Fowler's narrative turns away with extreme skepticism from language, especially from writing, discrediting any direct or disinterested intentionality and expressive excess, and suggests that all writing except a record of the individual senses is either willfully false or at least inadequate to reality. But nonetheless the truth that opposes such falsity receives its own word, in Fowler's written confession, which is the narrative itself. The confessional discourse alone seems not to be subject to the skepticism it conveys, indeed it appears only to be further authenticated by the falsification of other forms and genres of writing. Confession's perlocution redeems itself from the fall of language.

But the confession and the confessant are fictional, to be sure. The point inevitably opens up a whole further dimension of questions about truth and falsity in writing. Is the fiction of *The Quiet American* one of those lies that can be an example of the truth? How close is it in any case to Greene's own experience? Does the story's peculiar shadowing of the relationship at the center of the early *Rumour at Nightfall* (which Greene later disowned) indicate the return of the repressed in another and quite different crypto-confession buried under this one? What about Greene's own experience of Vietnam? "Perhaps there is more direct reportage in *The Quiet American* than in any other novel I have written," the author averred in *Ways of Escape* (164-5). Norman Sherry took this hint enthusiastically in claiming that the novel is based on Greene's personal observations. "Many of his experiences find their way directly into the novel and what can be discovered about the people he came to know illustrates his creative process"; further, "Fowler...has, in spite of his nature, many of Greene's qualities" (373, 386).¹² Judith Adamson shares this view, with a straightforward belief that Fowler "sees and speaks what Greene saw and wrote in Vietnam"; she is impressed by the evidence that Fowler is given the name, Thomas, with which Greene was baptized as a Catholic, and that Fowler too has been to Malaya "and, like Greene, cares deeply about Vietnam" (128). Michael Shelden is less convinced by this novel's credentials, seeing it as "the work of a tired and distracted writer who had lost his sense of direction" (402). As for the closeness of *The Quiet American* to Greene's factual reportage, Shelden does not find the Vietnam dispatches either particularly shrewd or entirely honest.¹³

Questions about the relation between truth and falsehood in *The Quiet American* assumed a new shape when the novel was translated into the genre of film by Joseph L. Mankiewicz in 1958, in a version that reinvented the entire story, making Fowler a dupe of the Communists, and Pyle innocent of the bombings. This breathtaking reaccentuation was given a further twist when Mankiewicz cast Audie Murphy in the role of Pyle; how the quiet American was not only turned into the hero-the "real hero"-of the story, but played by a man who may not have been a real actor but was indubitably a real hero, the most decorated American soldier of the second world war, who as an infantryman had bagged a personal body count of 241 enemy dead.¹⁴ Greene complained that this version was incoherent and that "one could almost believe that the film was made deliberately to attack the book and its author" (*Reflections* 202); and thus the history of *The*

Quiet American, with Mankiewicz's radical revision of the novel, and Greene's furious denunciation of Hollywood's mendacity, itself becomes a narrative with its own auto-criticism of discourse.

As a matter of fact Mankiewicz's screenplay, credited as "based on a novel by Graham Greene," is not incoherent as Greene complained. It is a literate and ingenious reaccentuation, though admittedly a complete travesty of the theme of the book. Mankiewicz did not need to make many changes to the bulk of the story, but he adds a long wordy scene of dénouement between Fowler and Vigot in which the policeman, who incidentally has solved the crime and arrested Heng and Fowler's assistant Dominguez, explains that Pyle was as innocent as he seemed, and the communists have duped Fowler into helping them to murder him. "You know," says Vigot, "it's a mistake to say that communism is appealing to the mentally advanced. I think this is only true when the mentally advanced are also emotionally retarded. Don't you agree?" Without a doubt in this exchange we can hear a dialogue, scripted by Joseph Mankiewicz, going on between the American director and the European novelist, through the surrogacy of the characters. Vigot tells Fowler he has been childishly manipulated. Fowler is rattled, but defends himself, saying he is not a communist: "If you were," says Vigot, "it would be less sad." Most damagingly, Mankiewicz then has Vigot attack Fowler as a writer, saying that his judgement was so clouded that he would not permit even his training as a professional reporter to reject "an obviously idiotic story," the story of Pyle's guilt-which is, of course, the story of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. It is an extraordinary moment, adding critical insult to the injury of a thorough counter-discursive transformation. No wonder Greene was furious.¹⁵

The truth of the novel and its "contact with...contemporary reality" became an issue again when a new film version, directed by Australian Phillip Noyce, was test-screened in New Jersey on 10 September 2001, but shelved after the events of the following day, when Miramax president Harvey Weinstein decided that the national mood in America would not be well disposed to a film that showed an American involved in a terrorist bombing. As Pico Iyer noted in February 2003, Noyce's film "was delayed again and again thereafter as being much too close to reality as America began sending its troops out to Afghanistan, and who knows where else" (19). (The invasion of Iraq took place the month after Iyer's review.) The film had finally been released in November 2002, and began to disseminate Greene's story of good intentions in a world where it had contemporary resonances that could never have been anticipated by Phillip Noyce or his scriptwriters Christopher Hampton and Robert Schenkkan, and still less by Graham Greene. A book may give us information about contemporary reality, but the dialogue is a two-way process; contemporary reality is quite capable of enriching and modifying the meaning of a book in retrospect. Fifty years on, *The Quiet American* continues to raise questions about genre and the truth and falsity of representations.

UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

[Footnote]

NOTES

- 1 *The End of the Affair* (1951) was the first of Greene's novels to use a first-person narration. *The Quiet American*, which followed, was the second.
- 2 Bakhtin's enthusiasm not only for "openendedness" but also for "contact with...reality" must complicate efforts to recruit him for postmodernism.
- 3 For speech genres, see Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*.
- 4 Kipling's Pagett, the pompous Member of Parliament on a fact-finding visit from London to British India, is a prototype of the politically ignorant metropolitan theorist in the East. Kipling's satirical poem, "Pagett, M.P.," was published in *Departmental Ditties* in 1886. See Kipling, *Definitive Edition* 26-7. His story, "The Enlightenments of Pagett, M.P.," first appeared in *The Contemporary Review* in 1890.
- 5 In such idyllic inventories, Vietnam remains pictorial and static, "the picture on the canvas." See Pathak, Sengupta, and Purkayastha, 204.
- 6 This has a Cervantic precedent in the way not only Quixote but also Sancho invents a character for Dulcinea del Toboso although neither knows anything about her and it seems likely that neither has actually met her. There are other correspondences that suggest that Pyle is one of Greene's versions of Quixote, although there is no structural parallel such as he was to deploy in *Monsignor Quixote* (1982). The ghostly presence of Don Quixote in *The Quiet American* is obviously of relevance to the novel's discursive self-consciousness.
- 7 For a consideration of Eastern inscrutability and illegibility, see Kerr, "Not Knowing the Oriental."
- 8 See Booth and Rigby. Most of the essays in their collection deal with questions of modernism and alterity in one form or another.
- 9 See *Ways of Escape* 157. For Greene's relationship with *Life* and *Paris-Match*, see Sherry 395-7, and Shelden 387-96.
- 10 In a review Greene praised the American Ralph Ingersoll's *Report on England* (1941), which reprinted his dispatches on London in the Blitz. Ingersoll "was not personally involved and was enormously interested," and the outsider's perspective of his reporting "does give an honest picture (inaccurate only in small details), and it is written with imaginative sympathy-which is better than emotional sympathy" (*Reflections* 96, 97).
- 11 While the novel is staunchly against American interference in Vietnam, it is much more equivocal about the colonial power. The French are losing the war, but they are losing it romantically and tragically and perhaps even redemptively, in the person of Captain Trouin, who tells Fowler, "We are fighting all your wars, but you leave us the guilt" (151). Trouin's insistence that, in the eyes of the French fighting men, this is not a colonial war, is an observation repeated from a long article by Greene published in *Paris-Match* on 12 July 1952 (*Reflections* 129-47). The title of the article-"Indo-China: France's Crown of Thorns"-again sounds a redemptive note and hardly suggests a straightforward anti-colonialism. It may be relevant that France was a Catholic power, while the Bostonian Pyle comes from the Puritan heartland.
- 12 Sherry goes so far as to suggest that when Fowler sends a letter to his wife in London, this must be based on a letter Greene sent to his wife, which has not survived. "The letter [written by Fowler] is a revelation of Greene's character as well as Fowler's. How easily Greene could have had Fowler put the right gloss upon his activities in the Far East, but Fowler does not, as Greene also would not have done" (407). When Fowler's wife in London sends him a reply, "Helen's response to Fowler's letter seems to be the kind of letter Vivien could have written" (407).
- 13 Of Greene's famous report of his interview with Ho Chi Minh in 1955, "The Man as Pure as Lucifer," Shelden points out that Ho was unaware that his interviewer was in the pay of British intelligence: "Any relevant information that Greene gathered on his visit to Ho was promptly presented to the SIS station chief in Singapore" (384). Greene's account of the interview is in *Collected Essays* 301-3. In 1977 Greene told Michael Menshaw that he was very nervous before the interview, "so that he smoked a pipe of opium and went to the rendezvous stoned" (Menshaw 105).
- 14 The 1958 film and Murphy's role in it, and the changing discourses of heroism as American involvement in Southeast Asia escalated, are discussed by Whitfield.
- 15 To make matters even more humiliating, Mankiewicz has Phuong, disgusted at what Fowler has done, refuse to return to him at the end.

[Reference]

WORKS CITED

- Adamson, Judith. *Graham Greene, The Dangerous Edge: Where Art and Politics Meet*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl

Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.

-. Speech Genres and Other Late Essays. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: U of Texas P, 1986.

Booth, Howard J. and Nigel Rigby. Introduction. *Modernism and Empire*. Ed. Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000. 1-12.

Cunningham, Valentine. *British Writers of the Thirties*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.

Greene, Graham. *Collected Essays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994.

-. *The Quiet American*. 1955. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

-. *Reflections*. (1923-88). Ed. Judith Adamson. London: Reinhart Viking, 1990.

-. *Ways of Escape*. London: Bodley Head, 1980.

Hirschkop, Ken. *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

Iyer, Pico. "The Unquiet American." *New York Review of Books* (13 Feb. 2003): 19-20.

Kerr, Douglas. "Not Knowing the Oriental: Ignorance and Power in the Colonial East." *New Zealand Journal of Oriental Studies* 5.2 (2003): 33-46.

Kipling, Rudyard. "The Enlightenments of Pagett, M.P." *Contemporary Review* 58 (July/ Dec. 1890): 333-355.

_____. *The Definitive Edition of Rudyard Kipling's Verse*. London: Hodderand Stoughton, 1940.

Menshaw, Michael. "Greene in Antibes." *Conversations with Graham Greene*. Ed. Henry J. Donaghy. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1992. 97-106.

Pathak, Zakia, Saswati Sengupta, and Sharmila Purkayastha. "The Prisonhouse of Orientalism." *Textual Practice*. 5.2 (1991): 195-218.

Quiet American, The. Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Perf. Audie Murphy, Michael Redgrave, and Claude Dauphin. Screenplay by Joseph L. Mankiewicz based on a novel by Graham Greene. United Artists, 1958.

Quiet American, The. Dir. Phillip Noyce. Perf. Michael Caine, Brendan Fraser, Do Thi Hai Yen. Screenplay by Christopher Hampton and Robert Schenkkan based on a novel by Graham Greene. Miramax, 2002.

Shelden, Michael. *Graham Greene: The Man Within*. London: Heinemann, 1994.

Sherry, Norman. *The Life of Graham Greene: Volume Two 1939-1955*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1994.

Whitfield, Stephen J. "Limited Engagement: The Quiet American as History." *Journal of American Studies* 30.1 (1996): 65-86.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.