New Blackfriars (2024), **105**, 13–30
doi:10.1017/nbf.2023.8

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Loser Takes All: Graham Greene's Theological Puzzle Box

Peter J. Comerford

Portsmouth, RI, USA
Email: Pcomerford1@cox.net

(Received 19 June 2023; accepted 3 July 2023)

Abstract

Graham Greene's novella *Loser Takes All* has been unfairly ignored in the critical literature. Rather than the mere frivolity it is taken to be, it is a humorous examination of some serious theological issues. By means of an inversion of Pascal's Great Wager, Greene makes the case that attempts to rationalize the mystery that is the object of our faith will cheapen and diminish that faith. In the course of so doing, he alludes to and has fun with his earlier works, particularly *Brighton Rock*, and critiques the inversion of the Wager by Albert Camus. He shows the influence of Miguel de Unamuno, who years later would influence Greene's *Monsignor Quixote*. Greene also invokes a poem by Charles Baudelaire, which Greene has quoted in many works, that the possibility of damnation adds meaning to life, though it may drift into what von Balthasar called Greene's indulgence of the mystique of sin.

Keywords: Baudelaire; Graham Greene; Great Wager; *Loser Takes All*; mystique of sin

1. Introduction

In 1955, Graham Greene said that he had written the novella *Loser Takes All* in a mood of escape[1] and that he wanted 'to write what I hoped would prove an amusing, agreeably sentimental novella—something which neither my friends nor my enemies would expect'.[2] His motivation was that 'A reputation is like a death mask. I wanted to smash the mask'.[3] As Greene points out, he had published *The End of the Affair* in 1951 and had just finished *The Quiet American* in 1955,[4] both of which are dark and serious, and both dealing (albeit in very different ways) with adultery. He saw it was time for something light-hearted. His mood of escape took him to what he viewed as a tax-deductible holiday at the Hôtel de Paris in Monte Carlo, where he enjoyed breakfast in bed, gambled, and wrote this novella.[5] Despite that, a serious theological point is being made,

[1]Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980) p. 224.
[2]Ibid.
[3]Ibid.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid.

just as can be seen in similarly humorous novels by Greene like *Travels with My Aunt*[6] and *Monsignor Quixote*.[7]

Perhaps taking Greene at his word, scholars have almost completely ignored his novella in the critical literature. Mark Bosco, in his well-regarded monograph on Greene, does not mention it at all.[8] Henry Curtis Webster concludes that the principle virtues of the mid-century entertainments, *The Third Man* (1949), *Loser Takes All* (1955), and *Our Man in Havana* (1959), are: 'Fast pace and plot ingenuity'.[9] Webster further notes, 'Greene himself properly characterizes *Loser Takes All* as a "frivolity"'.[10] Gene Phillips dismisses it as 'the lightest story that Greene has ever written'.[11] Phillips goes on to say that 'Attempts have been made by literary critics to uncover serious symbolic significance in this little situation comedy'.[12] I have been unable to locate any essays devoted to such attempts, which contain any depth of analysis. Searches on Google Scholar, EBSCO, and JSTOR yield little beyond a 1958 essay on the Accountant in Literature.[13] It rates but a single sentence in J.W. Miller's 1959 essay about Greene:[14] 'Bertram, in *Loser Takes All*, reflects upon his employer in a statement that has more meaning than is obvious at first glance: "He makes the world and then he goes and rests on the seventh day and his creation can go to pot that day for all he cares"'.[15] Miller finds this illustrative of his theme that the entertainments, as Greene calls them, feature 'a vast parade of alienated souls [that] wanders through a lonely world'[16] but does not explore the implication that there is theological symbolism and meaning at work here.

Robert Pendleton does devote four pages to the novella in his study of the influence of Joseph Conrad on Greene.[17] Pendleton argues that *Loser Takes All* 'displaces the Catholic interior narrative into the genre of romantic comedy'.[18] Behind what he sees as Greene's parody of religious symbols, Pendleton finds 'a serious intent behind the myth of creation, fall, and redemption which underpins the novel'.[19] He sees the tension between protagonists Cary and Bertram as illustrative of the difference between what he characterizes as 'Cary's intuitive form of faith against Bertram's "theological" rationalism'.[20]

[6]Andrew Madigan, 'A Bad Aunt? *Travels with My Aunt*, Morality and the Catholic Novel', *The Heythrop Journal*, 52 (2011), 986–92.

[7]Peter J. Comerford, 'Kneel *compañero*: Monsignor Quixote's Sacramental Adventure', *New Blackfriars*, 103 (2022), 337–58.

[8]Mark Bosco, *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[9]Harvey Curtis Webster, 'The World of Graham Greene', in *Graham Greene: Some Critical Considerations*, ed. by Robert O. Evans (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1963), p. 18.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Gene D. Phillips, *Graham Greene: The Films of His Fiction* (New York: Teachers College Press 1974), p. 89.

[12]Ibid., p. 90.

[13]Nicholas A. H. Stacey, 'The Accountant in Literature', *Accounting Review* (1958), 102–05.

[14]J. W. Miller, 'The Earthly Inferno of Graham Greene', *The Angle*, 1959 (1959), 9–13.

[15]Ibid., p. 11.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Robert Pendleton, *Graham Greene's Conradian Masterplot: The Arabesques of Influence* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996).

[18]Ibid., p. 139.

[19]Ibid., p. 140.

[20]Ibid., p. 141.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Pendleton cites a book by Gwenn R. Boardman[21] for her observation that in this novella, 'behind apparent parody of his religious symbols, there lies Greene's familiar territory'.[22] Boardman devotes a couple of pages to *Loser Takes All* in a chapter entitled 'A Place for Laughter'.[23] She notes that 'When the GOM's [sic][24] yacht fails to arrive, the lovers in *Loser Takes All* "don't believe in the *Seagull* any more" (p.53)—not a blasphemous allusion to true Belief, but ironic commentary on the sort of easy piety that assumes all prayers will be answered automatically'.[25] She rather quickly moves on, however, without explicitly stating that the name of the Gom's yacht is meant, perhaps, to allude to the Paraclete (because unless it does, there is no allusion to belief or piety, blasphemous or otherwise).

While *Loser Takes All* clearly does not stand with *The Power and the Glory* as among Greene's masterworks, it demonstrates Greene's development as a novelist grappling with issues of faith and theology. In fact, it is a carefully constructed puzzle box, the operation of which reveals, as its 'prize', the theological message that our faith cannot be parsed out mathematically but should be borne of passion amidst doubt and anguish. The very 'lightness' of the treatment is an indictment of the shallowness of a certain kind of middle-class faith illustrated in the novella, and 'easy piety', and is one of the hinges that makes the box operate.

First, we will look at the notion of the exemplary novel and see how Greene sets the stage for viewing this novella as fitting in that category, and that its 'exemplariness' means it conveys a message, in this case theological. Then, we will look at the way in which Greene uses the image of the seagull, seen here as the name of the Gom's yacht, as carrying symbolic weight. We will then examine how Greene has used allusions to a poem by Charles Baudelaire in the novella and how he has used that snippet in some of his earliest work, and on into his later work, as a theological signifier. We will also see that Greene, like T.S. Eliot, invokes Baudelaire for his belief that there is a certain *gravitas* associated with sinfulness, of daring to be damned, signaling a religious purpose by inversion. As Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote, 'Even a great writer like Graham Greene … cannot be absolved from what Karl Rahner has branded a false and fatal "mystique of sin", namely, the thesis set forth under the pretext of sincerity and anti-pharisaism, the guilt itself, when assumed voluntarily (in solidarity with another sinner), contains a redemptive element'.[26] We will further consider that view of sinfulness in some depth by seeing *Loser Takes All* as an inversion of one of his darkest works, the 1938 *Brighton Rock*.

Then, we will examine how *Loser Takes All* illustrates an inversion of Pascal's Wager and how Greene intends to contrast his view of the significance of that inversion with the inversion of the Wager in novels by Albert Camus. Greene and Camus were familiar with each other's work, and both were concerned with the working of grace in

[21]Gwenn R. Boardman, *Graham Greene: The Aesthetics of Exploration* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1971).

[22]Ibid., p. 123.

[23]Ibid., p. 118 *et seq.*

[24]'Gom' is an acronym used by the employees of the company where the protagonist works, standing for Grand Old Man, referring to their boss. Despite being an acronym, it never appears in the novel with all capital letters.

[25]Ibid., pp. 122–23.

[26]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), p. 113.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the postwar world. Furthermore, we will explore the theological influence of Spanish thinker Miguel de Unamuno as a source of Greene's response to Camus. Finally, we look at *Monsignor Quixote*, a novel from late in Greene's career, to see it as a parallel achievement with similar goals and methods. That parallel should have the dual effects of, first, strengthening the case for viewing *Loser Takes All* as theologically significant and, second, discovering that this text serves to illustrate the deep roots of his 1982 exemplary novel *Monsignor Quixote*.[27]

2. Exemplary novel

On the rear cover of the 1957 Compass Books paperback edition of *Loser Takes All*, the novel is said to be 'fashioned in the form of the "exemplary" novels of Cervantes and Unamuno'. However, this observation, which is accurate, is not explained. Just what is an 'exemplary novel'? This is a genre of tales of relative brevity that 'have to do with moral doctrine'.[28] It is, therefore, axiomatic that if this work is in fact an exemplary novel, it has, and is intended to have, a lesson to teach us. That lesson is the prize in the puzzle box; the box itself is a small gem of satire, and the lesson within tweaking and teasing theologians in general, and Blaise Pascal in particular, while teaching us that the lived experience of faith is deeper and more complicated than that depicted in the novella.

Loser Takes All is the story of a middle-aged accountant named Mr. Bertram, who is first seen with his new, young wife rubbing the knee of an equestrian statue of King Louis XIV in the lobby of the Hôtel de Paris in Monte Carlo, a superstitious practice meant to bring luck to gamblers. Then, we flash back to the scene 2 weeks earlier, where Bertram is working as an assistant accountant at a huge conglomerate. There he meets the head of the firm, Herbert Dreuther, known to all as the 'Gom' (or Grand Old Man). We come to learn that the Gom is one of a trinity of owners of the firm, along with Sir Walter Blixon and A.N. Bowles, known to the employees as A.N. Other.

In the course of the meeting, Bertram explains that he is about to be married (for the second time) and to honeymoon at Bournemouth. The Gom insists that Bertram be married in a civil ceremony in Monte Carlo, and then the Gom would meet up with them on his yacht, where they could honeymoon. The Gom's arrival in Monte Carlo is delayed, and the couple run short of money. On the strength of his friendship with their good patron the Gom, the hotelier lends him several hundred thousand francs. Using his skill with numbers, Bertram creates a system to win at roulette. He wins several million francs and hatches a plan to take over the company where he works, but his new-found wealth, and the crass neglect of his bride that it engenders, alienates her, and she leaves him. Ultimately, he gives away the money, wins back his wife, and ends with a promotion at his firm.

Thus, we have a tale that at the most basic level is about the importance of valuing loving relationships over material wealth, and that by itself qualifies it as an exemplary novel. As we will explore, the deeper moral lesson is not merely anti-materialist, but a theological point about faith and the danger of trying to rationalize, and thereby minimize, theological mystery.

[27]Comerford, 'Kneel *compañero*'.
[28]William J. Entwistle, 'Cervantes, the Exemplary Novelist', *Hispanic Review*, 9 (1941), 103–09, at 104.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. Intertextuality and the seagull

The next hinge of the puzzle box's operation is that *Loser Takes All* has the same 'thickness' of language embedded with the sorts of allusions and references that characterize the works of Greene that are accepted as great.[29] An example of that intertextuality is the image of the seagull to explore pneumatology, i.e., the theological study of the Holy Spirit.

One of the first scholarly examinations of the seagull image in Greene's work is in Richard Creese's thoughtful examination of allusions in Greene's 1966 novel *The Comedians*.[30] The bird first appears in a flashback in which the protagonist, Brown (he is only ever identified by his last name), recalls being a high school student in Monte Carlo, about to lose his virginity with an older woman in the Hôtel de Paris.[31] He finds himself unable to consummate the relationship, whereupon a seagull flew into the hotel room and 'for a moment he seemed spanned by the length of the white wings'.[32] His would-be paramour is frightened by the gull, and Brown's focus on calming her restores his ability to complete what he had begun. Greene writes, 'Neither of us during those minutes saw the seagull go, although I shall always think that I felt the current of its wings on my back as the bird sailed out again towards the port and the bay'.[33] Creese points out that, later in the novel, during Brown's first sexual encounter with his mistress, he again experiences difficulty, but there is no bird to save him. Creese sees this association of the gull with the two sexual encounters as an example of how 'Greene uses objects in more complex ways to indicate the workings of psyches'.[34] For Creese, the complexity flows, at least in part, from the arbitrary association of a given object, in this case a seagull, with overcoming sexual dysfunction.[35] When we recall that Bertram in *Loser Takes All* is finally able to consummate his marriage aboard the Gom's yacht the *Seagull* (after experiencing a lack of success in that regard while staying – like Brown – at the *Hotel de Paris*), we can see that Greene's allusion to the seagull in *The Comedians* is giving a backward nod to *Loser Takes All*.

As much as the seagull image may be a random association for Brown, it is not so for Greene. For instance, the feeling Brown gets of the current of the bird's wings on his back seems an echo of the Paraclete. A scene in *Brighton Rock*, strikingly similar in imagery, brings home the meaning of what Greene is portraying in an allusive way. *Brighton Rock*, the 1938 novel that was the first by Greene to adopt explicitly Catholic themes, is the story of the moral choices faced by a small-time gang led by a young tough named Pinkie, and this work began the construction of the 'mask' that Greene seeks to smash in *Loser Takes All*.

Pinkie and Rose (his wife) drive toward the spot where Pinkie thinks they will carry out their murder/suicide pact, a scene that Peter Sinclair calls 'the terrifying force of

[29]Richard Creese uses the term 'thickness' of language to refer to the allusive power of importing, by implication, the significance of certain words and images that resonate with meaning because of their prior use in other novels and in the culture at large. See, generally, Richard Creese, 'Objects in Novels and the Fringe of Culture: Graham Greene and Alain Robbe-Grillet', *Comparative Literature*, 39 (1987), 58–73.

[30]Creese, *supra.*

[31]Graham Greene, *The Comedians* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 55.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Creese, 'Objects in Novels', p. 70.

[35]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

grace that attacks Pinkie's car like a giant bird of prey'.[36] Greene writes 'An enormous emotion beat on him; it was like something trying to get in; the pressure of gigantic wings against the glass. Dona nobis pacem'.[37] That grace resulted, even if seemingly by chance, in the arrival of the police, saving Rose even as Pinkie accidentally hurls himself off the cliff to his death. But we are left to wonder whether he felt a last-minute repentance. As Greene himself said: 'But in the end, you remember, I introduced the possibility that he might have been saved "between the stirrup and the ground"'.[38]

Seagulls are found in other spots in *Brighton Rock* as well. James Dorrill's analysis of allusions and references in *Brighton Rock*[39] notes the recurring appearance of seagulls as being meaningful, and specifically as religious.[40] One set of seagull references occurs in scenes set under Brighton's Palace Pier, and in a manner again suggestive of the Paraclete. The pier itself is a massive steel structure jutting out into the water, on top of which is the building that houses many of Brighton's carnivalesque attractions. Greene's language tells us that he views this 'structure' as having a liturgical significance. At one point, Spicer, one of Pinkie's confederates, went for a walk and 'passed into shadow under the pier'.[41] As he is walking, 'A seagull flew straight towards him between the pillars like a scared bird caught in a cathedral, then swerved out into the sunlight from the dark iron nave'.[42] The flight of the gull is suggestive of the movement of the Holy Spirit within the church. Seen in that way, the fact that the bird is scared by being 'caught' within the structure of the institutional church from which it escapes may have a theological significance as well.

Another passage in *Brighton Rock* points to the location's theological significance: coming out from under the pier, Spicer 'stumbled on an old boot and put his hand on the stones to save himself: they had all the cold of the sea and had never been warmed by sun under these pillars'.[43] A little later, the novel returns to the same spot under the pier: 'An old man went stooping down the shore, very slowly, turning the stones, picking among the dried seaweed for cigarette ends, scraps of food. The gulls which had stood like candles down the beach rose and cried under the promenade. The old man found a boot and stowed it in his sack and a gull dropped from the parade and swept through the iron nave of the Palace Pier, white and purposeful in the obscurity: half-vulture and half-dove'.[44] The dove reference strengthens the argument that the gull image alludes to the Paraclete. The fact that the gull was 'purposeful in the obscurity' strengthens the pneumatological reference, just as the Holy Spirit is not overt in carrying out its work.

[36]Peter M. Sinclair, 'Graham Greene and Christian Despair: Tragic Aesthetics in *Brighton Rock* and *The Heart of the Matter*', *Renascence*, 63 (2011), 41–56, 50.

[37]Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 239.

[38]Marie-Francois Allain, *The Other Man: Conversations with Graham Greene* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 148.

[39]James F. Dorrill, 'Allusions at Work in Graham Greene's *A Gun for Sale* and *Brighton Rock*', *Renascence*, 66 (2014), 167–88.

[40]Ibid., p. 186.

[41]Greene, *Brighton Rock*, p. 85.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Ibid., pp. 130–31.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

4. The theological invocation of Baudelaire

Loser Takes All is one of the works of Graham Greene in which he makes theological points by invoking the poem *L'invitation au Voyage* by Charles Baudelaire. This is a poem to which Greene has turned since his earliest writing, and its presence here is another hinge that folds back to reveal Greene's theological message that spirituality flows from yearning.

Called by T.S. Eliot 'one of the most beautiful of his poems',[45] *L'invitation au Voyage* is seen by Eliot as 'a dim recognition of the direction of beatitude'.[46] As such, it is unavoidably theological. Despite its beauty, Eliot finds it 'hardly exceeds the *poesie des departs*',[47] defined as 'a specific aspect of French symbolist poetry, the vague nostalgic regret associated with voyages and departures, a regret that at the same time is exhilarating'.[48] This 'nostalgic regret' rises to a theological dimension in that it is inherent in our nature as having been blessed, yet unavoidably sinful. It may be that, for Eliot, this poem 'hardly exceeds' this vague nostalgia, but it does in fact manage to rise above it. Eliot goes on to say, in the same essay, that Baudelaire's 'view of life is one which has grandeur and which exhibits heroism; it was an evangel to his time and to ours'. He quotes Baudelaire as saying that true civilization '*elle est dans la diminution des traces du peche originel*', meaning 'it is in the reduction of the traces of original sin'.[49] The luxury, calm, and order alluded to in the poem are an aspiration to escape, and thereby transcend, our sinful nature, even while being a reminder of it.

T.S. Eliot observed that Baudelaire was a deeply religious poet, paradoxically, *because* of his focus on evil. Eliot writes that 'the possibility of damnation is such an immense relief in a world of electoral reform, plebiscites, sex reform and dress reform, that damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation—of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living'.[50]

It is worth taking a moment to examine the poem itself. The narrator begins:

> Mon enfant, ma sœur,
> Songe à la douceur
> D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble!
>
> My child, my sister,
> Think of the rapture
> Of living together there![51]

Each of the three stanzas is followed by the repeated phrase, '*Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,/Luxe, calme et volupté*'. This has been translated as, 'There all is order and beauty,/Luxury, peace, and pleasure'.[52]

[45]T. S. Eliot, 'Baudelaire' Collected in *Selected Essays of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 380.
[46]Ibid., p. 379.
[47]Ibid.
[48]Hugh Underhill, 'Poetry of Departures: Larkin and the Power of Choosing', *Critical Survey* (1989), 183, quoting D.E.S. Maxwell.
[49]Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 381.
[50]Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 378–79.
[51]William Aggeler, *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954).
[52]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The narrator is imagining a life with an idealized woman. As Kerry Weinberg describes it, 'Through the narcotic effect of woman the poet hopes to escape from the ennui of the present to a land of "ordre et beaute,/Luxe, calme et volupté"'.[53] As we will see, Greene has often invoked this poem in his works precisely as both an allusion to escape through the narcotic effect of a woman, a lover, yet as pointing at bliss, or beatitude, adumbrating Greene's view of the sacramental nature of sexuality.

The first of Greene's allusions to the poem is in his 1936 travel book *Journey without Maps*. Greene writes upon sailing into Dakar, Senegal, that he had 'a sense of warm and sleepy beauty, of enjoyment divorced from activity and the weariness of willing'.[54] It is noteworthy in that connection that T.S. Eliot finds that Baudelaire's *ennui*, alluded to here, is 'a true form of *acedia*, arising from the unsuccessful struggle towards the spiritual life'.[55] *Acedia* is the theological term for the sin of sloth.

Greene thereupon quotes *L'invitation au Voyage:*

> *Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,*
> *Luxe, calme, et volupté.*

He goes on to say that he finds it hard to believe that Baudelaire had not been to Africa and 'that the nearest he had come to it was the body of Jeanne Duval, the mulatto "tart" from *Le Théâtre du Panthéon*, for Dakar was the Baudelaire of *L'invitation au Voyage*'.[56] It is unclear exactly what Greene meant by saying that Dakar somehow embodied that poet, but it is noteworthy for our purpose that so early in his career Greene was alluding to this poem.

Fifteen years later, in his autobiography, Greene tells us that in 1951, in Haiphong, he had his first experience with opium. After four pipes, he, despite his unease with French, 'found myself reciting a poem of Baudelaire, that beautiful poem of escape, *Invitation au Voyage*'.[57] This poem is echoed in his 1956 novel *The Quiet American*, which is set in Vietnam. Toward the beginning of that novel, Fowler (the protagonist) returns to his flat as he reacts to the death of Pyle, his rival for the affection of his Vietnamese mistress, Phuong. With Pyle dead, there is now no obstacle to Fowler's relationship with her. She prepares his opium pipe, and as he looks at her, he thinks, '*Mon enfant, ma sœur*—skin the color of amber. *Sa douce langue natale*'.[58] These are lines from *L'invitation au Voyage* ('My child, my sister'). Thus, Greene, in referring to the woman with whom Fowler cheats on his wife, again signals a languorous fantasy, a sinful escape from the ennui of Fowler's life as a journalist.

The invocation by Greene of this poem by Baudelaire in *Loser Takes All* ties that novella to all the other works where he quotes it and tells us the we are escaping the banal in a way that has theological significance, even more particularly a languorous sensual escape, where Greene regards the sexual as sacramental. As Michael Gorra wrote regarding Sara Miles in Greene's 1951 *The End of the Affair*, 'Erotic experience

[53]Kerry Weinberg, 'The Women of Eliot and Baudelaire: The Boredom, the Horror and the Glory', *Modern Language Studies* (1984), 31–42.
[54]Graham Greene, *Journey without Maps* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), p. 28.
[55]Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 375.
[56]Greene, *Journey without Maps*, p. 28.
[57]Greene, *Ways of Escape*, p. 175.
[58]Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974) p. 14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

has brought her to a knowledge of the divine and even into a state of grace'.[59] In light of this, we look back at Eliot's essay about Baudelaire. Eliot says that 'Baudelaire has perceived that what distinguishes the relations of man and woman from the copulation of beasts is the knowledge of Good and Evil (of *moral* Good and Evil which are not natural Good and Bad or puritan Right and Wrong)'.[60] Eliot goes on to say that 'It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation'.[61]

Greene alludes to Baudelaire's poem near the beginning of *Loser Takes All*. This allusion occurs at the very outset of Bertram's journey, when he is summoned to the Gom's office, and the Gom refers to his own sense of peace as the onset of '*Luxe, calme, et volupté*'. Bertram replies that in the materials he was reviewing 'I can't find any *ordre* or *beauté* in these figures, sir'.[62] We then learn that Baudelaire is the Gom's favorite poet. By interposing a literary reference that Greene found so resonant, he is signaling that he regards this novella seriously enough to take a place in his canon. It is also later in Monte Carlo, not coincidentally, that Bertram says that the veteran gamblers 'looked, some of them, like opium smokers, dehydrated'.[63] Greene is telling us we are inside an opium-like dream, but also seeing the glamorization of sin that von Balthasar finds in Greene's work.

Greene also signals that he shares Baudelaire's view that there is a *gravitas* to a sinner that is not shared by someone who does not dare damnation and foreshadows an escape from that fate.[64]

The theological significance to Greene's invocation of Baudelaire, whether in a light-hearted way in *Loser Takes All*, or solemnly in *The Quiet American*, is the reflection that Christianity is a religion for sinners, who will struggle with doubts and setbacks. In light of that, it offers forgiveness through grace, which Greene often portrays, or suggests, in the most dramatic way, whether it is Pinkie's hoped-for repentance as he plummets from the cliff or Scobie's even as he is committing suicide. In *Loser Takes All*, it is the rejection of the Wager, and instead Bertram turning to the love of his wife.

5. Theological inversion of *Brighton Rock*

As von Balthasar has noted, Greene often indulges in the glamorization of sin, whether it be Pinkie in *Brighton Rock*, the noble yet sinful whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory*, Scobie driven by pity to suicide in *The Heart of the Matter*, or the adulterous affairs in *The End of the Affair*. All these share the theological influence of Baudelaire as seen by Eliot, that at least sinning involves daring at the level of the supernatural and is more morally ambitious than a life of secular mediocrity. Greene inverts this in *Loser Takes All*, providing yet another hinge to the puzzle box. The glamorization of sin, to humorous

[59]Michael Gorra, 'On "The End of the Affair"', *Southwest Review*, 89 (2004), 109–25, 110.
[60]Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 380.
[61]Ibid.
[62]*Loser Takes All* (New York: Viking Press, 1957) p. 21.
[63]*Loser Takes All*, p. 33.
[64]In *Ways of Escape* (pp. 224–25), Greene wrote that the Gom was based on the film director Alexander Corda, with whom Greene would discuss Baudelaire. Thus, ascribing to the Gom a taste for Baudelaire may be, at a minimum, a nod to Corda. Greene's use of this very poem throughout his oeuvre shows it is more than that.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

effect, is seen in the extent to which the marriage of Bertram and Cary is an inversion of the fraught nuptials of Pinkie and Rose in *Brighton Rock*, who marry in a civil ceremony neither of them views as licit, simply so Rose cannot testify against Pinkie in court.

As we saw earlier with the 'seagull' references, Greene embedded many echoes of *Brighton Rock* in *Loser Takes All*. Even more telling than those avian allusions are the Baudelaire-tinged theme of daring or enjoying to live in sin. When Bertram breaks it to Cary that they will be married in a civil ceremony, she wonders if it would 'count' and was told that if it didn't count, they would be living in sin. She replies, 'I'd love to live in sin'.[65] With the Gom's delayed arrival, Cary further talks about the bills they will run up and says that running up debts is 'not so much fun really as living in sin'.[66] After the civil ceremony, we hear 'I don't feel I've been married', Cary said, but then she added, 'It's fun not feeling married'.[67] In the light of Greene's other novels, and especially *Brighton Rock*, these are astonishing statements. These statements are part of the mask-smashing of which Greene spoke, but also part of the proof that he was up to more than mask-smashing.

In contrast to Cary, in *Brighton Rock*, the protagonist, Pinkie, is aghast at the thought of living in sin following a civil marriage ceremony. He is vividly aware and strongly convinced of the pains of hell. As he is getting to know Rose, the two discuss their shared Catholic faith. 'These atheists, they don't know nothing. Of course, there's Hell. Flames and damnation', he said with his eyes on the dark shifting water and the lightning and the lamps going out above the black struts of the Palace Pier, 'torments.'[68] As Pinkie and Rose get married in the registry office, he thinks 'He had no doubt whatever that this was mortal sin, and he was filled with a kind of gloomy hilarity and pride. He saw himself now as a full-grown man for whom the angels wept'.[69] Rose views her new state less with gloomy hilarity and more with a curiosity that is never quite hopeless. As she wakes up on her first married morning, and Pinkie has already gone out for the day, she thinks 'It did not seem in the least strange to Rose that she should wake alone—she was a stranger in the country of mortal sin, and she assumed that everything was customary'.[70] Later that day, as she is watching people on a Sunday morning coming and going from church, she reflects 'She didn't envy them and she didn't despise them; they had their salvation and she had Pinkie and damnation'.[71]

In light of this earlier work, it is stunning to see a sympathetically drawn Greene character such as Cary say that it would be fun to live in sin. Yet this inversion has a deeper theological meaning than simply Greene having fun at his own expense, by mocking – through inversion – his frequent theme in order to merely 'break the mask'. That deeper meaning is that Cary and Bertram's superficial spirituality ignores the anguish that vivifies the admittedly immature faith life of Pinkie and Rose.

During the same era (mid-1950s) in which he was writing *Loser Takes All*, Greene was writing *The End of the Affair*. He dedicated the latter novel to 'C', his mistress Catherine Walston. As Michael Gorra pointed out, 'He himself put it best in a 1947 letter to his

[65]Ibid., p. 27.
[66]Ibid., p. 36.
[67]Ibid., p. 47.
[68]Greene, *Brighton Rock*, p. 52.
[69]Ibid., p. 169.
[70]Ibid., p. 189.
[71]Ibid., p. 194.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mistress Catherine Walston, on whom he would base the character of Sarah Miles: "It's odd how little I get out of Mass except when you're around. I'm a much better Catholic in mortal sin!'"[72] So we see that the 'fun' of living in sin expressed by Cary in the novella may have been an all-too-true reflection of Greene's personal life at that moment. But there is another layer of theological meaning, derived from Baudelaire, i.e., that daring knowingly to be sinful brings a heightened awareness of eternal reward or punishment. In other words, to paraphrase Dr. Johnson, the prospect of eternal damnation concentrates the mind wonderfully.

Several scholars have noted that Greene's depiction of Pinkie in *Brighton Rock* is informed by the influence of Baudelaire. Herbert R. Haber finds in regard to Pinkie that 'There is more than a tinge of Baudelairian Satanism buried within that soul'.[73] Haber concludes that Greene has been influenced by Baudelaire in a way similar to T.S. Eliot and notes 'Indeed Eliot might almost have been describing Pinkie when he stated that for the French poet, the sterility of his own world was such that sin took on a curious dignity'.[74] Similarly, Peter M. Sinclair, in writing about *Brighton Rock*, finds a path from Baudelaire through Eliot to Greene: 'Greene, however, is more interested in the aesthetic contexts of theology, drawing some of his ideas concerning evil from T. S. Eliot, who writes concerning Baudelaire, "it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least, we exist. It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for damnation"'.[75] This Baudelairian influence is heightened in the inversion of Pinkie and Rose into Bertram and Cary. Thus, Cary's repeated references to the pleasures of living in sin are a comedic take on the glory flowing from the capacity for damnation, and because she does not take damnation seriously, she lacks the glory as well.

6. Theological inversion of Pascal's Wager

The seriousness that Greene brought to the construction of this puzzle box is that the central piece, the fulcrum on which this mechanism rests, is Pascal's Great Wager. The explicit references to Pascal in the context of a plot driven by the invention and use of a wagering system demonstrate this. Reflecting on Pascal's Great Wager, and its theological implications for the life of faith, is a theme and purpose of the novel.

Pascal's Great Wager is found in *Pensée* 418.[76] Pascal begins from the proposition 'If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since being indivisible and without limits, he bears no relation to us. We are therefore incapable of knowing either what he is or whether he is'.[77] Faced with that situation, he then says that at the far end of the infinite chaos that separates us from God, 'a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong'.[78] He then asks us to 'weigh up the gain and

[72]Gorra, 'On "The End of the Affair"', p. 110.
[73]Herbert R. Haber, 'The Two Worlds of Graham Greene', *Modern Fiction Studies* (1957), 256–68 at 259.
[74]Ibid., p. 260.
[75]Peter M. Sinclair, 'Graham Greene and Christian Despair: Tragic Aesthetics in *Brighton Rock* and *The Heart of the Matter*', *Renascence*, 63 (2011), 41–56 at 41, internal citation omitted.
[76]I use the A. J. Krailsheimer translation, Penguin Classics Harmondsworth England 1975. *Pensée* 418 is at pp. 149–53.
[77]Ibid., p. 150.
[78]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

loss involved in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything. If you lose you lose nothing'.[79] Based upon that assessment, he says that the only rational choice is to pick 'heads', which will result in the 'winner' being transformed by the act of wagering, such that the bettor 'will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a sincere, true friend'.[80]

We see an allusion to Pascal's Great Wager in Greene's description of the moment when Bertram, in despair at running out of money and the Gom having not yet appeared in Monte Carlo, decides to create a system:

> I watched them playing their systems, losing a little, gaining a little, and I thought it was strange how the belief persisted—that somehow you could beat the bank. *They were like theologians, patiently trying to rationalize a mystery*. I suppose in all lives a moment comes when we wonder—suppose after all there is a God, suppose the theologians are right. *Pascal was a gambler—who staked his money on a divine system.* I thought, I am a far better mathematician than any of these—is that why I don't believe in their mystery, and yet if this mystery exists, isn't it possible that I might solve it where they have failed? It was almost like a prayer when I thought, It's not for the sake of money—I don't want a fortune, just a few days with Cary free from anxiety.[81] (emphasis added)

Despite his own withering criticism of gambling systems, Bertram becomes obsessed with using what he asserts is his mathematical talent to develop his own perfect system. He and Cary encounter a gambler trying to peddle *his* system, and he greets them saying 'I carry with me good tidings'.[82] Cary feels 'that his use of a biblical phrase gave her a touch of shivers, of *diablerie*—the devil at his old game of quoting scripture'.[83] When Cary confronts Bertram about his previous remarks denigrating systems, in light of his efforts to now create his own, he says that he had not studied them at that time. She replies, 'That's what the devil said—he'd studied'.[84] Despite this diabolical foreshadowing, Part 1 ends with Bertram having apparently perfected his system and having won 5 million francs.

We see an implicit critique of Pascal's last assertion, quoted above, as Part 2 begins with Bertram having become shallow and materialistic because of his wagering instead of the panoply of virtues posited by Pascal. Bertram is devoted to his system above all else, and his relationship with Cary suffers as a result. Bertram wonders if his winnings are because his system really works or is it simply incredible luck. As he puts it, 'the poetry of absolute chance or the determination of closed systems? I would be gratified for the poetry, but what pride I should feel if I proved the determinism'.[85] In light of his earlier denigration of theology as the rationalization of mystery, it is hard not to see Bertram's query as having a religious dimension.

[79]Ibid., p. 151.
[80]Ibid., p. 153.
[81]*Loser Takes All*, pp. 50–51.
[82]Ibid., p. 53.
[83]Ibid.
[84]Ibid.
[85]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Bertram's existential conversion away from the wager comes when he learns that his 'determination of closed systems' is mathematically valid, and his 'winnings' result in the break-up of his marriage. By this point, the Gom has arrived in Monte Carlo. (Unbeknownst to the Gom, Bertram's winnings have given him power over the Gom, through his deal to acquire A.N. Other's shares in the company. Metaphorically, his 'success' at the wager has put this God-figure under his control. Theologically, this metaphoric control of a God-figure, the reduction of the deity to human control, is an indictment of Bertram's system. The ineffable God of faith exists far beyond a mere wizened denizen of the highest floor the London County Council would allow).[86] The Gom leads Bertram through a scheme to win back Cary, which involves walking away from the winnings that allowed him to gain control of the company. Then, when they are at last alone in their stateroom, Bertram rips up the paper on which he has laid out his system and tosses the scraps out the porthole. The ending is classically comical. Cary speaks first.

> The sleepy voice said, 'Darling, it's terribly cold. It's snowing'.
> 'I'll close the porthole'.
> 'No. Just come back'.[87]

So, Bertram regains his relationship with Cary and gets a promotion in his company, through *rejection* of what he 'gained' as a result of his success at gambling. The pay-off promised in the title, that the *Loser Takes All*, is delivered in this denouement. This is Greene's rejection and inversion of Pascal's Great Wager, where the loser lost nothing of value.

By having Bertram walk away from his winnings and discard his 'system' as the way to win back his wife and his life, Greene is having him reject the certainty of the Pascalian Wager with its sterile 'God idea', opting to abandon the attempt to rationalize mystery and staking his money on a 'divine system'. Greene foreshadows the point he makes with *Loser Takes All* in the far more somber *The Quiet American* from 1955. Fowler, the middle-aged English writer who is the Greene-like protagonist of the novel, is sitting drinking and gambling with Vigot, the Sûreté officer and reader of Pascal who is investigating the death of the American, Pyle. Vigot urges on him the merits of Pascal's Great Wager. Fowler's reply: 'I quoted Pascal back at him—it was the only passage I remembered. "Both he who chooses heads and he who chooses tails are equally at fault. They are both in the wrong. The true course is not to wager at all"'.

7. Camus and Greene

The next piece of the puzzle is the likelihood that *Loser Takes All* was meant by Greene as a riposte to the treatment of the Great Wager in the novels of Albert Camus. Greene

[86]Greene notes that when Bertram enters his office building, a 'huge office block with its glass, glass, glass and its dazzling marble floor and its pieces of modern carving in alcoves and niches like statues in a Catholic Church'. (*Loser Takes All* p. 9) He is soon summoned to Room 10 on the 8th floor, which, we are told, is 'as far as the London County Council regulations allowed us to build towards Heaven'. (p. 13) Thus, Greene starts us off in a counterfeit Heaven atop an ersatz cathedral, and a spurious Trinity; a deliberately staged *simulacrum* meant to teach a lesson about the difference (as Greene would find it expressed by Unamuno) between a mere 'God idea' and God Himself.

[87]*Loser Takes All*, p. 126.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was no stranger to inversions of Camus. In the first paragraph of *Travels with My Aunt*, for instance, Greene wrote 'For those reasons I found myself agreeably excited by my mother's funeral', a riff on the opening line of Camus' *L'Étranger*, '*Aujourd'hui, maman est morte*'.[88] Because Camus himself inverted Pascal's Wager in his novels, and because these two writers have deep affinities, it is worth exploring this relationship in the context of what Greene appears to have been attempting theologically in *Loser Takes All*.

The similarity between Greene and Camus was explored by Henry A. Grubbs in 1949.[89] We know that they were familiar with each other's work. Greene had a copy of the 1948 Knopf edition of the Stuart Gilbert translation of *The Plague* in his library, along with a heavily annotated copy of a 1955 edition of *The Myth of Sisyphus*.[90] Greene had plenty of time before the 1955 publication of *Loser Takes All* to become familiar with Camus's inversion of the Wager in his 1948 *The Plague*.

Similarly, Camus had quotes from Greene's novels in his notebooks.[91] Camus, despite being a non-believer, was of interest to the Catholic world because of his passionate concern for those who are suffering.[92] In his essay on Camus,[93] Henri Peyre notes that 'that moralist who has more than once upbraided Christianity and who may well be characterized as determinedly anti-Christian, has aroused most sympathetic interest among Christians'.[94]

R.W.B. Lewis offers the following critique of Greene writing 'religious literature':

> It has been a legitimate complaint about 'religious literature' in the second quarter of this century that its concern with grace has blotted out its vision of nature; that, in the theological perspective, the common aspirations and behavior of men appear dim or ugly, and their suffering insignificant. This is the whole point of the implausible figure of the priest, Paneloux, in Albert Camus' *The Plague*, preaching to the afflicted congregation of Oran that normal human health and

[88]Cf. Madigan, 'A Bad Aunt?' p. 987.

[89]Henry A. Grubbs, 'Albert Camus and Graham Greene', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 10 (1949), 33–42.

[90]<http://www.librarything.com/catalog/GrahamGreene&deepsearch=Camus>.

[91]A. Camus, *Notebooks: 1942-1951. Translated from the French and Annotated by J. O'Brien*, Vol. 2 (New York: Knopf, 1965). There are four quotes from *The Confidential Agent* (p. 195) and four quotes from *The Heart of the Matter* (p. 230). Greene had this volume of Camus's notebooks in his library (http://www.librarything.com/catalog/GrahamGreene&deepsearch=Camus) but would not have had this volume when he wrote *Loser Takes All*, since they were not published until after Camus's death in 1960. In Greene's copy of the notebooks, he highlighted a passage in which Camus wrote 'Christianity is pessimistic about man and is optimistic about human destiny. Marxism is pessimistic about human destiny and human nature and is optimistic about the march of history'. (p. 226) Greene's marginal note included 'Perhaps the most important historical point in the future will be when the Christian says "I do not always believe" and the Marxist agrees with him'. (Ibid.) Greene later reflected that at that moment in 1964, he had written what *Monsignor Quixote* was all about.

[92]In a notebook entry sometime between January 1942 and September 1945, Camus makes a statement that could equally have been made by Greene: 'Meaning of my work: So many men are deprived of grace. How can one live without grace? One has to try it and do what Christianity never did: be concerned with the damned'. *Notebooks: 1942-1951*, p. 99.

[93]Henri Peyre, 'Albert Camus, an Anti-Christian Moralist', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 102 (1958), 477–82.

[94]Ibid., p. 477.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> happiness are not items to be valued; and it is the basis of Camus' reversal of Pascal's wager about the existence of God.[95]

Lewis notes Camus' reversal of Pascal's Wager in *The Plague*[96] (and indeed in *The Stranger* as well) as being in service of what he calls Camus 'busy converting in a direction opposite to Graham Greene'.[97] What he did not see was that Catholics, at least, do not see Paneloux as a model of what a Catholic priest should be.[98]

The crucial difference between the two authors, particularly as regards the treatment of Pascal's Wager, is that Camus urges a rejection of the wager by means of 'betting' that there is no God, and that we therefore need to save ourselves. However, for Greene, the rejection of the wager in *Loser Takes All* flows from the conclusion that faith is above and apart from such a superficial rationalization, and the wager is rejected by refusing to bet at all. Despite that crucial difference, the two are more alike than not as regards the rejection of the Wager. It was Camus who wrote that both believers and non-believers must 'get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today'.[99]

That insight is at the core of Greene's rejection of the Wager. It was Camus who, in the quoted passage from his notebooks, saw so many men deprived of grace and called for us to be concerned with the damned. This, we have seen, was the enduring concern of Greene as well.

8. The influence of Unamuno

The final hinge of this puzzle box is the influence of the Spanish thinker Miguel de Unamuno. In *Monsignor Quixote* (1982), for example, there are explicit references to Unamuno as having taught one of the main characters, and his influence on the theology set forth in that novel has been established.[100] Father Leopoldo Durán, a friend of Greene's who traveled with him in Spain, wrote that *Monsignor Quixote* was born when he and Greene visited Unamuno's grave in Salamanca.[101] The meaning of Unamuno for Greene is illustrated in his 1980 autobiography, *Ways of Escape*, where Greene wrote:

> Perhaps Unamuno had these [the well-educated] in mind when he wrote: 'Those who believe that they believe in God, but without passion in their hearts, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of

[95] R. W. B. Lewis, 'The Fiction of Graham Greene: Between the Horror and the Glory', *The Kenyon Review*, 19 (1957), 56–75 at 71, Ibid., p. 64.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid., p. 70.

[98] Indeed, Thomas Merton says 'Paneloux is a spiritual profiteer, and his kind of Christianity is a reflection of the social establishment, with which it exists in a symbiotic unity. Of such Christianity, Teilhard [de Chardin] says it makes one less than a man and a traitor to the human race'. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, New Directions, p. 236.

[99] Albert Camus, 'The Unbeliever and Christians' Collected', in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. 71.

[100] Comerford, 'Kneel, *compañero*', p. 342.

[101] Leopoldo Durán, *Graham Greene: An Intimate Portrait by His Closest Friend and Confidant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), p. 212.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God Idea, not in God himself'.[102]

We know from Greene's autobiography that he had not read Unamuno's *A Tragic Sense of Life* at the time he wrote *A Burnt-Out Case*, which was published in 1960, so he would not have known it while writing *Loser Takes All* 5 years earlier. However, he had read Unamuno's *Life and Death of Don Quixote* years before.

Despite what Greene describes as 'making my way with passionate curiosity through works of theology',[103] he finds himself out of sympathy with attempts to rationalize mystery and in agreement with Unamuno's conclusion that proofs for the existence of God only prove the existence of that idea of God.[104] While Greene's in-depth reading of Unamuno post-dates the writing of *Loser Takes All*, it seems clear that Greene and Unamuno were thinking similarly for some time.[105] In fact, Father Durán remarked that Greene 'knew almost by heart' Unamuno's *Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*.[106] Moreover, Unamuno himself read and thought deeply about Pascal and saw the Wager as being contrary to the main lines of Pascal's thought. He writes of Pascal's rebellion against the probabilism of the Jesuits and said, 'He rebelled against it because he sensed its dangers within himself. Or is the famous argument of "the wager" anything but a probabilist argument?'[107] This dismissive aside is the only reference to the Wager in an entire chapter Unamuno wrote about Pascal.[108] When, in *Loser Takes All*, Greene has Bertram literally throw his system through the Seagull's porthole, we see – allusively – the Holy Spirit assisting Bertram in eschewing his shallow approach to faith, and Unamuno's influence on Greene's thought and literary work.

9. *Monsignor Quixote* foreseen

The authentication Greene gives us that ours is the correct solution to his ingenious puzzle box is to see that he later (1982) illustrated similar theological insights and influences in his novel *Monsignor Quixote* with those found in the earlier novel, *Loser Takes All. Loser Takes All* shares with *Monsignor Quixote* both the genre, i.e., the exemplary novel, and the influence, both stylistic and theological, of Unamuno. Both novels deal with doubt and certainty, faith and belief, and reality and fiction. Both are funny and not terribly long. Even the character A.N. Other as the third person of Greene's spurious

[102]Greene, *Ways of Escape*, p. 265.
[103]Durán, *Graham Greene*, p. 266.
[104]Ibid.
[105]Comerford, 'Kneel *compañero*', p. 342.
[106]Durán, *Graham Greene*, p. 212.
[107]Miguel de Unamuno, *The Agony of Christianity* (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Company, 1960), p. 107.
[108]This essay does not contend that Pascal's thought, writ large, is properly reducible to the wager. Neither does it contend that Unamuno rejected Pascal's thought. As F.R. Martin pointed out in his 1944 essay (F. R. Martin, 'Pascal and Miguel de Unamuno', *The Modern Language Review*, 39 (1944), 138–45), there is 'a special sympathy between these two minds with their personal, non-intellectual approaches to the problem of belief'. (Ibid., p. 138) Martin quotes the opening lines of a 1923 essay Unamuno wrote (in French) for the tercentenary of Pascal's birth: 'The reading of the writings which Pascal has left us, and especially those of the *Pensées*, do not invite us to study philosophy, but, on the contrary, to know a man, to penetrate the sanctuary of the universal pain of a soul, a very naked soul, and better yet maybe, a soul wearing a hairshirt'. (Ibid., translation by Dr. Constance Rousseau).

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Trinity finds an echo in Monsignor Quixote's use of a half-bottle of wine in explaining the Holy Spirit to Sancho. This echo of *Loser Takes All* in Greene's most thoroughly theological novel[109] is another validation of the seriousness of the earlier work.

Both these two exemplary novels share the 'mask smashing' of which Greene wrote. As Mark Bosco notes in his monograph on Greene, it was a commonplace in the critical literature to divide Greene's work into a Catholic period and a post-Catholic period, with the dividing line being placed after the publication in 1961 of *A Burnt-Out Case*.[110] Just as in *A Loser Takes All*, Greene has indeed 'smashed the mask' of being seen exclusively as the creator of bleak landscapes populated by God-haunted sinners, so in *Monsignor Quixote*, he was able to smash the mask that would have him limited to political questions in Haiti, Vietnam, or Paraguay.[111] In both cases, he does so in a way that plays on theological themes that sound through his more 'serious' work.

More importantly for our purpose, both novels eschew 'attempts to rationalize mystery'.[112] Admittedly, *Loser Takes All* is a more superficial take on this concern, framed, as it is, in the form of an extended joke inverting the Great Wager, whereas *Monsignor Quixote*, while funny, is a narrative that enacts an 'ecclesiology of friendship'[113] to show that lived Catholic faith is about relationships rather than rule-following. This through-line further demonstrates Greene's long-time grappling with the verse from Mark's gospel 'Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief'. (Mark 9:24 KJV) In discussing the distinction Greene observes between faith and belief, Graham Holderness sees that Greene is drawn to the volitional yearning toward God that is faith more than the rational assimilation of doctrinal points he describes as belief. To illustrate this, Holderness quotes from an interview Greene gave to Maria Coutu, in which Greene said, 'I have always liked the Biblical saying, "Lord I believe. Help my unbelief". I try to believe and what remains of my faith says that I'm wrong not to believe. I make a distinction between faith and belief. Faith is irrational and belief is rational'.[114] Patrick Henry, in one of his essays on the influence of Unamuno on Greene's *Monsignor Quixote*, finds Unamuno wrestling with this very same passage, when he sees 'the struggle in the life of those who do not know but cannot or will not resign themselves to not knowing. This struggle is resumed in Unamuno's interpretation of Mark 9:24: "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief". Here, "I believe" means what it does for Unamuno: "I want to believe"'.[115] These echoes establish both the parallels between these two exemplary novels, as well as the consistency of Greene's grappling with this theological issue over the years. Indeed, the scared gull escaping from the 'cathedral' of the pier in *Brighton Rock*, as noted above, foreshadows the preference for the church of love over the institutional church as expressed in *Monsignor Quixote*.[116]

[109]Comerford, 'Kneel, *compañero*', p. 358.
[110]Ibid., p. 23.
[111]There is a good critique of the division of Greene's work between Catholic and post-Catholic novels in Graham Holderness, "'Knight-Errant of Faith"? "*Monsignor Quixote*" as "Catholic Fiction"', *Literature and Theology*, 7 (1993), 259.
[112]Comerford, 'Kneel, *compañero*', p. 353.
[113]Ibid., p. 355.
[114]Holderness, p. 270.
[115]Patrick Henry, 'Doubt and Certitude in "Monsignor Quixote"', *College Literature*, 12 (1985), 75.
[116]Comerford, 'Kneel, *compañero*'. p. 355.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The growth and maturing of Greene's faith journey is illustrated by both the similarities and differences between these two exemplary novels spanning the years from 1955 to 1982. By the time Greene was writing *Monsignor Quixote*, he had returned to the sacraments and had acquired the wisdom that comes with age. The remarkable consistency between the two is the apophatic nature of Greene's spirituality, a devotion to mystery that runs from *Brighton Rock* forward.

10. Conclusion

A puzzle box is, on some level, a frivolity. It is an amusing object that would typically contain a prize of some kind. Constructing one, however, requires great mastery, and the solving of it is satisfying both for the intellectual exercise and for the prize one uncovers within. In *Loser Takes All*, Greene has constructed the puzzle with such cunning that it has for a long time gone unsolved. But as we have worked each hinge, we come to learn that there is an important message inside. Greene was committed to his craft and to his faith, so much so that even his jokes point to transcendent issues, and 'getting' his joke brings into play a breadth of references that demonstrate how seriously he took this effort. His decision to write an exemplary novel signals that he intended to send us a message. He alludes to his pneumatology by placing the image of the seagull in a place of privilege, echoing the avian references that so often populate his works with this message. Greene's invocation of Baudelaire is another layer of intertextuality in the construction of this puzzle box. Cary's light-hearted declaration of how much fun it is to live in sin jokes about the Baudelairian notion of the greatness of those who dare to be damned and simultaneously creates an inversion of *Brighton Rock*.

Furthermore, Greene, in uncharacteristically humorous fashion, mocks the facile acceptance of an idea of God that is undemanding and inadequate. By contrasting his view with that of Pascal and Camus, and leaning on Unamuno, Greene tells us that the real life of faith is a visceral experience of anguish and doubt and not a mere wager on the veracity of a particular intellectual notion. In so doing, Greene foreshadows his achievement in *Monsignor Quixote*, and those insights about the later novel are ratified by seeing they have such deep roots. Even his lightest story bears the weight of eternity.

Acknowledgements. Many thanks are owed to Dr. Constance Rousseau of Providence College for patiently helping me find my way through this puzzle.

Cite this article: Comerford PJ (2024). *Loser Takes All*: Graham Greene's Theological Puzzle Box. *New Blackfriars* 105(1), 13–30. https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2023.8