"Anyone Can Read Aloud": Orality and Literacy in *The Heart of the Matter*

Introduction

In his lecture on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe exposes "the desire – one might almost say the need – in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (Achebe, 1988, p. 1). In Conrad's novella, of course, Europe's state of grace is represented by its "civilization", negated by African barbarism, which has such negative power that it can destroy the mind of one of Europe's representatives.
Graham Greene's *Heart of the Matter* developed out of his experience as a civil-servant in Sierra Leone during the Second World War. Greene, too, sets up a set of "African" characteristics which he can oppose to those of European culture but, in contrast to *Heart of Darkness*, Greene does not see European civilization as being close to any sort of grace and, secondly, Greene's conception of what lies at the heart of European malaise, and what he sees in Africa to set up in comparison too it, is the West's reliance on print and literacy as opposed to Africa's closer relationship to orality.

Greene himself was a fanatical reader, and understood at least to some extent the way in which oral culture turned into print culture in the West. In "Greeneland" – that distorted universe in which is major novels take place – the defects in behaviour and personality are mirrored in textual and information technology in much the same way that emotional content in the Victorian novel was mirrored in the extremes of nature. Greene's novels are all concerned with social relationships. These relationships are often incomplete or unsuccessful, full of deception (of self and of others), comforting lies, and silences. Greeneland is a world where our oral relations with each other, relations which Walter Ong characterizes as "mobile, warm, [and] personally interactive" (Ong, 2002, p. 135), have become impossible. This kind of lifeworld (Husserl's term used by Ong) is the Africa of *The Heart of the Matter*. This Africa is perhaps as offensive in its fictitiousness as Conrad's, but in Greene's novels, Western countries are treated in the same way. Jurgen Habermas saw the development of Western culture as the "colonization" of the lifeworld by the rationality and practical modes of thinking which make up the "system" (Habermas, 1985). In *The Heart of the Matter*, this figurative colonization is represented by, in fact, actual colonization: the occupation of West Africa by the English. (Across the river from Freetown, the French colonists are themselves under the command of the proponents of practical reason *ad absurdam*, the Nazis). Greene's style is full of metaphor, simile and allusion (though it is not, by his own insistence, *symbolic*), and in order to represent the two opposing forces of this colonization without resorting to the vulgarly political, he required a schema of phenomena which would serve to expose the kind of opposition he was interested in. The schema he chose was that of print culture itself, and the opposition that of literacy vs. orality.

Greene's life has always been heavily influence by print. An avid reader and writer from an early age, Greene used his intimate relationship with all kinds of print and information technologies in his novels. This is not surprising since, as Finkelstein and McLeery assert that in their *Introduction to Book History* (2005) "society is based on transactions enabled by communication

processes" (p. 28). For Graham Greene, a writer preoccupied to the point of obsession with social transactions, communication is a fundamental aspect of his characters' lives. Generally speaking, social transactions in Greeneland are investigated in their negative aspect, that is, they are not so much enabled by communication processes as *disabled* by faulty communication. In order to portray this state of affairs more fully, Greene's novels are populated with characters whose relationships with each other (their social relationships) are defined by their relationships with different forms of communication. Finkelstein and McLeery go on to say that "our ability to function is often determined by the accuracy and best use of available information and knowledge" (p. 28). But this seems to me to ignore the question of personality, of character; this is the area that Greene examines. In Greene's novels, the "accuracy and best use of information" does not determine the ability to function; rather it is a medium through which personality expresses itself. A character in Greeneland is drawn to certain modalities and technologies of information depending on his or her personality. The accuracy of the information becomes subordinated to the action engendered by it. Indeed, the idea of "accurate" information is too close to the idea of absolute truth for any of Greene's characters to be comfortable with. For Greene, as for Nietzsche, the inaccuracy of information is not necessarily problematic, the question is to what extent social transactions are made possible.

The population of Greene's novels with characters interacting with information and communication media signifies the importance of these elements in human society.

> From the beginning of time, the skill and ability to process, decode, pass on, and utilize knowledge and information has been highly prized. Oral cultures have had their 'griots' (storytellers), their shamans, witchdoctors, sages, whose function was to preserve and pass on cultural traditions, who acted as repositories of social and cultural values, and who were called upon to judge, heal, inform, or entertain. Written cultures have called on scribes and philosophers to preserve and interpret human thought and activity. (p. 28)

No writer, it seems, accords information so high a value as Graham Greene does. In every novel there is someone whose occupation is concerned with information and communication. The ubiquitous priest is not merely a sounding-board for Greene's religious examination, but a "repository of social and cultural value", whose mystical communication with God is sacrosanct, who is privy to private information via the confessional, and yet whose ability to communicate that information is circumscribed by precisely that ritual which allows him to acquire it. Graham Greene was a spy; his greatest spy novel (*The Human Factor*) is a compendium of esoteric means of communication, and the drama of the novel is based on the ways in which these means of communication break down, and the consequences of that breakdown.

In *The Heart of the Matter*, the standard Greene elements of alienation and the inability to communicate are present. Print-based, European culture is contrasted with an older oral culture in the form of the English colonial presence in West Africa. The Europeans, in Greene's view, are so alienated from each other and their world that they are no longer able to communicate directly, orally in the "mobile, warm, personally interactive lifeworld" (Ong, 2002, p. 135). They live according to the "practical reason" of the system, exemplified for Greene by the technology of writing which, "more than any other single invention… has transformed human

consciousness" (p. 134). These two forms of consciousness, pre- and post-print, that for Greene, are in opposition in the modern world.

Orality and Literacy

In "Orality and Literacy", Walter Ong discusses the ways in which the coming of writing and then of print restructured the ways in which human beings not only expressed their thinking, but the way in which they thought. "Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form" (Ong, 2002, p. 134). For Ong, the "natural" relations between people was oral – direct communication – but this was not to say that the "artificial" means of communication via the technology of writing was a bad thing. The use of tools is specific to humanity, and does not detract from our ability to express deeply human things (Ong uses the examples of musical instruments). But tools are not merely useful in allowing us to overcome our bodies' physical limitations; they allow us to distance ourselves from the oral "lifeworld" (messy, emotional, contingent), to gain perspective, and to express ourselves more rationally:

> Writing transforms consciousness. Alienation from a natural milieu can be good for us and is in many ways essential for full human life. To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity, but also distance. This writing provides for consciousness as nothing else does.

Greene, on the other hand, sees alienation and distance as existential evils in the modern world. Many of his novels deal with lack of commitment – to politics, to other people, to life in general. Major Scobie, at an important moment when orality impinges on his life (to which we will return later) sums up Greene's view of distance and alienation in the modern world:

> He had been in Africa when his own child died. He had always thanked God that he had missed that. It seemed after all that one never really missed a thing. To be a human being one had to drink the cup. If one were lucky on one day, or cowardly on another, it was presented on a third occasion. (Greene, 1991, p. 125)

One of Greene's ironies is that the earliest technology to conquer distance by print, the telegraph, is instrumental in Scobie's learning of his daughter's death.

> "I had a child", Scobie said, "who died. I was out here. My wife sent me two cables from Bexhill, one at five in the evening and one at six, but they mixed up the order. You see she meant to break the thing gently. I got one cable just after breakfast. It was eight o'clock in the morning – a dead time of day for any news." He had never mentioned this before to anyone, not even to Louise. Now he brought out the exact words of each cable, carefully. "The cable said, *Catherine died this afternoon no pain thank God bless you.* The second cable came at lunch-time. It said, *Catherine seriously ill. Doctor has hope my diving*. That was the one sent at five." (p. 155)

The failure of the telegraph system to communicate effectively exposes the distancing effect of the technology, which telegraphy usually hides.

Jurgen Habermas, in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, discusses the ways in which the "functionalist reason" of the "system" "colonizes" the lifeworld, the world of "communicative reason", i.e. that world where orality takes precedence, where arguments must be made and defended in a way that print denies. This aspect of print culture, which goes back to Plato's critique of writing, the inability of print to be directly challenged, required that ideas put into print form be more precise and accurate than a text which was only spoken orally. The way of thinking engendered by the technology of writing led directly to instrumental and functionalist reason which is one of the hallmarks of our contemporary world. As Habermas pointed out, however, instrumental reason, and our subservience to it, is responsible for many of the ills of contemporary society. So much was clear to Greene, and it is a happy coincidence that the figurative "colonization" of Habermas' theory manifests itself as literal colonization in *The Heart of the Matter*.

Despite the fact that the print/oral, colonizer/colonized opposition is realized in an actual colonial experience – English/West Africans – Africans do not play an important part in *The Heart of the Matter*. They provide a context of oral culture in which Greene's doomed innocents can exist. The Colonized in *The Heart of the Matter* are figurative, not literal: they are Europeans who are not at home in the world of print and instrumental reason; those who long for a lost world of warm and direct communication, unmediated by print, the technology of distance. Each of the four main characters in the novel – Major Scobie, Scobie's wife Louise, Wilson, and Mrs Rolt, the nineteen-year-old widow with whom Scobie falls in love – are defined by their relationship to print culture: what and how they read and write. Their relationships are the relationships between different levels of orality and literacy, texts, books, and reading.

Pragmatics and Intertextuality

The defining feature of Greene's style – more obvious, perhaps, than even its restraint – is the heavy use of simile, that is, a way of reading the world intertextually. Greene himself, in one of his travel books, defines metaphor as a memory, and it must be borne in mind that one of the criticisms of print as far back as Plato is the denigrating effect it has on memory. On the first page of *The Heart of the Matter*, Wilson is "like the lagging finger of a barometer" (p. 7), which is itself a scientific tool for reading the book of nature. A group of schoolboys attempt to lure a sailor to the local brothel, and the "boys' refrain came faintly up to Wilson like a nursery rhyme" (p. 11). The constant use of simile, especially when the vehicle refers to technologies of print and reading, creates a semiotic mosaic out of Greene's text which keeps the act of reading (the signs of nature, of life) always before the reader.

Despite Greene's disdain for symbolism, each simile is a sign in itself (the nursery rhyme a sign for the immaturity of the boys), but the interpretation of the simile from the point of view of the character (Wilson reminded of a nursery rhyme) serves to delineate that character. In this way, Greene's similes, metaphors, and allusions, are "pragmatic" (Rorty, 1992, p. 92) for his characters[1]. Wilson is an innocent, reminded of the nursery even by the vulgar exhortation

“Captain want jig jig, my sister pretty girl school-teacher, captain want jig jig” (Greene, 1991, p. 7). By using the simile not only to describe what the boys say, but Wilson’s interpretation (reading) of it, Greene deepens and enriches an otherwise spare and desolate style, while at the same time efficiently giving a sense of Wilson’s character: his reading of the world depends on what he had read to him in the nursery as a child. It is no coincidence, either, that nursery rhymes are read to a child, not read by a child alone. From the beginning then, Wilson is marked by an allegiance to orality.

When we first meet Wilson, he is new to the Colony (unnamed, but understood to be Sierra Leone, where Greene worked for British Intelligence). Wilson knows no-one, and his function in the Colony is for the moment undefined. Even before we know his position in the colony or the novel then (he turns out not to be the hero), we are introduced to Wilson as a reader:

> A black boy brought Wilson’s gin and he sipped it very slowly because he had nothing else to do except return to his hot and squalid room and read a novel – or a poem. Wilson liked poetry, but he absorbed it secretly, like a drug (p. 12)

Poetry, in Greeneland, is characteristic of the innocents, those who cannot function in the world of instrumental reason, those who yearn for the directness of orality. Poetry, of course, with its strict language, formulas, and mnemonic devices, is the genre of orality, and it is Wilson’s secret love of poetry, not his reading of novels, that Greene comes back to again and again. A love of poetry must be kept secret from the world of print genres, the world of instrumental reason, because it is full of the kind of messy, irrational communication that the “system” is attempting to destroy in the “lifeworld”. Greene tells us that Wilson “wanted passionately to be indistinguishable from other men” (p. 12), which clearly means reading what they read – which does not include poetry. He attempts to adopt the signs of conformity (reading novels in public, the “very young moustache” which he wears “like a club tie”) to hide his authentic innocence – the only compromise he has yet learned to make with the world of the system.
Wilson is approached by Harris, a cable-sensor (i.e., a professional reader). Harris seems to know who Wilson is – “You’re the new accountant at the U.A.C?” – and truth or falsity of this knowledge will prove instrumental in the intricate plot Greene constructs. The two are brought together for a moment in discussing the Indian who haunts the hotel they live in – a reader of palms, of the future – the kind of reading that is so foreign, completely anathema, to the world of instrumental reason. Soon their attention is attracted by Scobie, the deputy police commissioner.

Scobie is the opposite of Wilson – he hates to lie, to hide to evade; the world, in Scobie’s view, would be better off it conformed to the rational and unemotional content of his police reports, that is, the rationality of print, in which every word had been carefully chosen for effective and efficient communication. The Commissioner refers to him as Scobie the Just[2].

Other members of the English community in the Colony do now know how to deal with Scobie’s honesty: they make up stories about him, signs that would indicate, if they were true, that the “real” Scobie was just as corrupt as they. “Probably in the pay of the Syrians if the truth were known” (p. 14). Wilson is troubled by his inability to live in the world, while Scobie is not – except in the one area where the “warm, mobile” lifeworld, the world of emotion, breaks in: his

relationship with his wife, Louise. After fifteen years together in the Colony, each can "read" the other so well that every scene seems to Scobie pre-written, scripted, and neither of them is capable of changing the text. The text is immutable as print, not as fluid as real oral interaction

Scobie feels responsible for his wife's unhappiness: her face is scarred with the signs of experiences he feels he has forced on her: facing the death of their daughter alone, moving to the Colony, etc. Scobie is constantly reminded of how Louise used to look by an old photograph, but the most succinct expression of the distance between husband and wife is in the contents of their bookshelves:

> Scobie took a Mende grammar from the bookcase: it was tucked away in the bottom shelf where its old untidy cover was least conspicuous. In the upper shelves were flimsy rows of Louise's authors – not so young modern poets and the novels of Virginia Woolf. (p. 22)

It is no surprise by now that Scobie prefers practical texts to Louise's poetry. It is interesting that Greene includes Virginia Woolf on Louise's bookshelf. If Walter Ong's thesis that "writing restructures consciousness" is correct, then surely "stream of consciousness" was an attempt to restructure (traditional) writing, an attempt that adherents of oral culture in Greeneland would support.

These adherents, these poetry-lovers like Louise and Wilson, are tormented by an imaginary world where life is exciting, happy, and full of joy – a world Scobie the realist, the believer in functional rationality, knows does not exist. Scobie reads neither poetry or novels, and is satisfied with the safety of his Mende grammar.

It is their shared interest in poetry that brings Wilson and Louise together. Throughout the novel, Wilson denies his poetry-reading in an attempt to fit in. When he finds himself snubbed at the colonists' club Louise, who believes herself also snubbed, speaks to him:

> "Do you like reading?" Louise asked, and Scobie realized with relief that she was going to be kind to the poor devil. It was always a bit of a toss-up with Louise. Sometimes she could be the worst snob in the station, and it occurred to him with pity that perhaps she believed she couldn't afford to be snobbish. Any new face that didn't "know" was welcome.
> "Well," Wilson said, and fingered desperately his thin moustache, "well…" it was as if he were gathering strength for a great confession or a great evasion.
> "Detective stories?" Louise asked.
> "I don't mind detective stories," Wilson said uneasily. "Some detective stories."
> "Personally," Louise said, "I like poetry."
> "Poetry," Wilson said, "yes." He took his fingers reluctantly away from his moustache and something in his dog-like look of gratitude and hope made Scobie think with happiness: have I really found her a friend?
> "I like poetry myself," Wilson said. (p. 31)

Wilson's favourite reading is the *Golden Treasury*, and even while performing an adult act (the attempted seduction of Louise) he is reminded by a poem by Shelley included in it (62). For Wilson, the poem represents what he hopes is the underlying reality of experience – direct and warm communication. Scobie, on the other hand, believes in no underlying reality, no hidden *noumenon* represented by its *phenomenon*. These positions fit in well with Ong's account of the unchallengeable nature of print. For Wilson, the "book of the world" can be questioned, is not an irrefutable reality, while for Scobie (and for print culture in general) the world is a "discourse which cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be" (Ong, 2002, p. 134). For Ong, the reason a written text cannot be directly questioned is because "written discourse has been detached from its author". For Greene, a convert to Catholicism, this is exactly the situation the world is in. Scobie, also a Catholic, has the benefit of a clerical hermeneutic to tell him the truth of the world, while Wilson, whose religion is as vague as his occupation, does not.

Scobie's belief in the power of print over the shifting truths of orality becomes shaken throughout the course of the novel. When we first meet Scobie, he is dealing with a complaint brought by an African girl. The girl tells Scobie that her landlady broke up her home the night before by tearing down partitions in her room which turned the room into a communal apartment and stealing the girl's china. Scobie begins the interview not by taking a statement of the facts, which would be the norm in England, but by determining the social situation in which the girl lived:

> "Why you come here? Why you not call Corporal Laminah in Sharp Town?"
> "He my landlady's brother, sir."
> "He is, is he? Same father same mother?"
> "No, sir. Same father." (Greene, 1991, p. 19)

This is not the world of instrumental reason, but the lifeworld of orality. Scobie imagines what would happen if he bothered to investigate:

> The landlady would say that she had told her tenant to pull down the partitions and when that failed she had taken action herself. She would deny that there had ever been a chest of china. The corporal would confirm this. He would turn out not to be the landlady's brother, but some other unspecified relation. (p. 19)

The "truth" of an oral culture is not the same as the truth of print culture. To attempt to write all this up in a report (which Scobie spends much of his time doing), to sift through all the contradictory oral testimony, would be impossible. When Scobie first arrived in the Colony he attempted to maintain a rational, clear-cut distinction between truth and falsehood, which becomes increasingly impossible as the mess and irrationality of his own situation corrupts his belief, not only in God, but in the validity of print and instrumental rationality.

Fact vs. Fiction

What, then, does Scobie read? On the face of it, very little. Besides the Mende grammar, he reads his police reports, his diary, and some letters. Each of these forms is, typically "true", "factual",

"non-fiction", that is, they fulfill the requirements of practical reason. Scobie's police reports are facts determined through investigation, his diary records the barest information set down without emotion (the record for the day his daughter died reads simply: "C died" (p. 115)), dispassionately. In his letters to his wife, Scobie cannot bring himself even to offer the comforting lie, preferring to omit rather than state an untruth – writing remains a technology of distance. Other people's letters, however, full of passion and prevarication, Scobie does not quite understand, and they remain for him texts which do not exist in themselves, but only as relationships between reader and writer. In Rorty's contribution to a lecture series entitled "Interpretation and overinterpretation", he describes pragmatism as an interpretation of a text which does not attempt to fit the text into a network of relationships (philosophical, exegetical, etc.), to penetrate behind the text to the reality it represents, Pragmatism rather takes the text as it is, meaning what it must to fit the needs of the reader. "Interpreting something", in Rorty's view, "knowing it, penetrating to its essence, and so on are all just various ways of describing some process of putting it to work" (p. 93). This pragmatic view is Scobie's, while the idea that a text can express a hidden truth about the world is that of Wilson and Louise, and it is the point of view of orality.

Early on in the novel, Scobie confiscates a letter from the captain of a Portuguese ship passing through the colony. This letter means less to him as a passionate text from a lonely father to his absent daughter than as an element in Scobie's own relationship to the captain, to his own men, and to the British Colony as a whole.

> He looked at the address – a Frau Groener in Friedrichstrasse, Leipzig. He repeated, "I'm sorry, captain," and because the man didn't answer, he looked up and saw the tears beginning to pursue the sweat down the hot fat cheeks. "I'll have to take it away," Scobie said, "and report…"
> "Oh, this war," the captain burst out, "how I hate this war."
> "We've got cause to hate it too, you know," Scobie said.
> "A man is ruined because he writes to his daughter."
> "Daughter?"
> "Yes. She is Frau Groener. Open it and read. You will see."
> "I can't do that. I must leave it to the censorship…." (p. 50)

But Scobie does open it, does read the letter, and this first glimpse at what might lie behind the truths he believes puts him on the road to his final fall.
The one book Scobie keeps with him always is his diary. There are boxes full of volumes stretching back to his childhood. "Night after night for more years than he could remember he had kept a record – the barest possible records – of his days" (p. 114). But Scobie does not really know what the diary means to him:

> He couldn't have told himself why he stored up this record – it was certainly not for posterity. Even if posterity were to be interested in the life of an obscure policeman in an unfashionable colony, it would have learned nothing from these cryptic entries. Perhaps the reason was that forty years ago at a preparatory school he had been given a prize – a copy of *Allan Quartermain* – for keeping a diary throughout one summer holiday, and the

habit had simply stayed. (p. 115)

In his essay "The Lost Childhood" Greene placed great importance on the books one read in childhood, and this childhood habit that Scobie cannot get rid of links him immediately to Helen Rolt, the "child-widow" Scobie falls in love with. When he first sees her being carried on a stretched to a hospital, she is clutching a book of stamps, given to her by her father. When he asks her about them later on, Helen tries to explain why she keeps the book. "I don't know," she replies, "I don't really collect. I carry them round. I suppose it is habit". (p. 154). A moment later she admits that she loves the stamps. This inability to shake of the textual habits of childhood reminds us of the "autonomous" discourse mentioned in Ong; both a diary and a stampbook are ways of imposing order on the world, of interpreting it, and for both Scobie and Helen the habits of diary-keeping or stamp-collecting are unchallengeable.

The connection between Helen and Scobie is in contrast to the connection between Louise and Wilson: Louise and Wilson are brought together by what they read, Helen and Scobie by what they do not. But Helen and Scobie's affair is doomed by the fact that the second time he sees her, convalescing in a field hospital, Scobie is already infected with the idea that the world might be other than it is. With his strict belief in right and wrong compromised, he begins to invent, to create fiction, to *change* a printed text in the act of reading it aloud. Asking what he might do to help a young boy who is recovering in the bed next to Helen's, Scobie is told that he might read to him. The selection of books at the Mission hospital is ghastly, even for a Catholic: it consists mainly of the biographies of missionaries. Scobie "wasn't much used to books, but even to his eye these hardly seemed a bright collection for reading to a sick boy" (p. 127). Previously, Scobie would have appreciated these books for their truthfulness, their factuality. But even when his choice is approved for reading to the boy, Scobie cannot being himself to do it. For the first time in his life chooses the comforting lie over the reality of the text. "What's the name of the book you've brought?" the boy asks him, "perhaps I've read it. I read *Treasure Island* on the boat. I wouldn't mind a pirate story. What's it called?"

> Scobie said dubiously, "*A Bishop Among the Bantus*."
> "What does that mean?"
> Scobie drew a deep breath. "Well, you see, Bishop is the name of the hero."
> "But you said *a* Bishop."
> "Yes. His name was Arthur." (p. 127)

Scobie makes up a fiction involving Arthur Bishop among the Bantu pirates. The sanctity of print has given way to the warmth and transience of orality. Once Scobie has chosen orality, however, chosen to belief that things could be other than they are, he becomes like Wilson and Louise, no longer able to live in the world of certainty and fact. His attempts to live as if the world were richer and less damnably rational than it is provides the scenario for his eventual suicide, made possible by more falsifying of printed texts.

Throughout the novel, the advantages of orality are propounded by the illiterate Syrian trader, Yusef, who serves as a kind of tempter for Scobie. Yusef exemplifies all the advantages of oral cultures, strong mnemonic skill for instance (Yusef knows much poetry, including Shakespeare,

by heart). In his role as tempter, Yusef pays for Louise to go abroad in return for a momentary lapse of integrity on Scobie's part. Yusef, who keeps all his inventories in his head, offers to bear all of Scobie's worry in order to protect his investment. Because nothing is written down, all agreements are verbal, Yusef feels that he communicates directly with Scobie, that he knows him better than most, a feeling that Scobie adamantly resists. Plagued by responsibility, Scobie eventually succumbs to Yusef with "the odd sense of having for the first time in his life shifted a burden elsewhere (p. 242). Scobie has by now realized that Wilson is in fact a police spy, and he worries that Wilson knows not only about his relationship with Yusef, but his affair with Helen Rolt. It is this knowledge that Scobie fears Wilson will expose; fears not for himself, but for the pain that this would cause to both Helen and Louise. Scobie finally turns to Yusef as the only person he can really trust, and in the cosmology that Greene has set up, we can read this as return to oral culture to supply the inadequacies of print. When Scobie finally gives in, Yusef says:

> "It is a long time since we have seen each other." Yusef sat down and rested his great head wearily on his palm like a dish. "Time goes so differently for two people – fast or slow. According to their friendship."
> "There's probably a Syrian poem about that."
> "There is, Major Scobie," he said eagerly.
> "You should be friends with Wilson, not me, Yusef. He reads poetry. I have a prose mind." (p. 240).

In fact, Yusef's temptation is not only material. Beyond the money-lending and diamong smuggling, Yusef appreciates poetry, and it is he who points out that Scobie's Catholicism, his devotion to prose, his strict judgement of right and wrong, are inadequate to such a complex, human world. Only poetry, storytelling, orality, is capable of achieving anything important. Yusef tells Scobie:

> "I have always dreamed of an evening just like this with two glasses by our side and darkness and time to talk about all the important things, Major Scobie. God. The family. Poetry. I have a great appreciation for Shakespeare. The Royal Ordnance Corps have very fine actors and they have made me appreciate the germs of English literature. I am crazy about Shakespeare. Sometimes because of Shakespeare I would like to be able to read, but I am too old to learn. And I think perhaps I would lose my memory. That would be bad for business, and though I do not live for business, I must do business to live. There are many subjects I would like to talk to you about. I should like to hear the philosophy of your life."
> "I have none." (p. 244).

God, the family, poetry: all subject which instrumental reason, the dominant rationality of the world of print, cannot comprehend. For Yusef, the benefits of an oral culture – a storytelling, dramatic, rhetorical culture – ideally outweigh his business interests. But he is wordly enough to recognize the need to do business. For Scobie the process of what he, in his Western, print-dominated way, saw as at best naïve and at worst dishonest (poetry, fiction), become a way out of the moral impasse in which he finds himself. The transition from reporting to storytelling, from print to orality, began when he read aloud to the boy in the hospital, although falsification

of evidence began earlier: with the omission from the official report of the confiscation of the Portuguese captain's letter. As in Catholicism, Scobie's sin of omission is the beginning, while his later sin of commission is unpardonable. When the boy tells Scobie that "anyone can read aloud", the power of orality/drama/rhetoric becomes stronger than the dogma of the Church, of the Western Canon, of print and facticity. Scobie comes to understand that only by an extreme act of fiction, of drama, of storytelling, can he resolve the unbearable situation that he – through his inability to communicate, to close the distance created in us by the technology of print – has created. Thus Scobie's relationship to print, books, and reading becomes bound up in the unforgiveable sin with which his story ends.

People of the Book

Three different kinds of text feed into Scobie's decision to take his own life. First there is the note left behind by the deputy police chief of a neighbouring town, which Scobie reads in the course of investigating the man's suicide. The policeman was in debt to Yusef, and did not want to admit it to his father, worrying that Yusef may try to collect on the debt: "They may try to get it out of you. Otherwise I wouldn't mention it." To Scobie, the note was "like a letter from school excusing a bad report" (p. 88), and awakens in him the understanding of the value of the comforting lie, the comforting fiction.

Later, in discussing the suicide, a local doctor tells Scobie that the best way to make a suicide look like an accident (for insurance reasons, perhaps) would be to claim the symptoms of angina, complain of sleeplessness, and get a prescription for sleeping pills. The question of a prescription, of insurance company records, of a death certificate – all texts that claim to be true and factual – combine in Scobie's plan to extricate himself, his wife, and his lover from the situation they are in. The plan calls for these ordinarily sacrosanct documents to be falsified; there must be no question of suicide. A fiction must be created which puts Helen's and Louise's minds at ease (not to mention the minds of the police and the coroner).

Scobie's bank manager, when we first meet him near the beginning of the novel, is a hypochondriac with a selection of medical books that he pores over obsessively, searching for what might be wrong with him. A medical book, again, is factual, is *true*. The need to look up the symptoms of angina draws Scobia back to the office, only to find that the bank manager no longer has need of the book, and for the first time seems relaxed, almost happy: he has just been given six months to live, and can stop worrying. For him, the details of the factual medical text turned out to be false, and the comfort he sought from facts also false.

Besides acting out the symptoms of angina before his doctor and Louise, Scobie begins to falsify his diary. He goes back over the entries of a month or so and jots down evidence of sleeplessness and pain. Although he his hoarding the sleeping pills against a planned overdose, he carefully monitors in his diaries the effects of doses he purports to be taking. In this way an elaborate fiction is created, a fiction which is easier to comprehend, easier to bear, than reality. This is the lessons Scobie learns, his fall from a policeman's grace – the grace of fact and truth. Echoing Nietzsche's maxim, Scobie finally understands that "the falseness of a judgment is not necessarily an objection to a judgment… the question is to what extent is it life advancing"

(Nietzsche, 1990, p. 4). In order to confirm the story he has told, however, Scobie must really die. He dies believing himself damned not only as a suicide, but as one who lies, who creates fictions, one who chooses Nietzsche's life-advancing untruth over everything else. Having wandered from the path of truth, fact, and the Book, Scobie finds himself caught up in fiction, orality, "falsehood", all those things the Catholic church fights. The only mystery a Catholic is allowed is the mystery of God; everything else is explained by Scripture and the custodians of scripture. For the good of the people he is leaving behind, Scobie (a Catholic and a policeman, both enemies of mystery) attempts to weave one more mystery. In Greene's world, of course, God's mystery is in the end victorious. The narrative of the church is proof against the individual narratives of little men; Scobie's death can be worked into the story that the church tells. Scobie has died believing himself damned, but Father Rank, the local priest (custodian of the Book) has the following exchange with Scobie's widow:

> "He was a bad Catholic."
> "That's the silliest phrase in common use," Father Rank said.
> "And at the end of this – horror. He must have known that he was damning himself."
> "Yes, he knew that all right. He never had any trust in mercy – except for other people."
> "It's no use even praying…"
> Father Rank clapped the cover of the diary to and said furiously. "For goodness' sake, Mrs Scobie, don't imagine you – or I – know a thing about God's mercy."
> "The Church says…"
> "I know the Church says. The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart." (p. 272)

Greene seems to be suggestion that the infallibility of the Church – founded on the Bible – is no match for the orality, storytelling aspect of God (cf. Eco, 1992). Thus, while the Catholic Church and its Book win out – in a very colonial sense – over older oral traditions, as well as over less dogmatic texts and modes of reading, the implication is that there is a God of orality which the Catholic Church does not represent. For Greene, the world is composed of books, and the only productive attitude to take is that of a reader – but he is not so dogmatic or insensitive to assume that the texts and ways of reading of his own culture and background are sufficient for other cultures. While showing us the way in which a "literate" Westerner approaches his world, Greene never loses sight of alternative possibilities which suit the rest of the world. In this way, he gives us another chapter in his investigation of religion and of the behaviour of men and women in the modern world.

Conclusion

The fictional world created by Graham Greene – sometimes known as *Greeneland* – is an extremely literary one. Texts abound: notes, letters, diaries, newspapers, books; and texts play an extremely important part in the cosmology of Greeneland, and the constellations of Greene's characters. In his lecture on 'interpretation and history', Umberto Eco (1992) states that interpretation of 'the book of the world' in medieval Europe was 'indefinite': "If [a plant] is vaguely like part of the human body, then it has meaning because it refers to the body" (p. 32).

Texts and characters in Graham Greene refer back and forth to each other, with texts aiding in the interpretation of character, personality and behaviour in the fictional world. Greeneland is the quintessential world of print. And yet, the malaise and alienation so characteristic of Greeneland implies that there is another mode of existence which print obliterates, a mode of orality and direct experience which the printed text makes impossible for Greene's characters. As a convert to Catholicism, Greene might have been expected to identify this richer mode with the religious life, but post-reformation Christianity is just as much a religion of the printed text as the secular twentieth-century. For Eco, "every time a secret has been discovered [through the act of interpretation], it will refer to another secret in a progressive movement toward a final secret" (p. 32), and his conclusion is that "there can be no final secret". This conclusion is shared with Greene who, nevertheless, creates characters who constantly attempt to pierce the mystery and discover the final secret.

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1 Pragmatism, according to Rorty is "the stage in which all descriptions… are evaluated according to their efficacy as instruments for purposes, rather than by their fidelity to the object described" (p. 92)
2 After Aristides the Athenian. The populace of Athens were called upon to vote for or against the exile of Aristides around 482 BC. An illiterate voter came up to Aristides, who he did not know, and asked him to write Aristides' own name on the voting shard. When Aristides asked the man if Aristides had done him some wrong the man replied that he was simply tired of hearing Aristides referred to everywhere as "The Just". Aristides then wrote his own name on the shard. Scobie's relationship with an illiterate will, indeed, end in a kind of exile.