

The Displaced Person

by Jeffrey Meyers

Greene on Capri: A Memoir
by Shirley Hazzard
New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux;
151 pp., \$22.00



“The depravity of Tiberius, or the salacity of Suetonius,” wrote Anthony Burgess, “had left its mark on an island all sodomy, lesbianism, scandal and cosmopolitan artiness.” For the last 150 years, writers have been attracted to the natural beauty as well as the lechery of Capri—20 miles across the bay from Naples, four miles long, and with a permanent population of 12,000. Hans Christian Andersen, Ivan Turgenev, Tristan Corbière, Axel Munthe, Gerhart Hauptmann, Booth Tarkington, Ivan Bunin, and Rainer Maria Rilke, among others, visited the island.

Joseph Conrad, who spent time on Capri in 1905, said the air was too stimulating and complained of the hot winds, violent contrasts, and sexual depravity:

Too much ozone they say: too exciting and that's why no lung patients are allowed to come here. . . . This place here, this climate, this sirocco, this transmontana, these flat roofs, these sheer rocks, this blue sea—are impossible. . . . The scandals of Capri—atrocious, unspeakable, amusing, scandals international, cosmopolitan and biblical.

D.H. Lawrence lived on Capri for two

months in 1920, hated the place, and called it “a stewpot of semi-literary cats.”

The Australian-American novelist Shirley Hazzard met Graham Greene in the Gran Caffé in Capri in the late 1960's when she supplied the last line of a poem by Browning that he'd begun to quote but couldn't quite complete. Her slight but charming, engaging, and handsomely designed memoir of Greene suggests

what it was to be habitually in his company, to walk with him in a street, to exchange opinions, literature, laughter, and something of one's self; to observe his moods and responses, suffer his temper, and witness his attachments; to see him grow old.

Her book belongs to the same valuable genre of personal recollections as Maxim Gorky's *Reminiscences of Tolstoy, Chekhov and Andreyev* (1919) and J.R. Acklerley's *E.M. Forster: A Memoir* (1970). Hazzard, remembering “long and well, and without prompting, what is truly interesting,” rarely made notes after her talks with Greene, though she occasionally recorded precise details of an evening spent with him. Her style is usually vivid and elegant. But Greene would have disapproved of her lapses: into cliché (“the Second World War convulsed the globe; calling populations to arms”), Jamesian ponderosity (“In certain enkindled moods, the inconsequential supposition of a shared opinion might be angrily repelled as importunate”), or unnecessary obfuscation, as when she describes an Italian publisher who “was killed—apparently by an explosive device related to Feltrinelli's own clandestine adventures.” (In fact, he blew himself up while trying to destroy a pylon.) And Hazzard's observations at times require more substance or elucidation. Her list of great

19th-century fictional heroines excludes Anna Karenina. She remarks that Greene liked the name of the Sicilian wine Corvo, which means “crow” in Italian, without explaining that it reminded him of Frederick Rolfe, Baron Corvo, whom he admired as a writer and called “so amazingly unreasonable.” She was baffled when Greene enigmatically compared himself to Flaubert, though both authors had a penetrating vision of evil in the world.

In 1948, Greene bought his house on Anacapri, *Il Rosaio* (the rosebush), with all its contents, for the bargain price of £3,000—his proceeds from the film of *The Third Man*. The house, with a fine cultural pedigree, had been a refuge for the Czech politician Jan Masaryk and for the writers Gorky, Norman Douglas, and Francis Brett Young. After the Great War, it had been sold to the novelist Compton Mackenzie, who had invited Lawrence to Capri. Greene's austere studio, inside a walled garden, had an old divan, a chair, a table, and a portable typewriter. In that refuge within a retreat on an island, he faithfully wrote his daily 350 words, breaking off—like Hemingway—at the point where it would be easier to resume the next day.

On Capri, the habits of the restless wanderer were as regular as those of Immanuel Kant. He wrote in the morning, took a walk in the late afternoon, and in the evening had a drink in the piazza and dinner at his favorite restaurant. And yet, he told Hazzard, Capri “isn't really my kind of place.” When asked, “what is your kind of place?” he cryptically responded, “well, not Antibes”—where he had a flat on the sea front. Spiritually and physically a displaced person who loved the intoxication of motion, he was bored by the tame, overcivilized Florence and Rome, much more at home in Paraguay or Phnom Penh. *Il Rosaio* was originally a refuge for Greene and his American mistress, Catherine Walston, who held him “in thrall between rapture and the rack for fifteen years . . . brought him to the verge of insanity and suicide,” and inspired the heroine of *The End of the Affair*. By the time Hazzard met him, Greene had another mistress, the French Yvonne Cloetta, who—unlike Catherine—idolized him. Hazzard does not mention that both women were married and had several children, which conve-

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niently limited Greene's involvement with them.

Hazzard writes that "the anxiety of men, women, and children living close to the bone and the abyss is a climate of the early fiction, which frequently takes place in wet, cold, sunless settings." And she shrewdly notes that many ridiculous characters in his novels are called "Henry," "a byword for naiveté and impotence" as well as Greene's real first name. But her comments are never as acute as Orwell's devastating criticism of the hero's suicide in *The Heart of the Matter*: "If Scobie believed in Hell, he would not risk going there merely to spare the feelings of a couple of neurotic women." Greene's novels, filled with spiritual malaise and flirtations with God, put him "on Colonel Gadaffi's cultural black list with D.H. Lawrence and curiously enough Henry James."

Greene liked to use old-fashioned expressions like "fall guy" and "what swank." Recalling the transformation of mores after the Lady Chatterley trial in 1959, he wittily remarked that, "among publishers, indecency was now becoming a competition rather than an obstacle." Once in close touch with the world's pulse, in old age Greene came understandably to loathe "the self-engrossed lassitude of hippies and yuppies": "I would like to take a machine gun to the young," he exclaimed. His decline seemed to match the decline of the island—part of a sad but inevitable spectacle I witnessed in the Spanish village where I lived at the time. As early as 1907, Rilke lamented the blight of hideous new buildings which, after the Great War, was compounded by Capri's characteristic "indolence, near-nudity, and egoistic hedonism," often ending in tragedy and suicide. As tourists invaded the island, fishermen abandoned the sea and peasants left the land for more profitable if less satisfying enterprises. "Solitary cliffside walks," Hazzard notes, "fell into dangerous decay, while green sites considered sacrosanct were obliterated by new hotels."

Hazzard admires Greene and understands that he required agitation as a defense against boredom. But she is also sharply critical of his increasingly rude behavior, which she contrasts to the courtesy and kindness of the aesthete Harold Acton (who makes a cameo appearance). Greene felt compelled "to foment trouble, to shake up tameness and disturb the peace . . . [and] often appeared indiffer-

ent to harm done, hurt inflicted, trust eroded." If she tried to avoid his evil temper, he asked why she stayed away; if she appeared as usual, he tended to hector and upset her. On one occasion, prompted by his disapproval of Hazzard's habit of feeding stray cats, "Graham flared into mindless rage. These were the worst moments I ever had with him, irrational and cruel: paroxysm of the playground."

Greene called himself "a Catholic agnostic" and told her that he hadn't been to confession for more than 20 years. But, she felt, he found excitement in sin, "in guilt and fear, even in being un-

masked." He made his last visit to Capri in 1988, to which he was unable to return; ten months before his death in 1991, he wrote me that he had been forced to cancel a trip to England, adding, "my health is too bad for me to receive visitors" in Switzerland. Weary of the world, his last words before lapsing into a coma were "I want to go."

Jeffrey Meyers, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, will publish his literary memoir, Privileged Moments: Encounters With Writers (University of Wisconsin Press), in September.

A Marathon

by Lawrence Dugan

Tired runners all over the place,
An occasional happy face.
A high school friend waves hello,
The rest might be shoveling snow
They seem so tired, so intent,
Absorbed in groups to come unbent
From the race, the amateur strain,
The release from pleasure and pain.
They fill the park with dull faces
And colorful shirts, trading places
As they fight off cramps and stretch,
And the sicker ones even retch
Into the street, while the older
Still run, shoulder to shoulder,
The names of banks on their backs,
The Irish flag or union jacks,
An old peace group's faded dove
Or just a bar they used to love.
I thread through them to church
Newly pulled from another lurch
By two more jobs—part-time teaching.
Everywhere yuppies are reaching
For water, something cold to drink,
Then heads bent down to knees to think.