

THE RESONANCE OF CONFLICT: GENRE AND POLITICS IN THE TRANSATLANTIC RECEPTION OF *THE QUIET AMERICAN*

Oscar Jansson

Lund University

Set in Saigon during the final days of the French Indochina War, Graham Greene's 1955 novel *The Quiet American* portrays the onset of the American conflict to come. Most of the story is structured by an allegorically fused love triangle: Fowler, a cynical British foreign correspondent who prides himself on being uninvolved, is challenged by Pyle, the eponymous quiet American, for the love of the young Vietnamese woman Phuong. Step by step, Fowler discovers that Pyle's position at the Economic Aid Mission is a front for covert operations: acting on an OSS mandate, he is leading a campaign for the armament of a "Third Force" meant to diminish the power of Vietnamese communism. As Pyle's campaign turns violent and civilian casualties mark the development of his ambition, Fowler is drawn out of inertia: through contacts with Viet Minh agents he plays a part in Pyle's murder, simultaneously ending his own uninvolvedness and adding to the US sense of the Vietnamese communist threat.

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Viewed in its bare outline, the novel invites postcolonial readings. The love triangle, for example, can be seen as a particularly disillusioned dramatization of Orientalist discourse.¹ In both early and later criticism, however, such theoretically informed interpretations are far less common than those emphasizing biographical and historical backgrounds. On the one hand, *The Quiet American* is often viewed as a watershed in Greene's oeuvre, marking both a thematic and a generic shift from his earlier, so-called Catholic novels, that focused on metaphysical rather than political problems. Central to this idea is that the timing, setting, and thematic of involvement amplify *The Quiet American's* ties to *la littérature engagée* and political debates of the 1950s—and not least to Greene's relation to those debates (Bergonzi 144ff; Diederich 30; Greene, *Ways of Escape* 154ff; Philips 79; Stratford 310).² On the other hand, many scholarly readings use a biographical frame for more direct historical

readings. In the most notable of these readings, the novelistic fabric is conflated with historical veracity, often with a view to two key points: first, the testimonial first-person narrative; and second, the likeness between descriptive passages in the novel and Greene's reports on the French Indochina War published in the *London Times* and *Le Figaro*. Stephen J. Whitfield, for example, argues that the novel and its first film adaptation were squandered chances "to face the implications of involvement in the Vietnam struggle for national independence (66ff). William Bushnell underscores the factual basis of the character General Thé (406). Kevin Lewis examines the first film adaptation process as a "time capsule of American Cold War policies" (478). Simon Willmetts uses the same film to probe the relationship between the CIA and Hollywood in the post-WWII period (127ff). Kevin Ruane uses the novel as a fulcrum to inspect details of British and American covert operations in Indochina during the early 1950s, especially stressing Greene's role in these operations (Ruane 432ff, 446ff).

534 The biographical and historical readings of *The Quiet American* have distinct merits in their own right, but they also imply that the novel's reception has been shaped by a dynamic process between contextual climates, historical change and perceptions of the novel's generic stature. Though often simply called a "political novel," *The Quiet American* has been treated as a thriller, a *roman à clef*, a work of prophetic journalism, a personal ideological statement, a piece of history, and even as an historical source text. Some early US critics, for example, saw the novel as a "mouthpiece" for Greene's "anti-American attack" (Trilling and Rahv 66ff; cf. Culhane 87; Davis 32). After the televised trauma of the Vietnam War, the situation was near the opposite. In 1978, Gloria Emerson wrote that Greene "had always understood what was going to happen there, and in that small and quiet novel, told us nearly everything" (123). More recently, the novel has become shorthand in political discourse for anti-interventionism, with President George W. Bush criticizing "the Graham Greene argument" and the phrase "quiet Americans" cropping up in editorials on foreign policy (Bush; GPD 4605). From fiction to an author's ideological attack to political prophecy and commentary on policy, ideas of what type of text *The Quiet American* is have changed over time.

The early outcries in the US are fairly well known, but the wider story of how *The Quiet American* has been read through time and across the Atlantic remains to be told. Similarly, the underlying mechanisms of interpretive contextualization—the impact and function of intertextual echoes moving in time and space—that determine its path are largely unexamined. What follows is an attempt to chart those mechanisms, to outline the impact of contextual resonance on the novel's transatlantic reception history. Although this ties in with traditional Konstanz-school reception theory, my main starting point is what Wai Chee Dimock calls "diachronic historicism," which posits that literary texts remain meaningful through history by a "lack of insulation" from contextual change (1061ff).³ Following Dimock's idea, this article aims to show how the politicized clangour of *The Quiet American's* early

reception marked it as both generically different than Greene's earlier works, and successively formed the baseline of a gradual turn to history in its more long-running reception. More specifically, it discusses how just such a lack of insulation has not only kept critical interest on *The Quiet American*, but reshaped its position in the borderlands between fiction and reality.

This article focuses on Britain, the US, France, and Sweden—arguably the four most important countries for Greene's reception in the 1950s, and with distinctly different positions on *The Quiet American's* political backgrounds, both in terms of the conflict in Vietnam and the Cold War more generally⁴—and on three roughly divided periods: first, the immediate reception of the novel in 1955 and 1956; second, the renewed debates that followed Joseph Mankiewicz's film adaptation in 1958; and third, the long period extending from the late 1960s onwards, defined in this context by the trauma of the Vietnam War. The latter is separable by certain events—such as the fall of Saigon in 1975, for example—but is crucially cohesive in how it maps a shift from what could provisionally be called biographical and political readings to historical ones. Taken as a whole, this series of contextually affected readings show that political backgrounds have resonated with not only what *The Quiet American* is taken to mean, but more pointedly what it is taken to be: a novel of love and war, or a historical document of conflict and ideology.

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The earliest reviews of *The Quiet American* were written in Stockholm, far from Vietnam and from American political commentary. The Swedish edition, *Den stillsamme amerikanen*, translated by Jane Lundblad, was published in November 1955, preceding the British edition by a month. Greene had a longstanding friendship with his Swedish editor, Ragnar Svanström, at the Norstedts publishing house, and from their correspondence it is evident that Svanström circumvented a delay with Heinemann, Greene's British publisher, by claiming that if *The Quiet American* missed Norstedts' autumn catalogue of 1955 it would have to wait a full year for publication.⁵ Thus, when Swedish reviews came out on November 7, they pre-dated their British and American counterparts and marked the starting-point of what was to become a winding reception history.

Two of the leading Swedish newspapers, *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter*, ran long assessments on the day of release, as did the evening paper *Expressen*. All three emphasize the political tenor of *The Quiet American* and comment on the apparent shift away from religious matters of Greene's previous novels. Though the comparison to Greene's earlier works has much to do with his celebrity in Sweden—during the ten years since the end of WWII he was one of the country's best-selling foreign authors (Peterson 242ff)—it is also highly affected by the politics as such. For example, in *Expressen*, Åke Lindström notes that the novel centers on a well-known

anticolonial critique of the American crusade for democracy, or “det pliktrogna missionerandet av höga ideal med bazooka och napalm,” as he calls it (Lindström).⁶

Both Sten Selander, in *Svenska Dagbladet*, and Bengt Holmqvist, in *Dagens Nyheter*, made similar comments, but with a clearer emphasis on the formal effects of the novel’s political focus. Selander particularly remarks that its outer structure of thriller, adventure and detective novel aligns with the central political theme, and judges it wrought with “överlägsen skicklighet.”⁷ Clearly allowing his own political views to shape the presentation of the novel, however, he also collapses the narrator Fowler’s views with those presumed to be Greene’s. When describing the conflict between Fowler and Pyle, for example, he mostly uses the famous watchtower scene in which the two discuss politics while beset by Viet Minh forces, giving some lines of dialogue verbatim. He does not mark citations, however, nor does he evoke the ironies of Fowler’s rant: the inconsistencies of his reasoning or the simple act of talking “for the sake of an argument—to pass this bloody night” (Selander; Greene, *TQA* 88). Selander thus strips away aesthetic registers of both narratorial unreliability and emotional characterization, distilling slogans from a ten-page dialogue. When he then goes on to describe Pyle, matters are reversed; he *adds* an ironic register, stating that Pyle comes to Saigon fresh out of college with a view of American ideas as “patent medicines” set to cure Humanity’s ailments. This characterization is not out of line with Greene’s text, but in the simple act of summarizing the novel Selander’s review intensifies the polemic of its political subject. Furthermore, though towards the end of the review Selander concedes unfamiliarity with literature on the French Indochina War, he nonetheless deems it improbable that any book would give a fuller account of events in Vietnam (Selander). Essentially an elaboration on Greene’s ethos, in other words, Selander’s claims of the novel’s excellence is directed at its journalistic aspects, processed though his own presumptions of the Vietnamese political climate.

Holmqvist is more reserved and nuanced in describing the novel’s political dimensions. First of all, he draws parallels to pamphleteering and calls it a “literary variation” of anti-imperialist sentiments. Second, he argues that the same pattern of construction increases the novel’s artistic merits: the conflation of Fowler’s political motives with trite jealousy, for example, and the ties between his critique of US foreign policies and his dislike of boisterous Americans both function as a characterization of Fowler and discredit the objectivity of his political analysis. In contrast to Selander, Holmqvist also notes distinctions between characters’ expressions, his own commentary, and the views supposed to be Greene’s. He does make assumptions on the latter, however, especially when claiming that the irreligious Fowler cannot be seen as a projection of Greene, the famously Catholic author. And yet, he contends, in political matters the two align: Fowler is “en Greene minus religionen, en intellektuell desperado med bitter kunskap om tillvarons sjaskighet” (Holmqvist).⁸

Like Selander, then, Holmqvist uses a biographical frame to position the novel in sociopolitical reality; they both view it as contemporary and intensely real, despite

their differing views on the balance between its literary and political significance. If mapped onto the influential definition Irving Howe gave to “the political novel” in 1957, they would fall on opposite sides of a dividing line. Howe argued that, instead of “another rigid category” marked by “fundamental distinction of literary form,” the political novel is distinguished by letting political ideas to be taken as dominant “without thereby suffering any radical distortion” (Howe 15ff; cf. Spacks 222) of the novel as such. Where Selander does not register any such distortion, Holmqvist clearly does: the ironies and narrative nuances are far more resonant than the political baseline. Interestingly, though, neither Holmqvist nor Selander expresses any reservation about the content of *The Quiet American’s* politics; rather, the opposite is true. Selander at one point describes Pyle as an embodiment of an America that at times incites caution, even in a “congenial admirer.” Holmqvist is more to the point, calling *The Quiet American* “det fränaste uttrycket hittills för den olust många européer under det senaste decenniet börjat känna inför livräddaren och arvtagaren USA” (Holmqvist).⁹ The matter-of-factness in this abstract of the novel’s politics is worth noting, particularly its revelation of the contextual background of Sweden in the 1950s. More pointedly, the sympathies it assumes for Greene’s depiction of US policy ties in with a widespread concern about Cold War polemics among public intellectuals.

Following the Prague Coup in 1948, when the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia seized power, disputes raged in the Swedish Writers’ Union on whether it should condemn the actions or remain silently neutral—debates that shared some of Fowler’s rhetoric on involvement. In the early 1950s, these debates ramped up in Stockholm and a series of texts were published arguing for and against “the Third Position,” which in an international setting had acquired the wider meaning of not supporting either the Soviet Union or the US. A long list of writers took part in the debates, including Karl Vennberg, Artur Lundkvist, Eyvind Johnson, and Werner Aspenström. In 1951, Herbert Tingsten, a liberal-conservative publicist, claimed the unreasonableness of the Third Position, pointing towards the dangers of communist occupation and arguing that the view of Western Europe as a “third force” between world powers on either side was ill-advised (5ff). Though perhaps most expressive of a general Cold War mentality, the specific positions and phrases of the Swedish debates are important backdrops for both Selander’s and Holmqvist’s depictions of Greene’s politics. Tingsten’s argument is even homonymically linked to *The Quiet American’s* central phrase, even if it is ideologically reversed: in the novel, Fowler’s neutrality turns to action *against* American policy and it is Pyle who preaches the merits of a “Third Force.” The link is circumstantial, to be sure, but, paraphrasing Dimock, both the debates themselves and Tingsten’s specific wordings are part of the “semantic webs” (Dimock 1060) that *The Quiet American* entered in Sweden. And, as is evident when compared to other contexts, the circumstantial semantic ties are part of the point, and of the problem. The blurred lines between the novel’s portrayal of ideological issues and its political context undergird critics’ responses. The porous division

of contexts allows matters of politics and aesthetics to resonate within each other.

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538 The Swedish debates on Cold War neutrality were inextricably linked to international concerns. The connection to ideas of *neutralisme* in France was particularly important. An early commentary on a European “Third Force” in the Paris daily *Combat*, for instance, was written by Bertil Svahnström, a Swedish national writing in both Swedish and French, and the Stockholm Appeal of 1950, calling for a ban on nuclear arms and principally directed at the US-Soviet conflict, was held in the Swedish capital but initiated by a Frenchman, Frédéric Joliot-Curie (Marcus 295ff; Milza 268ff). The early French reception of *The Quiet American*, however, was less focused on the novel’s political arguments, even if the French colonial war in Indochina proved an unavoidable background. Instead, and as in most British reviews, a clear emphasis was placed on the novel’s position within Greene’s œuvre, especially in terms of its generic stature.

André Fontaine’s review in *Le Monde* of December 30, 1955 captures much of this emphasis. “Depuis quatre ans,” he begins, “Graham Greene ne nous avait donné —aucun roman.” He then states that *The Quiet American* (*Un Américain bien tranquille* in Marcelle Sibon’s translation) marks a glorious return for Greene, and especially so for French readers:

C’est une fois encore en effet le problème de la responsabilité personnelle, de l’impossibilité de la neutralité morale, qui y est posé. Mais à cela l’auteur ajoute une évocation de climat qui est bien faite pour attirer le lecteur français puisque c’est l’Indochine, l’Indochine de la guerre déjà perdue, qu’il a choisie pour cadre de son récit. (Fontaine, “Greene revient au roman”)

Fontaine’s comment on “the war already lost” is both unsurprising and commonsensical. The novel is rife with references to the French conflict in Indochina that its contemporary readers would easily spot (Ruane 432). Clearly, the French experience of the war in Indochina had a dramatically different resonance in France than in the US, where critics saw less of that conflict than Greene’s critique of American policy. However, Fontaine’s emphasis on Greene’s well-known œuvre, and how the recognizable context echoes with a recognizable moral problem, is equally important.

In short, Fontaine’s text reflects that Greene was one of the leading international writers in France during the postwar period, partly due to the strong endorsement of François Mauriac (Coward 453). No fewer than eleven of Greene’s novels, two travelogues, and one play were published in French between the translation of *The Power and the Glory* in 1945 and that of *The Quiet American* in January 1956; many of them sold copies in six figures through Robert Laffont’s *série jade*, a highly regarded book series directed at what they considered excellent international novels. In their British originals, the same titles had been published over a period of nearly twenty-

five years. Apart from enhancing Greene's literary celebrity and status—a status that is evident in Fontaine's note that *The Quiet American's* love story “serait banale si elle n'était traitée par Greene (“Greene revient au roman”)—the condensed publishing patterns of his works in France also led to different generic delineations. Where in Britain and the US, a central division was made between serious “novels” and popular “entertainments”—a distinction Greene himself made from the 1930s to 1958—in France translations were published without regard to either chronological sequence or generic classification. Instead of an author's progression, the dominant mode of description was precisely the thematic cohesion Fontaine expresses. In a 1949 profile of Greene, for example, *England Made Me*, *A Gun for Sale*, and *Brighton Rock*—three novels that were generically differentiated in Britain—were drawn together in France, without mention of their varying genres (Fontaine, “Un romancier catholique”). In the same year, Jacques Madaule made an equally revealing argument that the artistic merit of Greene's writing lay in his combination of a Continental tradition of ideas with a British type of novel (Madaule 9, 13ff).

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Rather than the politics of *The Quiet American*, then, Fontaine's 1956 review illustrates the influence of echoes of the French war in Indochina, on the one hand, and the temporally and generically compressed views of Greene's œuvre on the other. These influences are seen in the “une fois encore” of Fontaine's description of the novel's theme, and in the simple note to Greene's artful fusing of the love story to complex political analysis. Greene's persona is equally part of Fontaine's concluding remarks: “Greene lui-même laisse finalement le lecteur juge, même si sa préférence est évidente pour le journaliste athée contre l'apprenti sorcier chrétien” (Fontaine, “Greene revient au roman”). Given the ruling idea of a palpably Catholic Greene, it is tempting to note the heresy in Fontaine's description of Pyle as “the sorcerer's apprentice,” and the frame it gives to the portrayal of political conflict.

Greene's persona plays a similar role in the rhetoric of British reviewers, but the framework it presents has a nearly opposite effect: aspects of Catholicism and religion are seen as flaws in his writing and the turn to politics is a welcome change of pace. For Norman Shrapnel of *The Guardian*, for example, “Greene has fulfilled the promise” implied by the previous novel, *The End of the Affair* (1951), since *The Quiet American* “comes down from the spiritual heights” (Shrapnel 4). Going further, the reviewer in *The Evening Express* known only as D.M.T. writes that Greene has changed his theme and that “[n]o reader is going to be disturbed by uncomfortable interpretations of Catholic theology” (D.M.T.). In *The Observer*, Philip Toynbee also elicits Greene's persona in his review, if only as a means of establishing the scale for his criticisms: “Graham Greene is a novelist who must be judged on the most important level” (11). He hastens to add, however, that on that level, he fails; more specifically, Greene's depiction of Pyle is ill wrought since it combines “opposing forms of moral error.” Toynbee is less critical of Fowler, although in the generic placement of him within the genre of “the American hardboiled,” particularly in the comparison to the “world-weary, sardonic figures with whom we have become so familiar from the private-eyes

of California fiction” (Toynbee 11), there is a certain aesthetic skepticism.

In terms of *The Quiet American*’s political resonance, one would perhaps have expected a more sympathetic response from the publicly communist Toynbee. What his review exemplifies, however, is that British commentary placed less interest in the novel’s actual topicality than what it represented for Greene as a writer. When it did turn political, it was not as in Sweden with notes on American bazookas and napalm, or as in France with assumptions of the novel’s journalistic acuity, but with an eye to its wider implications. As D.M.T. of the *Evening Express* put it, despite the novel’s “brilliant narration,” doubting the truthfulness of Pyle might be the best thing to do, at least for “the sake of Anglo-American relations.”

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540 In the US, there was an outcry against what was seen as Greene’s anti-American attack, and, via the collapsed distinction between Greene and Fowler, accusations of “British arrogance” (R. Smith 18). However, there were also less affected commentaries, often focused on questions of aesthetics, narration, and genre. One review in *The Los Angeles Times* characterized Greene as a “master storyteller” of both novels and entertainments, and named *The Quiet American* “among his best” (“British Journalist” 106). In *The Pittsburgh Press*, the discussion of genre went further: stating that the novel “mingles the thrills of [Greene’s] earlier ‘entertainments’ with the purpose of his more recent novels,” the review specified how “with a Pascal-reading detective, bicycle-bombs, explosive plastic, and Vietminh spies, Mr. Greene paces melodrama with mystery” (Amerman 90). As in the *LA Times* review, however, there is no real mention of politics.

The less politically expressive reviews, however, were not as influential as A.J. Liebling’s scathing assessment in the *New Yorker*—pointedly titled “A Talkative Something-or-Other”—or Diana Trilling’s combined criticism of the novel and what she saw as watered-down American liberalism in *Commentary* (Liebling 148ff; Trilling 66ff). Taking the form of a debate between her and Philip Rahv, who had written favorably on *The Quiet American*, Trilling’s text is particularly interesting and worthy of quoting at some length:

Europeans, no less than Americans, have the entire right, even the duty, honestly and openly to challenge our country on the many manifest errors in its activities abroad. But receptivity to honest criticism of America is very different from acquiescence in an assault upon America as palpably hostile in purpose as that of Mr. Greene’s latest novel. And it is this reluctance, not only sharply to distinguish between fair and unfair attack upon America, but also to confront and combat whatever bad political intention may inform the attack, which characterizes Mr. Rahv’s review and which is so typical of American liberalism today. (67)

What for her is an unsatisfactorily critical review of Greene’s novel, in other words,

prompts Trilling to ask questions on ideology and national identity in American liberalism, and in literary criticism. The argument is closely tied to *The Quiet American*, especially to Greene's depiction of Pyle, but the most forceful resonance is struck with an ideological conflict in reality rather than his fictional Saigon.

Trilling, it should be noted, was a member of the New York Intellectuals, a left-wing but anti-Stalinist group that was influential in the early 1950s (Leitch 302ff). When she goes on to specify that the problem with American liberalism stems first from "the endemic guiltiness" it entices in a rich and powerful country, and second from what she calls "liberalism's long established fear of nationalistic pride," her review is anything but a polemic from the far right. For her, speaking from the political left, *The Quiet American* gives clear evidence of the "essential non-neutrality and of the pro-Communism" that supposed neutrality hides (66-67). This provides a sharp contrast to the interpretive backdrops of Sweden and France, in which the notion of neutrality was more nuanced.

The review in *The New York Times*, "In Our Time No Man Is Neutral," was also written by a left-wing intellectual, Robert Gorham Davis (D. Smith 17). It was printed on the front page of the Sunday issue of March 16, 1956—as was the review in the *Chicago Tribune*—which testifies clearly both to Greene's celebrity at the time and to the scope of the conflict *The Quiet American* had entailed.

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Davis begins by stating that *The Quiet American* is "different from anything [Greene] has written before" (1). He emphasizes Greene's "long-practiced and even astonishing skill" of narrative construction, but, ultimately naming it a "political novel," faults the novel for "employing its characters less as individuals than as representatives of their nations or political factions" (1). With short comparisons to Greene's previous novels, Davis claims a difference between how *The Quiet American* is driven by a political thesis, and how others have been set to geographical and social backgrounds to amplify the dramatic action. Much like his European colleagues, then, Davis uses Greene's previous novels for measurement and notes the generic unorthodoxy of *The Quiet American*. Unlike Fontaine, however, he sees no "une fois encore" in the world-weariness of Fowler. Contrary to Holmqvist's claim that the novel expresses well-known political sentiments through literary registers, Davis sees nothing but a deplorable political thesis.

Davis's view of the characters in *The Quiet American* as "representatives of their nations" is particularly telling (1). In *The Chicago Tribune*, Richard Sullivan expresses a similar take, summarily calling it "an agonized and tormented novel, a political allegory of our contemporary mixed up world, with some garishly caricatured types dominating its fast action" (1). Similarly, Trilling argues that "[t]he whole of Greene's case against America is stated in the person of his title character" (67). Davis expands on this idea of Pyle's representativeness and on Fowler as a mouthpiece for Greene, and connects both to previous US wars:

What will annoy Americans most in this book is the easy way Fowler is permitted to triumph in his debates with the Americans. The priests whom Greene makes argue so

tersely and effectively with the skeptics at the conclusions of “The Power and the Glory” and “The End of the Affair” did not have so easily their own way. When Americans are condemned for letting others do their dying for them no one speaks of Korea. (1)

542 Davis’s observation astutely frames the varying argumentative structures within Greene’s œuvre, but does not account for the difference in narrative setup between the three novels. For instance, there is a thematic point in *The Quiet American* to Pyle *not* being a priest but a young idealist, just as there is a point to Fowler being a disillusioned cynic rather than a religious skeptic. More interestingly, however, is Davis’s use of the word “Americans.” First, it alludes to prospective readers of *The Quiet American*, assuming their political preference. Second, “the Americans” refers to the novel’s fictional characters from the US, principally Pyle and Granger. Third, the final “Americans” technically refer to Fowler’s conception of US citizens, but conflates with the first—and with the American troops who died in the US-led intervention in the Korean War during the early 1950s. Davis’s criticism, in other words, is just as dependent on national representatives as he takes Greene’s novel to be. Though similar to Selander’s rhetoric in his review in *Svenska Dagbladet*, in which his own political views are mixed with Fowler’s, the effect in Davis’s case is more forceful. With Selander, there are vague distinctions in terms of who argues what; with Davis, the notion of *The Quiet American* as fiction is effectively silenced.

In a passage describing the novel’s narrative outline, lamenting Pyle and criticizing Greene, Trilling echoes the same collision between fiction and reality:

One of the bombs goes off and accomplishes no better than might have been expected of a product of the American effort: it kills a lot of helpless women and children. At this, the hero, who never takes sides, rushes over to the local Communists, whose virtues are as unspecified by Mr. Greene as the nature of his Third Force. Together, he and the Communists contrive to murder the American before he shall do any more damage with his good-will program. (66)

Reading carefully, one can spot the relation of noun-phrases and their references within the novel. Reading less carefully, however, and in line with Trilling’s highly affected idea that *The Quiet American* is essentially intended as non-fiction, the fast switch of referents between Greene in “his Third Force” and Fowler in “he and the Communists” effectively collapses the distinction between the two, meaning that Greene is accused of colluding with Communists to murder an American—albeit in the form of a fictional character.

In short, both Trilling and Davis felt *The Quiet American* to be an actual assault on America—and the key is Pyle’s supposedly representational function of American ideology. In aesthetic terms, this can be understood in contrast to Howe’s definition of the political novel: for both Trilling and Davis, the novel suffers “radical distortion” from its political underpinnings (Howe 15ff). More generally, it speaks to how mid-twentieth-century literary modernism had essentially expelled political representational modes from the realm of aesthetics, at least in Anglo-America (Scheingold 6). In terms of ideology and political rhetoric, however, Trilling and Davis exemplify

something else. Paraphrasing Emily Apter, one might say that they see “America” not in abstract notions of constitutional documents of legislative bodies but in “a cartography [...] of collateral damage” (Apter 162), in the byproducts and results of its sometimes violent political action. By eliding the distinction between narrator and author, between character and nationality—by hearing Fowler’s words as spoken out of Greene’s mouth; by taking Pyle as a representative of the US—Davis and Trilling assert that Greene’s depiction of political violence in Indochina itself becomes an act of political violence: the collateral damage of Pyle’s actions becomes a claim of American guilt. Instead of a complex mixture of thriller, novel of ideas, and journalism, Trilling and Davis see only a political performance.

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In 1958, the release of American director Joseph Mankiewicz’s film adaptation of *The Quiet American* marked a continuation of the political conflicts already tied to the novel, but with a change of perspective that essentially inverted its political hierarchies. The film also redrew the divergent critical views along new lines, particularly since the ideological underpinnings for criticizing the novel’s supposedly anti-American agenda were used to praise Mankiewicz’s film and vice versa.

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Indications of the film’s shift in perspective were apparent already in mid-December 1956, when plans for the adaptation made the news. Hollywood columnist Hedda Hopper wrote that she “screamed” when she learned that Audie Murphy was going to star in the film, since it was based on what she calls Greene’s “anti-American book” (353). “I knew that would be your reaction,” she quotes Murphy as responding. “But Joe Mankiewicz, who’ll produce and direct, has turned the tale around and the picture will be pro and not anti” (Hopper 353). Given that the war hero Murphy was America’s most decorated GI in history, Hopper’s reaction is unsurprising: any critique of American ideals or policy would go against the very foundation of his stardom. However, the simple inversion Murphy speaks of—how what he sees as Greene’s anti-Americanism would be turned around and made salutary rather than an assault—is more interesting, especially as it echoes the nationalistically formulaic representational mode that Trilling, Davis, and other critics faulted the novel for employing. Murphy’s reassurance, in other words, is yet another example of how politics and ideology have resonated in *The Quiet American’s* reception.

The inverted politics of the story were also in focus when the film came out in 1958, albeit largely through comments on the ideological simplification it entailed. In *The Guardian*, an account of the film’s release pointed out that Greene’s name “tactfully” was not mentioned, and made clear that in Mankiewicz’s treatment

[t]he cause of all the troubles [...] was the disillusioned English journalist Fowler; Pyle, the quiet American who in the book spreads death and destruction by his naïve, well-intentioned blunder into Indo-Chinese politics, is really as innocent as he thought he

was. (“The Best Intentions” 6)

The incentives for Mankiewicz’s decisive rewrite are not wholly apparent, but it is clear that his screenplay was vetted by the CIA and tailored for approval of Hollywood’s Production Code Administration (Ruane 433; Willmetts 127). Although this points to the pitfalls of “fidelity studies,” the film’s political pivot is nevertheless hard to disregard: given the publicity tied to Greene’s novel, it is tempting to see the film as a form of ideological retaliation.¹⁰ Within the logic of the collision between fiction and reality in the criticism of the novel, Mankiewicz’s film amounts to nothing less than an exoneration of America from political guilt and a proclamation of Greene’s moral depravity.

544 In France, reviewer Henri Pierre wrote in *Le Monde* that in Mankiewicz’s film, “il ne reste que quelques dialogues parfois reproduits mot pour mot,” ultimately calling it a betrayal with “une conclusion morale dans le style et l’esprit de Foster Dulles” (Pierre). It should be noted that John Foster Dulles was President Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, an office he held between 1953 and 1959, and that Pierre’s notion of betrayal has everything to do with changing the novel’s discussions of anti-interventionism and political engagement with a pro-American call to arms. However, the betrayal Pierre identifies is also connected to Greene’s persona; more specifically, the ties Pierre sees between *The Quiet American* and Greene are so strong that Mankiewicz’s role as adapter and director is effectively sidelined. About a month earlier, in the first week of February 1958, Greene had written a letter to the same paper with a similar agenda. Noting the release of Mankiewicz’s film, he tried to remove himself from it. Stating that he had not seen it and that he normally did not comment on films he had not seen—he was a prominent film critic throughout the 1930s—he also pointed out that “je n’ai été consulté en aucune façon à propos de ce film” (Greene, “Une lettre”).

Later in 1958, Greene wrote a longer elaboration of the theme, concerning a novelist’s ties to the films made of his books. His essay, “The Novelist and the Cinema,” gives an account of how films had helped his career, not least by way of his long experience as a film critic. When turning to the question of selling film rights, however, and describing “the long Hollywood contracts” that leave no room for “author’s rights,” he cited the case of *The Quiet American* in particular. Criticizing every aspect of the film, he wrote that “one could almost believe that the film was made deliberately to attack the book and the author” (Greene, “The Novelist and the Cinema” 441ff). Interestingly, the underlying structure of this comment is much the same as the highly politicized American criticisms of Greene’s novel, even if the positions are changed; or, rather, in both cases, a collision of fiction and reality drives the argument, where representations in supposedly fictional narratives—particularly Pyle in the novel and Fowler in the film—are connected to living persons, whether Americans in general or Greene specifically.

Forty years later, the novel was adapted to the screen a second time, in what marked

both a reinstatement of the novel's political analysis and a revision of it along the experience of the Vietnam War. Director Philip Noyce restored Pyle's less than laudable connections to bombings and terrorist factions from Mankeiwicz's hagiography; one critic even called him "a CIA kingpin whose fresh-faced Ivy League mask fall away at the end to reveal a coldly ideological functionary" (Bradshaw). Interestingly, Noyce's film ends with press footage from the Vietnam War, closing with a picture of a wounded soldier. In other words, Noyce restates the political frames Greene once put forth, but as history, not journalism or political commentary, and significantly not as fiction.

* * *

Compared to the violent collision between fiction and reality in the highly politicized American criticism of *The Quiet American*, the early European reviews can seem like whispers, limited as they are to how Greene's persona and conceptions of his journalistic reportage crept into readings of the novel. They share a likeness, however, in being centered on a collision between fiction and reality. Given the overlap between descriptive passages in the novel and the correspondence Greene wrote for the *Times* and *Le Figaro*, that centering is hardly surprising, especially considering the actual events of the Indochina war Greene hints at in the preface of the novel: one is the bombing at Saigon's Hotel Continental in 1952, the other the smaller but no less horrendous "bicycle-bombs" in the same city (Greene, *TQA* frontispiece). For Davis, the historical accuracy of Greene's descriptions is part of the argument: he cites their similarity to passages from the novel as support for the novel's faulted fictitiousness (Davis 32). For Toynbee, the ties to reality are less important than *The Quiet American's* relation to Greene's previous novels, as they form a baseline for an aesthetic, rather than a political, measurement (11).

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What is most interesting, however, is how the background noise of context tips the scale and changes not just the critics' mode of reading, but the very stature of the text. Where Trilling regards the bombs killing children as an attack on the US, Lindström sees an expression of imperialist bazookas and napalm. Similarly, the retrospection in France on the war that had already been lost is different from the highly contemporaneous strain of US criticism. In either case, what happens has to do with the differently tuned semantic webs across the Atlantic (Dimock 1060), but though the background explains *why* critics hear some words more strongly than others, it leaves much of the *how* unsaid; or, rather, whereas historical situations might illuminate underlying reasons for certain responses, they are less tuned to the mechanics of response itself.

For the American reviews, a productive approach for understanding how a novel came to be seen as an "anti-American attack" can be taken by way of Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech*, an elaboration of J.L. Austin's analysis of linguistic performatives.

Emphasizing hateful speech, she contends that “the circumstances alone do not make the words wound” (Butler 13), stressing, instead, the interpellative force of injurious words, and specifically how it produces a subject of subordinate position to the speaker (Butler 13ff, 26). Though hate speech is perhaps the wrong name, the notion of subordination by verbal means is a central aspect of Fowler’s relationship to Pyle, with the night in the guardtower as a case in point. The problem, then, is that since the novel’s characters are taken not as fictional but as representatives of nations and ideological viewpoints, the argument of the novel is not between make-believe characters, but between Greene himself and his readers. However, while an optic of injurious speech can help explain the mechanisms that magnified and shaped the arguments of the American criticism of *The Quiet American*, in a longer timeframe the more important factor is how the idea of the novel as “speaking” of and to actual persons came to affect its generic stature. This becomes especially clear after and beyond the outbreak of the Vietnam War: first, it reframed Pyle’s role as a caricature of US naïveté; and second, it replaced the novel’s Saigon as a fictional locale of a potential reality with the idea of it as a realistic depiction of an actual city.

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In 1967, for example, Anthony Burgess’s “Politics in the Novels of Graham Greene” focused on interpretive conflicts that arose from collisions of different belief systems that Burgess takes to be distinctive of Greene. Though the essay’s timing is closely connected to Greene’s 1966 novel *The Comedians*—dealing, as it does, with ideology and terror in Papa Doc Duvalier’s Haiti—Burgess’s prime example is *The Quiet American*. In short, he dismisses the initial protests over the novel’s anti-Americanism as ramped up by a tendency to read the first-person narrator as an autobiographical projection, as with Davis and Trilling, for example. Burgess then argues that what Greene really attempts is to dismantle what he calls “semantic tyrannies”—simplified “isms” placed in polemic binary positions. Rather than supplanting one with the next, Greene has them resonate within each other, as Burgess contends. The effect of that partly paradoxical orchestration of political reality *and* mystical sensibility is an exposure of the hypocrisies of dogma (Burgess 96ff), or so the argument goes, at least.

In a curious contingency of the historical record, Burgess’s notes on reading politics in Greene coincide with Roland Barthes’s proclamation of the Death of the Author.¹¹ Though emphatically unrelated, Burgess’s reading echoes Barthes’s essay, and in certain ways illustrates practically some of Barthes’s theoretical claims. Most particularly, his gloss on *The Quiet American*’s criticism resonates with Barthes’s call to let things “blend and clash,” to allow room for the reader’s voice where the Author previously “impose[d] a limit,” and to open the text’s temporalities beyond the “before and after” of its immediate point of conception (Barthes 145ff). Although this coincidence can be seen as illustrative of a move in the late 1960s beyond the authorial and biographical focus of much literary criticism in the earlier part of the twentieth century, in the case of Greene and *The Quiet American* it also signals how the dismantling of the author as interpretive authority increases the impact and validity of readerly context; or, more pointedly, how the untethering of *The Quiet*

American from Greene's political views ties it closer to the reader's perceptions of how the novel connects to reality.

1967 was also the year of David Halberstam's *One Very Hot Day*, a novel based on his Pulitzer-winning coverage of Vietnam for *The New York Times* between 1962 and 1964, during a time when in Halberstam's own words *The Quiet American* had already become the "bible" of American journalists in Vietnam (Nolan). Similar views form an essential part of the two introductions that were written in 2004 for the centennial editions of *The Quiet American*, the British edition by Zadie Smith and the US edition by Robert Stone. Smith, who claimed literary stardom with the "hysterical realism" of *White Teeth* in 2000, discusses Greene's reputation and his "ethical realism" in relation to his use of direct reportage in the depiction of political conflict. Pointing to the links between the novel and Greene's coverage of the French Indochina War, she dubs him "the greatest journalist there ever was" (Smith v-ix; cf. Lowe 174ff; Wood). Stone, whose 1974 novel *Dog Soldiers* is a classic of American fiction on Vietnam, focuses on narrative construction and the moral resonance of the novel. Situated in perspectives of the US, he calls Greene a witness to "the beginning of a terrible mistake," and the book a portrayal of the "tone-deaf" political powers (Stone xv-xviii; cf. Locke). With these later texts, in other words, the background noise of the Vietnam War had already turned Greene's novel into journalism and a testimony.

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The structure and pattern of *The Quiet American's* transatlantic reception, then, shows how a continued interest in the collision of fiction and reality ultimately gave way to the latter, at least in the sense of its perceived generic stature. The interest in recent criticism—in Whitfield, Bushnell, Lewis, Willmetts and Ruane, among others—of how the novel portrays historical reality and functions as a source text can thus be traced to even the earliest Swedish commentaries, in which the notes on Greene's previous works tied in with both views on American foreign policy and widespread notions of Cold War reality. The same is true of Britain, France, and the US, albeit with shifting and sometimes contrasting emphases: each case exemplifies the forceful effects of context on interpretation and criticism, and of how forestructures of understanding tie the text to generic, historical, and biographical frameworks. As much as an example of Dimock's notes on literature's lack of insulation against contextual shifts (1061ff), the case of *The Quiet American* shows how the background noise of history changes not only over time or what the text is taken to mean, but what the text is taken to be. The effect, in other words, of the successive turn to history in *The Quiet American's* reception is an erasure in the critical record of its potentiality of being seen simply as fiction; as a novel rather than prophetic journalism, a personal ideological statement, or a piece of history.

NOTES

1. Douglas Kerr and Corie Hardy examine the novel and film versions, respectively, with regards to narrative structure and representation, emphasizing the divide between Western and Vietnamese depictions of events (Kerr 98ff), and the construction of “Euro-American masculinity,” especially in the films (Hardy 252, 259ff). Julia Rawa maintains that the novel “captures alterity (race, class, and gender) in problematic ways” (110), especially the Orientalist underpinnings in depictions of Phuong.
2. In 1957, Robert O. Evans connected *The Quiet American* to what he calls an “aesthetic” variety of existentialism, eliciting Kirkegaard, Dostoevsky, Heidegger, and Sartre to undergird his argument (Evans 241ff). Miriam Allott made a similar claim, but by way of “literary” ties to Joseph Conrad, George Eliot and Henry James (Allott 188ff).
3. Both Hans Robert Jauss’s discussions of how “horizons of expectation” shape the reception of literary works and Wolfgang Iser’s delineation of how individual readers interact with specific text are relevant backgrounds to *The Quiet American*’s (and any) reception history (Iser 50ff; Jauss 168ff). Dimock’s vocabulary is more fitting, however, for the dynamic between political and aesthetic readings of Greene’s novel, particularly in terms of how they have echoed or resonated with each other.
- 548** 4. Briefly, the importance of France and Sweden for Greene’s post-WWII reception has to do with translation and publishing patterns, as well as the strong endorsements in both countries by leading literary figures such as François Mauriac and Erik Lindegren. As for the varying political backgrounds of readings of *The Quiet American*, the case in point is the difference between the French being defeated in a colonial war and the Americans engaging in a complex neocolonial conflict, but Swedish “neutrality” and Britain’s status as an old imperial power are equally important to keep in mind.
5. In a letter dated July 11, 1955, housed at the Royal Library in Stockholm, Svanström writes to Greene, making his argument for an early Swedish release (Svanström, “Letter to Graham Greene”). Greene replies on July 15, citing no objections from Heinemann but urging Svanström “to make sure a good translation can be made in the time” (Greene, “Letter to Ragnar Svanström”).
6. “the dutiful missionary work of high ideals with bazooka and napalm.” All translations from Swedish are my own.
7. “superior skill.”
8. “a Greene minus the religion, an intellectual desperado with bitter knowledge of the seediness of existence.”
9. “the most acrid expression yet of the unease many Europeans during the last decade has started to feel regarding the USA as saviour and heir.”
10. Both the CIA’s censorship and Hollywood’s Production Code are good examples of the structural differences between books and films, and thus speak to what Linda Hutcheon calls the problem of “fidelity studies” (2) of adaptation.
11. “The Death of the Author” first appeared in English in *Aspen Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 6, 1967, while the French version was published in *Mantéïa*, vol. 5, 1968.

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