Travels with My Aunt (1969) has never received serious critical attention. It’s considered an anomaly, a curiosity, a lighthearted correction to the brooding Greene canon. Readers are often delighted because it appears so different from his other works, but no one places it in the pantheon. On first gloss, the novel may come across as diverting, fun and comic, but perhaps not sufficiently literary. Some may wonder why the author, with his singular taxonomy, chose to classify it as a ‘novel’ rather than an ‘entertainment’. Travels is a far weightier text than we imagined, however, and calls for a second opinion.

Far from being incongruous with Greene’s more highly regarded novels, Travels is a continuation of his dominant themes, incidents and characterizations. The only major difference is tone; Greene offers the appearance of light comedy, but this is only a carapace for his usual brand of existential gloom. Even Paul Theroux, who admits that ‘comedy is very near to tragedy’, fails to see this, referring to ‘novels as diverse as “Travels With My Aunt” and “The Heart of the Matter,”’ giddiness on the one hand, gloom on the other’. Theroux’s quick dismissal of the novel as merely ‘giddy’ reflects the conventional wisdom. A close reading of the text, however, reveals a darkness, rigor and gravity that scholars and critics have overlooked. Travels is the inversion, the negative, of Greene’s other major novels. Like Woody Allen’s appropriation of Bergman, in so many of his films, which are full of Nordic dread and funereal pallor – but with jokes – Greene garnishes a somber novel with comedy.

There are only a handful of scholarly articles devoted to Travels. I'll parse two of them here, as representative academic studies. The first, ‘Greene’s “Literary Pilgrimage”: Allusions in Travels with My Aunt’ by Jerome and Rose Marie Thale, is little more than a list of intertextual references in the novel. The Thales have little to say about the text itself, its substance and subtext, or how it figures within Greene’s work as a whole. Similarly, Steve Fagin’s ‘Narrative Design in Travels with My Aunt’ is ad hoc and technical, a narratological look at the novel and its film adaptation. Fagin is concerned with structure and perspective. The scholarship, both in scope and because of its paucity, suggests that there is very little to say about Travels and none of it terribly substantive.

Before examining the novel itself, a few general words about Greene. We confront the same character in almost each of his works. He’s a middle-aged, middle-class professional who seems to have died some ten years before. The man inside has died, in any case, while his empty doppelganger walks the earth. He is burdened by conscience, unable to rectify a sinful life with a pure and exacting set of ideals. He’s exceedingly hard on himself, but in many ways morally and spiritually superior to the pharisaical people around him, who seem to have no compunction stepping over the threshold of their values for practical or selfish reasons. Greene was like this himself. He ‘lived in sin’ with a woman for many years,
even while being a devoted convert to Roman Catholicism. It’s hard not to see his characters’ pained consciences as reflecting the author’s.

Though Greene did not like to be called a ‘Catholic writer’, a Catholic sensibility pervades his work, both on and beneath the surface. This claim hardly requires documentation; we could look to *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *Brighton Rock*, *Monsignor Quixote*, *The End of the Affair* or *A Burnt-out Case* for verification. The overwhelming somberness and despair of his fiction is problematic for a devout writer, whose faith, and the availability of God’s grace, would presumably sustain him through the dark night of the novelistic soul, but for Greene it’s a long Arctic winter with very few hours of sunlight. The Gospels are a story of suffering and doubt transformed into redemption by Christ’s selfless love. In Greeneland, however, the suffering and doubt are foregrounded, while redemption is posed as uncertain, unlikely or even apocryphal. Gordon Leah has argued that the priest in *The Power and the Glory* ‘suffers from poor self-esteem’ (‘A Bad Priest?’ 18), but my diagnosis, which could apply to all Greene protagonists, is that he has an obsessively scrupulous conscience.2 The priest doesn’t suffer from a neurotic self-image so much as unyielding spiritual discrimination. Someone with poor self-esteem would judge himself harshly, compared with others, but Greene’s men judge everyone without mercy.

The Greene protagonist is preoccupied with the blight of original sin and the unworthiness of man, which is more Old Testament than New, more Calvinist than Catholic, but that’s just one of the author’s many paradoxes. His position with regard to the Church seems ambivalent. Does the wobbly faith of his characters tell us that Greene himself lacked strong faith? Is he merely portraying the reality of some Christians, whose actions don’t match their ideals? Is he dramatizing his personal failings as a sinner in the hands of a God he felt would be angry? Is Greene arguing each of these positions simultaneously? Writers are often prone to this multiple or fragmented perspective, especially modern writers, and especially regarding faith and spirituality.3

Green strongly suggests, in the novel’s opening paragraph, that he’s not writing a comedy. Henry Pulling, the narrator and main character, tells us about his early retirement and his mother’s death:

> Everyone thought I was lucky, but I found it difficult to occupy my time. I have never married, I have always lived quietly, and, apart from my interest in dahlias, I have no hobby. For those reasons I found myself agreeably excited by my mother's funeral. (9)4

This passage is humorous, in a darkly ironic way, but that doesn’t mean the novel itself is comic. Far from it. Greene is using understatement and, in the final clause, apophasis. Pulling isn’t ‘agreeably excited’; on the contrary, he’s bored, lonely and despondent. Greene evokes the main character of ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place’, a story of suicide, depression and meaninglessness. Hemingway’s narrator assures us that the man’s problem is ‘only insomnia’ (33) but we know better.5 Greene is also revisiting the famous opening paragraph of *The Stranger*, Camus’s portrait of a man – beginning with his mother’s death–who is spiritually, morally and emotionally atrophied yet who, on the surface, seems quite agreeable. These allusions to classics of existential crisis make it clear that Greene isn’t out for cheap laughs.

The novel isn’t nearly as giddy as Theroux leads us to believe. Pulling is the same kind of walking-dead character we discover so often in Greeneland. (Even the title of his first memoir, *A Sort of Life*, conveys this undead state.) Paragraph 1 focuses on his mother’s death and his own purposeless life, while the second paragraph begins by asserting that his
'father had been dead for more than forty years' (9). Pulling doesn’t seem to have much feeling for his deceased mother; his narration has more emotional depth when discussing dahlias, his former job at the bank, and business clients. He’s the perfect company man, a stereotypical bean-counter more at ease in the cold calculus of figures than with the intricacies of human relationships. The closest he comes to genuine self-examination is through indirect statements, such as when he asserts that cultivating dahlias is something for ‘rather lonely people’ (27), though he doesn’t explicitly admit that he is lonely himself. In another scene, he watches a man walking away from a train, which evokes the image of someone about to drown himself, but it’s evident that Pulling, not the other man, is having suicidal thoughts. References to suicide are scattered throughout the novel, further problematizing the book’s ‘comic’ nature.

*Travels* is devoted to the issue of character and morality. Pulling lives a quiet, boring life of fastidious rectitude. Even his taste in literature is chaste and orderly. ‘Modern literature has never appealed to me;’ he says, ‘to my mind it was in the Victorian age that English poetry and fiction reached the highest level’ (141). Like the typical Greene protagonist, Pulling is morally scrupulous, perpetually judging his own actions and those of others. ‘My aunt had obviously spent many years abroad, and this had affected her character as well as her morality’ (74). A few pages later, he becomes self-righteous again, but confesses: ‘It was no use appealing to Wordsworth’s sense of morality’ (78). Pulling is slowly learning that morality is more complex, more problematic, than a set list of proper and improper actions. Seen from the outside he is blameless, like a Pharisee, but on the inside he is cold, repressed, lonely. Greene handles this interiority with subtlety, and Pulling, in his first-person narration, doesn’t often betray his misgivings. In a typically understated manner, he admits that ‘for the first time I thought that perhaps dahlias were not a sufficient occupation for a man’s retirement’ (87). This hesitant introspection is the result of traveling with his Aunt Augusta, who has no compunction about lying, stealing, adultery, smuggling, drugs or, it would seem, any other indiscretion or iniquity.

Pulling couldn’t be more different than his aunt, but as soon as he associates with her he begins to commit the very sins–lying, smuggling, using drugs – he’d conscientiously avoided for so many years. ‘I don’t like lies’ (64) he tells the reader, after committing a minor deception. Pulling is inordinately submissive to the letter of the law, but, before meeting Augusta, never the spirit. Naïve about the sinful world he inhabits, he is initially shocked and outraged by Augusta’s behavior and attitudes. She makes Pulling realize how innocent he’s been regarding the most basic things, such as who his mother is; she also helps him to discover his own moral innocence. Augusta challenges his assumptions about how to live a moral life and ultimately makes Pulling more virtuous because she helps cultivate, within him, a concern for the inner life rather than outward appearances. His values were based on fear and habit, rather than a genuine desire to do good. Augusta forces him to confront the narrowness and plasticity of his outwardly-impeccable life.

Augusta is the inverse of Pulling; he’s a bit of Pharisee, at least at the beginning of the novel, whereas she exhibits a Christ-like attitude. When it becomes apparent, for instance, that she’s going to smuggle gold into England, Pulling asks: ‘Have you no respect at all for the law?’ ‘It depends, dear, to which law you refer. Like the ten commandments. I can’t take very seriously the one about the ox and the ass’’ (137). Augusta is only concerned with the spirit of the law, but Pulling is a man who follows the letter, nothing more and nothing less. Notice how Greene is carefully obfuscating the characters’ positions with respect to Catholicism. It’s always Pulling, who tells us that he ‘[has] no religious convictions’ (170), who defends the Church and its proscriptions, while Augusta,
who claims to be Catholic, is quick to reject the Church’s teachings. Greene further confuses the issue by having Augusta refer to herself, at one point, as a “half-believing Catholic” (144) and by showing how much comfort Pulling derives from the Mass.

Ultimately, religion is the central issue in Greene’s work, as it has been for so many writers after Dostoevsky, and Travels is no exception. Chapter 6 of Part 1 is devoted entirely to the subject. Augusta relates an anecdote about a former lover, the Rev. Curran, who presided over ‘The Children of Jeremiah’ (45), a Church for dogs. She speaks at length about the sect’s dogma and ecclesial practices. Although it’s hard to take this church seriously, Augusta’s discussion of religion, and its relationship both to Pulling’s interior journey and to the novel as a whole, is significant. Her analysis of whether dogs have souls, for instance, may be bizarre, but it’s a question that Pulling, and of course Greene, can’t stop asking about humans. That the Church leader is either a charlatan or mad reifies Greene’s ambivalent attitude toward his faith. Similarly, Augusta tells a story, occupying five pages of text, in which Mr Visconti, another ex-lover, impersonates a Monsignor in order to hear a woman’s confession (119–123). Pulling takes many trips with his Augusta, but, more poignantly, he takes an interior voyage away from isolation and detachment. She also awakens his dormant religious sensibility. Far from being a light comic novel, Travels is a meditation upon the self, the soul, and the possibility of salvation. Despite Theroux’s false dichotomy, the novel is, in its essence, extremely similar to The Heart of the Matter.

Augusta refers to one of her many anecdotes as “‘a very sad and funny story’” (81), a dualism that could describe Travels as well. Often, the comedy becomes more pronounced in the novel’s most poignant and serious moments. A letter from Miss Keene, for example, refers to the ‘Dutch Deformed’ Church (141), but this mistake is, for Greene, a functional error. In his novels, organized religion is always ‘deformed’ in one sense or another, and this is evident throughout Travels. Greene, despite his piety, is once again revealing his ambivalence, or perhaps his problematic relationship toward, the Church. There’s an intrinsic weakness, he’s suggesting, a corruption even, in all human institutions, even if they’re founded on the most altruistic bases. God may be perfect, but any attempt to organize our worship of him is not; he’s arguing along Platonic lines that an impassable path, an aporia, exists between form and matter.

Although not generally considered one of his ‘Catholic novels,’ Travels is teeming with references to Catholicism, the Bible and liturgical practices. In fact, many of these references seem out of place, or unnecessary, as if Greene was unable to control his obsession with religious matters, even to the detriment of his work (a problem many readers have identified in his theatrical, didactic Monsignor Quixote). “‘Was Macbeth a Catholic?’” (100) a character asks, apropos nothing. Augusta affirms that “‘Mr Visconti was a Catholic, even though a non-practicing one’” (109). In the same speech she adds that “‘Mario was with the Jesuits in Milan’” (110), which sounds like nothing so much as a non-sequitur. A few pages later, she says that “‘Mr Visconti was a good Catholic, but very anti-clerical’” (118), another extraneous aside (and another ambivalent statement regarding the Church). The novel is preoccupied with who is a Catholic, who is not, and to what extent, which is peculiar considering that the characters, even those who align themselves with the Church, are constantly rejecting its teachings.

Despite some awkward Catholic allusions, Travels is a profoundly religious novel, as much as The Power and the Glory or any of the others. Augusta concisely sums up Greene’s ambivalence when Pulling asks if she’s “‘really a Roman Catholic?’” She replies: “‘Yes, my dear, only I just don’t believe in all the things they believe in’” (151). If Augusta has
misgivings about Church regulations, she has no qualms about the basic teachings of Christ. The ‘hero’ of the novel, she exemplifies love, charity and especially forgiveness. Whereas Pulling is morally judgmental, Augusta is boundlessly tolerant. Like Christ, she associates with all manner of criminals and undesirables, seeing in them, despite their sins, a pure heart and the willingness to do good. She immediately and instinctively forgives the people she loves, even when they betray her. People who’ve cheated and stolen are excused without a second thought, as are philandering husbands and thieves, though she can be severe with hypocrites. When she meets a woman at Pulling’s father’s grave, for example, she’s offended by what she interprets as a showy, insincere display of mourning; according to Augusta, the woman doesn’t want to mourn so much as she wants to be seen mourning, like the ostentatious prayer of the Pharisees.

Christ-like forgiveness is one of the central themes of the novel. When Augusta tells Pulling about how Mr Visconti took her money and left her in the lurch, Pulling suggests that she must despise Visconti. This makes her furious:

‘I despise no one,’ she said, ‘no one. Regret your own actions, if you like that kind of wallowing in self-pity, but never, never despise. Never presume yours is a better morality. What do you suppose I was doing in the house behind the Messaggero? I was cheating, wasn’t I? So why shouldn’t Mr Visconti cheat me?’ (111).

We should always forgive others, she’s arguing, because we’re all sinners ourselves. Though obviously Augusta’s life is not pristinely Catholic, she does exemplify many of Christ’s teachings, in this case not to ‘cast stones.’ One of Augusta’s stories – which are precisely analogous to Christ’s parables: she is preaching her gospel to the ‘non-believing’ (in many senses) Pulling – which occupies most of Chapter 17, is dedicated to the subject: ‘... she was a perfect wife, uncrackably perfect, and your father used to say that the word ‘forgive’ tolled on in William’s ears like the bell at Newgate’’ (150). The wife is perfect because she is filled with love and forgiveness.

Pulling changes dramatically during the narrative. He becomes less judgmental, less fastidious about proper behavior, and more happy. He learns to enjoy life without counting out the hours on a time-table. His worldview becomes relativistic rather than absolute; he starts to make moral decisions for himself rather than passively following rules. He gradually becomes more forthright in his narration as well. Halfway through the novel, in the wake of his first adventure with Augusta, Pulling grows tired of Thackery, whose story isn’t as compelling as his aunt’s. Referring to her ‘characters’, he admits: ‘They peopled my loneliness’ (163). In the same passage he says the unspeakable, ‘I had lost the taste for dahlias’ (163), by which he means that his old life, and its comforting routines, were no longer sufficient to sustain him. Earlier in the narrative, Pulling wouldn’t have betrayed the fact, or perhaps even realized, that he was lonely, but as the novel ensues he increasingly comes to terms with the emptiness of his life. Retirement is his ‘dark night of the soul’, but he doesn’t understand this until he meets Augusta. In the last act, a transformed Pulling is able to be even more honest about his former incarnation as a lonely man living a meaningless life: he refers, without hesitation, to ‘that dead old world of mine’ (205). Later, locked in a Latin American jail because of his aunt’s crime, Pulling’s metamorphosis is complete. He is absolutely loyal to her, even though she is guilty and his loyalty may mean that he stays in jail.

In Travels, we find the typical Greene character, but we find him split in two. Pulling is the half who is dead inside; Augusta is pure in heart but sinful in action. They both have scrupulous consciences, in their own way. Though far from being an ideal person, or a
flawless Catholic, Augusta is the presumptive hero of the novel, and her influence on Pulling is quite positive. Though fastidious in his behavior, he was not close to God, to others, or even to himself. His new life at the end of the novel, in his aunt’s criminal underworld, may be externally sinful, but for the first time Pulling is filled with joy, hope and love. That Greene makes a woman the protagonist, attributing to her many of the qualities normally reserved for his male characters, is one genuinely significant difference between Travels and his other novels.

For Greene, morality and religion are complex issues fraught with paradox and therefore ambivalence. Pulling reflects on this:

Perhaps a sense of morality is the sad compensation we learn to enjoy, like a remission for good conduct . . . I had been born as a result of what my stepmother would have called an immoral act, an act of darkness. I had begun in immoral freedom. Why then should I have found myself in a prison-house? (203)

Notice the oxymorons: ‘sad compensation’ and ‘immoral freedom’. In Greeneland, something can never be good or bad, but rather an uneasy hybrid of the two. His vision is furiously bipolar. External sin is the mark of internal virtue. Outward piety is the sign of a true sinner. Deep faith is swaddled in doubt. As Pulling says, ‘Skepticism is inbred in a Catholic’ (238), which suggests that perhaps Greene isn’t ambivalent about Catholicism, but rather, in his view, Catholicism is itself a paradoxical union of faith and doubt.

We can’t entirely discount the notion of ambivalence, however. As an adolescent, Greene attempted suicide on several occasions, and what’s more ambivalent than a failed suicide attempt? Many of Greene’s characters walk around as if they had already killed themselves, or will soon, and some eventually do kill themselves; others, like Pulling, find salvation in a ‘deformed’ Church or a mysterious aunt and her idiosyncratic, if devout, brand of Catholicism. Lisa Bierman, in her study of The Heart of the Matter, addresses Scobie’s equally stilted Catholicism:

. . . he faces numerous moral obstacles that he attempts to surmount by adhering to his religious beliefs. However, a detailed examination of the work reveals that Scobie has tailored and customized his adopted religion to fit his own generally skewed view of the world, in which his primary goal is preserving the happiness of those around him, despite the cost to himself. (65) 7

This analysis applies very much to Pulling as well. Travels is, in many respects, a meditation upon the Catholic Church, its teachings and practices, and its adaptability to an individual conscience engaged in moral and spiritual conflict. Pulling and Augusta don’t follow the official version of Catholicism, but perhaps no one does. Greene is demonstrating that each individual conscience must struggle to take the Church’s abstract principles and apply them to concrete realities. As Bierman writes with regard to Scobie, ‘He is not constrained or condemned by any kind of religious imposition as much as he is a victim of his own conscience, which includes but is not limited to traditional elements of Catholicism’ (65).

Pulling is quite similar to Scobie, in many ways. As Gordon Leah asserts, ‘Scobie is known for his scrupulous honesty and incorruptibility’ (‘A Bad Catholic?’ 776). 8 Pulling is known for the same qualities, and, like Scobie, he eventually becomes corrupted (though Greene inverts the signifiers, portraying Pulling’s ‘corruption’ as virtuous). The central difference between Scobie and Pulling, of course, is that the former takes his own life. 9 Pulling also commits suicide, in that he kills his former self, but with Augusta’s help he is born again, which makes Travels a more optimistic, but not therefore a less serious, novel.
Greene may throw us off the scent with periodic comic touches—praying dogs, pot-smoking bankers—but these are red herrings; the true story here is morality and religion, as it always is. *Travels* is a compendium of the same topics found in his other works: bad marriages, lonely and loveless lives, the intelligence community, police and government functionaries, foreign travel and death. Morality and religion are the central topics, however. The final lines of the novel, from Browning, declare: ‘God’s in his heaven—/All’s right with the world!’ (265), which is an ironic way to describe Pulling’s new career as a smuggler. The ending is, in its own peculiar way, happy, but the novel isn’t giddy or a mere diversion. Greene was not a lighthearted man. Even a book called *The Comedians* is pretty grim, and *Our Man in Havana* is only laughing from one side of his mouth. *Travels* isn’t a u-turn for Greene, but merely a soft veering to the right. It’s exceptionally serious and the prevailing mood is dark; the odd comic touch doesn’t alleviate this. *Travels* is, without doubt, a novel rather than an entertainment, and the evidence suggests that it’s a Catholic novel as well.

**Notes**

3 This tendency might be greater in one, such as Greene, who suffered from bipolar disorder and manic-depression (Theroux).
6 Interestingly, though, this phrase is used by another character, Tooley, to describe her own life, which seems unerringly upbeat and light. As ever, Greene twists his ironies into all sorts of improbable shapes.
9 As Leah points out, Scobie justifies suicide by the example of Jesus, who ‘went voluntarily to his death, and thus wished it on himself—a form of suicide’ (*A Bad Catholic?* 778). Scobie’s intriguing, if perhaps heretical, analysis of the crucifixion shows us the Gospels as refracted through Greene’s idiosyncratic lens.