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The Self-Referential Jokes in
Graham Greene's *Travels with My Aunt*

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I

Travels with My Aunt was first published in 1969. Since then it has been categorized into "entertainments" by many commentators and, like Greene's other novels in this category, considered to be of little importance for clarifying the serious representation of the reality repeatedly found in his works. This critical unpopularity of this novel comes from its comic and optimistic aspects reminiscent of popular literature. On this point R. H. Miller thinks that the novel has "a concurrent emphasis on melodrama and on action over character, and, in the tradition of melodrama, a fortunate outcome to the story."¹ Brian Thomas, who gives the detailed analysis on the novel applying the structure of romance, states that it is "the most obviously romantic in conception."²

Besides the design of the plot and the conception, its jocular tone is another reason for the critical unpopularity. As well as Augusta's coarse jokes there are, as A. A. DeVitis points out, "self-referential and literary jokes which any careful reader of his novels would immediately catch."³ These jokes make the novel seem less serious. DeVitis mentions the self-referential jokes with the examples of correspondences of the places and of a character's name, Visconti, which is identical to the name of a character in Marjorie Bowen's *The Viper of Milan*. In this respect the romantic lover's name Wordsworth is also a literary joke. The exchange of Henry's mother's ash with marijuana is another joke for the author

who is often considered as a Catholic writer.

Optimism and comic tone in the novel are the characteristics not so familiar in Greene's novels, which means that the notion different from the typically Greenean one has intruded into *Travels with My Aunt*. It may be the tradition of melodrama or the structure of romance. An unfamiliar convention makes the novel seem quite different from other novels by the same author. This difference is the essence of the self-referential jokes in the novel. It is my design here to make clear the self-referential aspects.

II

Comments on the self-referential aspects of *Travels with My Aunt* are made mainly in comparison with the typical characteristics of Greene's novels. Correspondence of the places Henry Pulling and Aunt Augusta travel — Brighton, Orient Express (Stamboul Train), Paris, Paraguay — with the settings of Greene's other novels is often mentioned. The places in themselves are not so different from the ones in other stories. Brighton, for example, is a crowded resort with races, Palace Pier, Royal Albion, which are the elements familiar in *Brighton Rock*, a tragic novel. Even in the comic story the place also shows its grave aspect in the description like "It was a grey leaden evening with an east wind blowing on our backs from Kemp Town."⁴⁾

As a matter of fact the settings of Greene's novels represent the same notion of the real world, even though they are located quite distantly from each other — whether in Mexico, West Africa, Vietnam or a suburban town in England. The notion is generalized from the same recurring motifs in his novels and called Greeneland, and it is rare to find the same setting among the embodiments of Greeneland.

It is not the location and its features that concern but the author's view of the reality. His novels often have their settings in the distant exotic places, but in fact they are the caricatured images of where we live. The characteristic features are not defined by the location of the setting, but by the accumulation of the similar motifs in which the author's recognition of the reality is represented.

Some of the typical characteristics of Greenland are found in the world of *Travels with My Aunt*, as Neil McEwan summarizes it, "where crime and evil are not necessarily the same, where Catholicism does not mean accepting all that Catholics believe, where boredom and smug respectability are next to Godlessness."⁵⁾ But these characteristics do not determine the dominant tone of this optimistic novel. The names of the places which remind the readers of the serious and tragic novels become jokes, or self-parody, when the story turns out what it is really like. Considering within the context of Greene's novels, the expectation from the identical names and appearances of the places is different from the impression from the story.

The familiar motifs of the characters in the novel are also considered to be the self-referential jokes. As is often the case with Greene's novels *Travels with My Aunt* consists of the personages of the typical Greenian characters in their basic designs. A minor war criminal and smuggler Visconti, Augusta's younger lover Wordsworth who deals with marijuana, Curran an imposter who establishes the dog's church, Monsieur Dambreuse a married man who enjoys love affairs with two women staying in the same hotel; all these villains and the outsiders of society seem very familiar to the readers of his novels. But these characters live in the optimistic world and can avoid a tragic ending (except Wordsworth who is at the end excluded from this world).

By some critics the relationship between Augusta and Henry is compared to the mother-and-son motif which appears in *The Comedians* and *The Honorary Consul*. Unlike these two novels, their story, as I will show in the following chapters, ends up with the happy conclusion. When Sergeant Sparrows, an police officer trying to arrest Wordsworth, and Colonel Hakim and a CIA agent, O'Toole, both pursuing Visconti, come into the story, the familiar motif of flight and pursuit seems to appear, which is repeatedly mentioned to comment on Greene's novels. Though the motif may succeed in bringing suspenseful tension into the story to some degree, there is no pressure upon the minds of both fliers and pursuers which gives a great stroke on their faith in most of his stories. O'Toole finally confronts with Visconti, but their bargain is like a commercial transaction and it goes quite successfully. Under the unfamiliar notion of the real world the usual motifs play rather the comic role as the jokes than the depressing one.

In a sense the self-reference to the particular kind of places and the characters' motifs is the technique Greene always uses. But when the motifs are used in the usual way, they are not thought to be self-reference but the common characteristics. What characterizes *Travels with My Aunt* is the fact that the novel is dominated by the unfamiliar conception. Therefore there appears the gap between the expectation the familiar names of the places and motifs provoke and their comic function which becomes clear as the story progresses. The gap makes the self-reference, which in itself may be another characteristic feature of Greene, a paradoxical joke.

III

Henry Pulling is first introduced to the story shortly after his mother's death. In spite of his age, around fifty-six, and having retired from his job two years before, he seems to be ready to start the adventure to search for his real identity as many orphan boys do in the popular stories. He himself is feeling "slight stirring of excited expectation" (10) that something will happen at the funeral. There a mysterious figure, Aunt Augusta, who is his real mother, comes to take him to the world unfamiliar to him. Like an innocent and inexperienced child he travels around guided by her and sees the world. At last he finds a proper job and is going to get married; he has reached his maturity in the new world. This outline of his story shows that it exploits the basic structure of *Bildungsroman*.

The story of the man in his mid-fifties, educated by his mother of seventy-four years old, becomes a smuggler in Paraguay and marries a sixteen-year-old girl; it sounds like a quite distorted kind of *Bildungsroman*. Distortion is one of the characteristics of Greene's novels and it often comes from his recognition of the modern world, though in this story it is not connected directly with the serious and grave recognition. The application of the distorted form of *Bildungsroman* is another self-referential joke, and the essence of this joke is not the matter of characters' ages and Henry's vulgar new job.

Henry's story is compared to *Bildungsroman* in mainly two senses. First there is a shift from the world to which at first he belongs to the new one; he at the beginning of the novel becomes aware of the new world where Aunt Augusta lives and then, after enough experience, he comes to live there. Second he obtains the new identity or recognition of

his life; at the end of his travelling he determines to start a new life in the new world.

The two worlds are characterized by Henry's two mothers, Angelica and Augusta. Angelica's world, where he had lived for more than fifty years, is a decent and peaceful one but marked by the cold relationships without affectionate conversations. In his memory of Christmas dinner with Angelica at which they "sat almost silent, like strangers in a restaurant-car" (199), its quality is demonstrated. Brian Thomas states that the life there "tends toward isolation and silence rather than community". Augusta's, on the other hand, is a world of the coarse characters and the dangerous adventures coloured by liveliness and amusing talk. Thomas says that it "seems to be characterized chiefly by the imagery of freedom and mobility — everything that is involved in the whole idea of 'traveling.'" ⁶⁾ This world is shown mainly in the anecdotes Augusta tells Henry. The two worlds exist not in the spatial sense but in the recognitions of the real world and attitudes towards life.

The former world represents the serious recognition of the reality. It is the adult recognition which boys and young men in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels would finally obtain. In Greene's context it is shown in the world where humanity is excluded and only the seeming peace is left, the twentieth-century version of the adult world. Augusta's recognition is associated with the child notion. Though she plays the role of guiding mother, there sometimes appear her childlike images. She has little hesitation in doing what she wants and takes little notice of her duty in society:

'I have never planned anything illegal in my life,' Aunt Augusta said. 'How could I plan anything of the kind when I have never read any of the laws and have no idea

what they are?' (74)

Her attitude expressed here is based on her childlike but intentional ignorance of morality and the self-centered notion of right and wrong. It is rather a trick to evade the burden of the adult world than the quality of pure innocence. She does not seem to take the world so seriously and her concern is mostly about getting what she wants.

Henry finally decides "to pass the border into my aunt's world" (300). The shift which takes place at the end of his story is from Angelica's world to Augusta's, in other words, from the adult world to the child world. His new smuggling business is no doubt of the nature of Augusta's world, and for both he and Maria reading Victorian poetry they like is a kind of affectionate communication. The last quotation from Browning's *Pippa Passes*, "God's in his heaven — / All's right with the world!", shows not only their happy state but also the quality of the world Henry comes to live in. Innocence in the poem shows that he is in the child world. But as the child quality in Augusta's world is a cunning trick, Pippa's innocent song sounds very ironical. Henry, who has obtained the new identity to live in this world, ironically quotes the lines to get along in the world which is full of fatal danger and nothing is "right with the world".

As Greene's recognition of the reality is often expressed in the paradoxical way, the irony of Pippa's innocence is rather a familiar feature. What is surprising in the novel is her song actually gives the impression of the happy conclusion of Henry's narrative in spite of the reverse design of typical *Bildungsroman*, from the adult world to the child world. The narrator is much influenced by Augusta's recognition of the world, which is the unfamiliar notion intruded into the novel, and so is his narrative. Therefore the irony is rather a comic joke than the representation of the severe

recognition. Greene's ironical view itself becomes a self-referential joke when Henry's optimistic narrative is a parody of Greene's version of *Bildungsroman*.

IV

Travels with My Aunt is sometimes compared to the story of *Don Quixote* and Henry's travels to the quixotic-picaresque adventuring. But his role in the travels is rather that of Sancho Panza, who at first takes the world seriously. The picaresque quality of the travels is ascribed to Augusta and her world. Both she and Don Quixote live in their own worlds which their unique recognitions create. As their journeys go on, their worlds become dominant in their stories. In this respect Aunt Augusta has her own narrative, a quixotic-picaresque narrative in the novel.

About one third of the novel is occupied by her telling stories. They give the comic tone to the novel, form the notion of Augusta's world and at the same time show Henry and the readers her life before she meets him. Her anecdotes are told at random order and some topics are only alluded or told in ambiguous expressions. Though the truth of some of their details seem very doubtful, we can perceive the characteristic features of her life; the frequent spatial movements, her indecent and villainous behaviour and her love affairs with many partners. Her life shown in her stories is reminiscent of a heroine of such a picaresque romance as *Moll Flanders* rather than *Don Quixote*.

Augusta's adventuring chronologically began when she left Henry's father's house in Newgate. The place is another literary joke in the context of picaresque novels. Like many first-person narrators of this genre, she tells her life looking back her old days. Some episodes like meeting with such a

villain as Visconti at brothel or like travelling around Italy as a whore remind us of the stories of roguery. Her life is not completed as a narrative within the anecdotes she tells. According to the picaresque convention heroes and heroines will close their stories with their return to the ordinary world or with their happy marriages. At the end of the novel there is Augusta's marriage with Visconti, which must be the ending of her picaresque travelling.

In the novel the last episode of her life is focused on, which succeeds the ones shown in her anecdotes. It is about bringing back her son having been brought up separately, which is the story of Henry's shift from Angelica's world to Augusta's seen from the different viewpoint. Thomas points out that there are characteristic features of a fairy tale in the novel and that "in the fairytale perspective this protagonist is not simply a foundling: he is in effect a changeling, and as such, he returns in the end to his real mother and his 'real' home."⁷⁾ Characterized by this imagery, the opposed worlds of the two sisters are defined respectively as the angel's or good fairy's world as the name Angelica alludes, and as the world of "wicked fairy", which Augusta calls herself (15). Henry is a changeling left in the world of good spirit and, contrary to the tradition of fairy tale, the favourable and happy conclusion is represented in his return to the world of evil spirit, his real home. Again the reverse design appears, and also in her picaresque narrative the two worlds are given the reverse functions to the conventional ones. The ordinary world to which a protagonist finally returns is in Augusta's narrative her own world. It is the world of villains like Visconti, Wordsworth, Curran, since her anecdotes about these people has created it. The strange world where picaresque adventuring takes place is Angelica's world whose image is peace and stableness.

Augusta's narrative in this novel, which is the episode of Henry's return, is based on the structure of romance. Her underworld adventuring comes to the critical point at Boulogne when Henry becomes much affected by Miss Paterson, who belongs to the decent world of Angelica, and Augusta almost loses her son in the strange world. By representing the world to which she should ascend in the anecdotes on her company and the happy memories, her marriage with Visconti who is a member of her world symbolizes her return to her "ordinary" world and the fortunate ending of her narrative.

Penitence which marks the end of villain's life in many picaresque novels never appears in Augusta's life. Although she declares her journey's end, her nature as a villain does not change. As she says, "Perhaps travel for me was always a substitute" (307), the picaresque quality of her travelling is derived from her native world. Just as Don Quixote projects his imaginary world of chivalry onto the real world, Augusta projects the picaresque quality of her world onto Angelica's world. When her journey is over, her quixotic-picaresque adventuring comes to an end, but her picaresque life does not, though it will not be told any more.

In both Henry's *Bildungsroman* and Augusta's narrative her picaresque world is the place they should finally go to. When their shifts realized, their happy stories are completed. It is because the ruling conception of the novel is the optimistic recognition of the reality and it is represented by Augusta's storytelling. Merry talking overcomes the isolating silence by assembling many listeners. Augusta's anecdotes fascinate the readers as well as Henry and make her notion dominant in the novel. By the accumulation of her stories the definite image of her notion emerges. The creation of the world by telling the stories of the same recognition is

also the self-parody of the author.

V

The characteristic features of *Travels with My Aunt* can be attributed to the conflict of the two recognitions of the real world. In the context of Greene's novels Angelica's serious recognition is identical to the conception of Greeneland. The self-referential jokes of the places and the characters' motifs come from the fact that her recognition cannot dominate the novel. Of the two recognitions it is Augusta's that is dominant, and it is connected with the optimistic conclusion.

The qualities that divide the two worlds are mainly the qualities of word communication and silence. Augusta by *telling* stories enchants Henry and brings him back to his real home. His happy ending is represented in the happy marriage with Maria with whom he can *communicate* by the means of *reciting* poetry. The basic structure of both Augusta's and Henry's narratives, which is that of popular literature, romance, can be summarized as descent to the world of silence and ascent to the world of word communication. The readers who basically belong to the severe reality notice the narratives' reverse designs and the ironies. For example the world of affectionate communication the two protagonists come to live in is at the same time the world where a man "was accidentally shot dead by a policeman because he couldn't make himself understood" in the local language (319). But when Augusta's powerfully optimistic notion overcomes the serious notion of Greeneland, the severe recognition does not offer the firm ground for the ironies. Henry perceives the attitude prevailing the novel:

What did the truth matter? All characters once dead, if

they continue to exist in memory at all, tend to become fictions. Hamlet is no less real now than Winston Churchill, and Jo Pulling no less historical than Don Quixote. (74)

It matters little whether the reality is portrayed in the novel truthfully or not, but what recognition prevails in the novel is important. As Augusta's stories are amusing and attract the narrator, the ability of the storyteller is celebrated here. The narratives are completed as romance and the ironical representation of the reality is the joke derived from the conflict of the two different recognitions.

The self-referential jokes found in *Travels with My Aunt* is the parodic representation of the creating power of storytelling that can build up original and conflicting world within the universe of Graham Greene.

NOTES

- 1) R. H. Miller, *Understanding Graham Greene* (University of South Carolina Press, 1990) 126.
- 2) Brian Thomas, *An Underground Fate* (The University of Georgia Press, 1988) 161.
- 3) A. A. DeVitis, *Graham Greene* Revised Edition (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986) 51.
- 4) Graham Greene, *Travels with My Aunt* (London: William Heinemann & The Bodley Head, 1969) 42. All subsequent references to *Travels with My Aunt* will be to this edition, with the relevant page numbers incorporated within parentheses in the text.
- 5) Neil McEwan, *Graham Greene* (Houndmills: Macmillan Publishers, 1988) 127.
- 6) Thomas 174.
- 7) Thomas 163.