

Wireless Women: The “Mass” Retreat of Brighton Rock

Jeffrey Sconce
Northwestern University

All popular fiction must feature a romantic couple, and so it is in the opening pages of *Brighton Rock* (1938) that Graham Greene introduces Pinkie and Rose, the teenagers whose abrasive courtship and perverse marriage will both enact and travesty this convention as the novel unfolds. When Pinkie first meets Rose, she is working at Snow's as a waitress. Entering the establishment, Pinkie encounters a wireless set “droning a programme of weary music broadcast by a cinema organist—a great *vox humana* trembl[ing] across the crumby stained desert of used cloths: the world’s wet mouth lamenting over life” (24). This reference to the weary lamentations of wireless remains an isolated detail until moments before Pinkie takes his fatal plunge over the cliff in the novel’s closing pages. Having taken Rose up the coast from Brighton with plans to facilitate her suicide, the couple sits for a few awkward moments in an empty hotel lounge. As Rose works on her half of the couple’s double-suicide note, to be left behind for the benefit of “*Daily Express* readers, to what one called the world” (260), wireless makes a brief but meaningful re-appearance as that world speaks back. “The wireless was hidden behind a potted plant; a violin came wailing out, the notes shaken by atmospherics,” writes Greene (250). Later, the violin fades away and “a time signal pinged through the rain. A voice behind the plant gave them the weather report—storms coming up from the Continent, a depression in the Atlantic, tomorrow’s forecast” (251). With apparently only minutes to live, Rose listens absently to this mysterious yet “potted plant” of a technology--a medium capable of summoning both otherworldly atmospherics and the drudgery of British weather. But then suddenly she remembers, “tomorrow’s weather didn’t matter at all” (251).

Wailing against a seaside backdrop and in anticipation of an impending death, this sonic framing of Rose and Pinkie evokes Kipling’s 1902 “Wireless,” even as Greene rewrites that story’s ghostly theatrics of poetry from beyond the grave into a Catholic meditation on anxiety at the threshold of the void.¹ “[B]ehind the violin the rain tapped against the seaward windows,” continues Greene, evoking, like Kipling before him, the familiar association of wireless with two vast oceans, that of water and ether. Whereas Kipling explored the technology’s uncanny associations with a higher spiritual plane, Greene’s account is decidedly earthbound.

“[I]t was no good praying,” thinks Rose, pondering her looming fate within this gloomy soundscape. “Her prayers stayed here below with the siphons and statuettes: they had no wings” (250). The sound of the wailing wireless also follows Pinkie upstairs into the bathroom as he loads his pistol. “Down below the news was over and the music had begun again—it wailed upwards like a dog over a grave, and the huge darkness pressed a wet mouth against the panes” (252). To invoke Kipling once more on this “funny Marconi business,” the scene is indeed “disheartening--most disheartening” (220).

Such imagery would have been familiar enough to many readers of popular fiction in the 1930s. Stories of wireless and tragic romance had been widespread for many years, Kipling’s template generating dozens of similar tales in magazines as diverse as *Cosmopolitan*, *Harpers*, *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories*. Most often these stories featured a young couple, usually newlyweds or on the threshold of marriage, separated by death and then reunited when the dead lover makes contact by wireless. Frequently, these supernatural transmissions prompt the living to join his or her lost love in the great beyond. Varying in emphasis from occult romance to mystical science fiction, the stories evoked a bittersweet sense of separation and loss within their fantastic appeals to eternal reunion.² Such tales were especially prevalent in the late teens and into the 1920s as wireless became an increasingly familiar domestic technology. Drained of all supernatural mystery and romantic consolation, Kipling’s once profoundly esoteric conceit of 1902 appears here merely as a “potted plant,” weary, wailing, and otherwise depressing background noise for Rose and Pinkie’s brutally naïve courtship. Once a conduit of transcendental spirit, wireless serves here as yet another mass medium of those socially and spiritually dead “to what one called the world.”

Writing in the wake of wireless’s transformation from technology of astonishment to banal amusement, Greene’s invocation of BBC radio as a weary troubadour to Pinkie and Rose’s delusional romance is wholly in keeping with the elite scrutiny of mass culture so prevalent in Britain during the 1930s. Nor is wireless the only mass medium to make such a “disheartening” appearance in the novel. The cinema, the press, and the gramophone also figure prominently in the story’s unfolding, reaffirming Valentine Cunningham’s assertion that “the mass media obsessed the mass-conscious writer” in Britain during these years (280). For both the literary Left and Right, “suddenly, fiction was cluttered with cinemas, wirelesses, newspapers. Going to the cinema, listening to the wireless, reading newspapers, were abruptly taken for granted as stock activities of fictional characters” (281). Beyond providing period details for enhanced narrative realism, however, the relationship between a lone protagonist, the media, and the larger mediated public was even more significant as a convenient framework for considering the most compelling political and

cultural questions of modernity and massification. “The 30’s required of the bourgeois author some sort of response to the masses,” continues Cunningham, “The question haunted every serious person” (266). To invoke the mass media was by default to invoke the masses in all their abstract Otherness. And, as many cultural historians have noted, more often than not, the interdependent rise of mass man and mass media was a cause for great concern—especially for those modernists who sought to cultivate their own forms of cultural exile.

Of course, Greene’s work has its own ambivalent and conflicted relationship to the issue of the masses, so much so that mining Greene for political contradictions—Right/Left, high/low, elite/populist—has proven a durable, if not defining, strategy in engaging his work. After an initial wave of criticism that, for the most part, appears to have taken Greene’s own designations of “entertainments” and “literature” at face value, there has followed a corrective project that seeks to dissolve this hierarchy, and in the process, gently nudge Greene to the political Left, towards a more liberal position on the people and their amusements. In his study of Greene’s thrillers, for example, Brian Diemert aligns the author with a backlash against High Modernism and a belief in the emancipatory possibilities of popular forms, although conceding that Greene’s relationship to mass culture, like that of so many educated Britons, “was paradoxical and marked by a profound ambivalence stemming from his own education in Arnoldian notions of culture and literature”(38). Neil Nehring goes even further in such a project, using the Situationist tactic of *detournement* as a means of linking *Brighton Rock* with punk anarchism in 1970s Britain, thereby pushing Greene beyond the conventional Left/Right split so that he becomes a practitioner of avant-garde negation. That such critical recalibrations should focus on *Brighton Rock* in particular is not surprising. As is well known, Greene began the novel as a mass market book, a “thriller” that he no doubt hoped would be a big seller and that might lead to a deal with a movie studio.³ The intricate plotting of the novel’s opening pages—the highly cinematic pursuit of Hale, the gang’s anxiety over incriminating evidence and witnesses, Colleoni’s B-film posturing, Ida’s unconventionally conventional detective work—certainly suggest an eye toward commercial and thus *mass* viability. But as the novel turns more claustrophobic in the second half, dominated by Pinkie’s increasingly interiorized despair and desperation, *Brighton Rock* moves from a commercial thriller to an archetypically modernist character study, thus becoming the first of the more important “Catholic” novels for Greene’s critics and biographers. Greene commented on this textual shift many years later in *Ways of Escape*: “*Brighton Rock* I began in 1937 as a detective story and continued, I am sometimes tempted to think, as an error of judgment. . . . The first fifty pages of *Brighton Rock* are all that remain of the detective story; they would irritate me, if I dared

to look at them now, for I know I ought to have had the strength of mind to remove them, and to start the story again—however difficult the revisions might have proved—with what is now called Part Two” (56). No doubt fueled by such authorial lore, *Brighton Rock* remains even today a book that seems to talk itself out of its own existence, turning on the mass audience it was first meant to attract and, by implication, making them complicit in Pinkie’s persecution.

Is *Brighton Rock* a promising potboiler ruined by the book’s later pretensions to literature? Or is it important literature slightly blemished by an initial flirtation with commercial convention? These are, of course, ridiculous questions to ask since, in the end, *Brighton Rock* is what it is—the textual index of a whole series of period discourses on high and low, elite and mass, that were themselves in constant flux and contradiction during the 1930s. Looking back at the novel through the intellectual debates of the twentieth century, it is easy to project a “reactionary” or “resistant” label onto the work, a designation buttressed by an appeal to some ideological ink flowing directly and effortlessly from Greene’s pen. And yet, *Brighton Rock* can not have a “position” on the “masses” and their culture, any more than critics of today can unlock some secret foundation, motive, or unity that will finally adjudicate its genre and worth. Ultimately, this obsession with Greene and *Brighton’s* “status”—both political and aesthetic-- is best understood as a sociological game played on Pierre Bourdieu’s field of literary production, more a historical competition among critics than an immanent property of the author or text.⁴

Rather than attempt to divine Greene’s “core” politics or isolate the novel’s “true” identity, I would suggest that a more productive way of engaging this novel’s quite palpable fixation on issues of media massification is to consider *Brighton Rock* as situated in a historically specific discursive network, participating in a dialogue among a number of embroiled modernities that were not taking a political position on the masses so much as *creating* the concept of the mass in the first place. As Raymond Williams famously observes, “There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses” (300). Cunningham echoes these sentiments by noting, “crowds have no given self. Intrinsically, they possess only immense potentiality” (266). As Cunningham goes on to argue, intellectuals of the thirties were the first to move beyond the Leavisite position and argue that mass/popular culture should be taken seriously; and yet, they were also instrumental in replicating the tropes of passivity, addiction, and conformity inherited from *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* and that other great zombie classic of the era, Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses*. Written just as the culture industries had solidified their vertically integrated control of Fordist movie production, one-way networked radio, and a blanketing national culture, *Brighton Rock* participates in the complex process of defining the

potentiality of the crowd, of setting a vision of the “masses” that has proven exceptionally durable in all manner of political and aesthetic debates.

All of which returns us to wireless. When Kipling put a ghostly John Keats at the other end of a phantom wireless station, he was narrativizing a longstanding folk belief about media technology, creating a fantasy interlocutor who seemed to spring naturally from the technology’s qualities of invisibility, distance, and disorporation. In the following essay, I examine how *Brighton Rock*—as a novel that initially seeks to entertain a mass audience and yet quickly becomes suspicious of both entertainment and the masses—incorporates, narrativizes, and fantasizes the institutions of the newly massed media. What is particularly interesting about *Brighton Rock*, I would argue, is the text’s repeated engagements with the question of mediated massification, incorporating the press, the cinema, the gramophone, and most importantly, wireless, not as mere period details, but as key sites in negotiating the text’s own gradual retreat from the terrain of mass culture. Drawing on Andreas Huyssen’s foundational essay, “Mass Culture as Woman,” I am also interested in how Greene—like so many members of the period’s cultural elites—maps the era’s struggles over the question of the masses onto gender. This takes place most palpably, of course, in Greene’s creation of the massive Ida as the fleshy embodiment of “inauthentic” culture—but this impulse is also at work at the margins of the narration, which repeatedly engages the ongoing collapse of distinct class and cultural identities in the language of gendered difference. Newspapers, Hollywood, and radio all have parts to play in this gendered negotiation of the popular vs. the mass, the working-class vs. the middle-class, and the low-brow vs. the mid-cult-binaries that even today are no less confusing and yet equally generative of our collective authorship of “mass culture.”

The Doubled Man of the Crowd

Greene begins the novel with both a line and a scenario that suggest his initial commercial (and quite possibly cinematic) ambitions: “Hale knew, before he had been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him” (3). Concisely establishing place, genre, and immediate plot concerns, Greene then maneuvers Hale through an elaborately choreographed game of cat and mouse, the doomed young man negotiating a “fifty thousand” strong Whitsun holiday crowd as he tries to elude Pinkie and his gang. Born and nurtured in urban modernity, the cinema has long been attracted to the Gestalt game of complicating a chase sequence by immersing protagonist and antagonist in a teeming crowd, and it is quite possible Greene conceptualized this opening in terms of its obvious screen appeal.⁵ And yet, even as the novel’s opening chapter warmly greets the popular reader of the thriller with familiar stakes and mise-en-scene, Greene immediately complicates matters by making Hale not one man but two: Hale and his vocational per-

sona of “Kolley Kibber.” Paid by the *Daily Messenger* to wander through Brighton for the day as Kibber, Hale leaves behind prize cards, and waits to be confronted with the inanely officious declaration, “You are Mr. Kolley Kibber. I claim the *Daily Messenger* prize” (3-4).⁶ Hale/Kibber as real person and mass persona is thus doubly pursued, both by Pinkie’s gang and the British reading public, a duality Greene orchestrates to maximum suspense (Hale’s ironic tragedy, after all, is that the public’s inability to identify him as Kibber forces him to maintain his scheduled routine, thus making him more vulnerable to Pinkie’s gang).

Within this “potboiler” pursuit, the pages that Greene himself finds so “irritating,” the ambivalence and eventual disdain for the culture of the mass Other that will inform so much of Pinkie’s tribulations begin to emerge. “He only felt his loneliness after his third gin; until then he despised the crowd, but afterwards he felt his kinship,” writes Greene of Hale, adding somewhat strangely, even gratuitously, “He had come out of these same streets, but he was condemned by his higher pay to pretend to want other things, and all the time the piers, the peepshows pulled at his heart. He wanted to get back—but all he could do was carry his sneer along the front, the badge of loneliness” (4). This is a surprising amount of motivational back-story to provide for a character who will be dead in five pages, but it speaks to the novel’s overall fascination with masculine alienation within the changing social boundaries and cultural hierarchies presented by massification. Greene implies that Hale’s loneliness and cynicism is linked to his unfortunate ambition for the higher (but certainly not high) culture that comes with higher pay, when of course his real place is in the peepshow culture of working-class beachside amusements. Moreover, it is an irrevocable break. Hale cannot “get back”; something has been lost forever—a “natural” alignment of Hale’s sense of place, self, class, and amusements having been usurped by the inauthentic mass desires bound to his identity as Kolley Kibber. Mass culture, then, both as a landscape of manufactured desires and as Hale’s actual employer (in the form of the *Messenger*), has literally made Hale not himself.

One could argue that Hale’s frantic search for “salvation” rehearses in highly compressed and potboiler form the very crisis that will confront Pinkie over the remainder of the novel. In this respect, the opening chapter of this lowly thriller already flirts with the philosophical implications of Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” even as it appears to only exploit that story’s well-worn mechanics as a device for generating popular suspense. Writing at dawn of the great urban masses, Poe found in the man of the crowd “the type and genius of deep crime,” and a horror so profound that “er lässt sich nicht lesen” (it does not permit itself to be read).⁷ Poe of course is often credited as the “inventor” of the detective story, and in “Man of the Crowd,” the more specific subgenre of the urban mystery. Brighton is hardly

a sprawling metropolis, and yet the novel's opening in a mass spectacle of submerged criminality testifies to the continuity with Poe, even as *Brighton Rock* inverts that tale's criminal/mass equation. Hale is also a pathway into crime and horror, but appearing after decades of urbanization, he is less a threat to the crowd than the crowd is to him, less a singular arresting figure than an invisible anonymous type. Accordingly, while Poe's "man" appears pathologically afraid of being alone, Hale is pathologically afraid of the crowd. "He could see no familiar face anywhere, but he felt no relief," writes Greene with perverse irony, valorizing for a moment mass anonymity over interpersonal community. "He thought he could lose himself safely in the crowd, but now the people he was among seemed like a thick forest in which a native could arrange his poisoned ambush" (9). Hale's diabolical need to be seen and not be seen at the same time testifies to late modernity's generally pessimistic vision of mass man—wholly present to himself he is alone in a crowd; of the crowd he becomes estranged from himself. Greene makes this position even more diabolical by placing Hale's body and self in paradoxical conflict. The physical safety of Hale's body demands he leave Brighton forever and lose himself in Kibber's masses. The salvation of Hale's "self," on the other hand, calls for a spiritual reintegration with his natural, authentic identity in Brighton's working-class bosom.

Born of Pinkie's world and yet estranged from it, in search of a middle-class respectability built on the "pretense" of other things and yet alienated because of it, Hale anticipates Richard Hoggart's influential thesis in *the Uses of Literacy*. Like many postwar critics, Hoggart looked to earlier forms of British culture, before the era of rampant massification and Americanization, as a lost moment of organic unity, indigenous practice, and cultural authenticity. While this might seem to unite Greene and Hoggart in ideological sympathy, it should be noted that Hoggart—circa 1957—does not have much patience for Greene's work, grouping him with the cynicism of the "poor little rich boys" and observing, "because this apparent cynicism is really a nostalgia for belief there is a particular interest, not unmixed with envy, in observing other men going through the contortions and strains of finding belief" (257). Hostile though it is, this summation is not inaccurate in describing *Brighton Rock*. Getting even more specific, Hoggart calls out Greene's Ida by name, noting approvingly that she typifies the working classes of the "old order" in that "they do not think much about sin and grace, good and evil; but they are sure there is a difference between right and wrong." Responding to Greene's mocking portrait of Ida's "old order" as all that lacks sufficient Catholic gravitas, Hoggart adds, "I think I see the limitations of such a position, but I cannot feel that it indicates as miserable a condition as Graham Greene finds; in the circumstances, they might have adopted several less admirable attitudes" (98).

So, while the two men might be united in their valorization of

residual working-class amusements as opposition to the encroachment of mass culture, their disagreement would seem to stem from the very process of *authoring* the “masses.” As many cultural historians have noted, one of the major crises for cultural elites presented by the growth of the masses as a concept was media culture’s apparent ability to disarticulate class and cultural hierarchies. These perceived disruptions led to particularly anxious efforts to police the boundaries around the middle class since nothing was more horrifying than the mass “middlebrow.” For its harshest critics, the compromised “pseudo-culture” of the middlebrow sucked the authentic vitality out of a working-class culture that once knew its folkish place while simultaneously contaminating and degrading all attempts to produce or appreciate high art.⁸ Ida is a perfect emblem of these confusions. Is she working-class or middle-class? Are her interests lowbrow or middlebrow? One moment she is drunk in a pub belting out sentimental Victorian ballads, the epitome of Hoggart’s “immediate, present, and cheerful,” the next moment she is surveying the mid-cult mass trinkets of “the good life” kept in her cupboard: “pieces of china bought at the seaside, a photo of Tom, an Edgar Wallace, a Netta Syrett from a second-hand stall, some sheets of music, *The Good Companions*, her mother’s picture, more china, a few jointed animals made of wood and elastic, trinkets given her by this, that, and the other, *Sorrell and Son...*” (41). Greene’s inventory here is worthy of Bourdieu in its clinical dissection of Ida’s position on the social field of “taste” in interwar Britain. Once we remember that Ida does not actually exist, however, the inventory becomes more an index of Greene’s own relationship to the era’s attempts to negotiate popular pleasures and mass pursuits, an anxiety consistently manifest in Ida’s voracious and thus *indiscriminate* appetite for life. In their defense of Greene’s at times ambiguous cultural politics, an effort that seeks to reclaim Greene as a moral agent of the Left, several critics point to his consistent support of progressive causes, especially around issues of poverty and religious persecution. But as Bourdieu would remind us, money and culture constitute separate economies, two registers of “wealth” that were only further estranged from one another by the incursion of mid-cult taste. Like Hale, Ida seems to be on the cusp of low and middle, moving from a Rabelaisian comic grotesque to an insufferable custodian of middle-class doxa. Greene’s conclusion could not be more clear: she only *thinks* she’s living the good life. Whatever the author’s personal politics may or may not have been, he reminds us here that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a fat woman reading J. B. Priestley to pass through the gates of legitimate taste.

Massive Woman and Mass Culture

Recognizing that Pinkie’s gang has spotted him, Hale tries to utilize Brighton’s holiday crowd as a defensive weapon. Delving deeper into this anony-

mous “mass,” Hale/Greene gives it flesh in female form. “He had only, he told himself, to find a girl: there must be hundreds waiting to be picked up on a Whitsun holiday, to be given a drink and taken to dance at Sherry’s and presently home, drunk and affectionate, in the corridor carriage” (10). The narration’s slippage here, from a cornered man frantically scheming to save his life to musings on the courtship rituals of aimless British tarts, places *Brighton Rock* in historical dialogue with the Mass Observation project. Begun shortly before the novel’s publication and itself a symptom of the era’s desire to author the new masses, the Mass Observation movement famously sought to create “an anthropology of ourselves,” a bid for social self-understanding in an era when the traditional “self” no doubt seemed to be dissolving. Not unlike the army of volunteer observers who fanned out across Britain to witness, record, and thus give name to mass phenomena, Hale works here as a surrogate for Greene’s amateur sociology, producing a taxonomy of the women sitting in the sun: “clerks, shop-girls, hairdressers—you could pick out the hairdressers by their new and daring perms, by their beautifully manicured nails: they had all waited late at their shops the night before, preparing each other till midnight. Now they were sleepy and sleek in the sun” (10-11).⁹ Once again the urgency of Hale’s search for a single girl among the masses wanders into almost whimsical fantasy about the mass practices of mass woman (who would have thought there were enough hairdressers giggling in Brighton on any given day to constitute a recognizable “sub-mass”?). Greene imagines them performing elaborate fashion rituals (no doubt instructed by the latest magazines) alone in their individual shops and yet united in this performance of mass fashion. This path through a forest of increasingly specific yet still abstracted female types brings Hale at last to the deceptively singular Ida, who then becomes the novel’s personification of all mass publics, mass beliefs, and mass entertainments, a buoyant conglomeration of mammaryes, sentiment, and cripplingly democratic taste. “She was of the people, she cried in cinemas at *David Copperfield*,” notes Greene a few pages later (31). Combined with her interest in Syrett, Priestley, and Wallace, what more needs to be said?

It is a short path, in turn, from Ida crying at the Bijou back to Gustave Le Bon’s famous equation of mass psychology and feminine excitability in *The Crowd*, itself a founding text of gynophobic modernity. As Le Bon notoriously asserts, “It will be remarked that among the special characteristics of crowds there are several—such as impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides—which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution—in women, savages, and children, for instance” (17). Indeed, Le Bon’s laundry list of mass defects could easily be confused with Greene’s character notes on Ida. In this respect, *Brighton Rock* supports Huyssen’s thesis in “Mass Culture

as Woman,” demonstrating once again how the modernist project consistently imagines mass culture as “somehow associated with women, while real authentic culture remains the prerogative of men” (47). No doubt this is true, not only in Ida’s growing monstrosity as a one-woman mass public, but also in Greene’s concurrent transformation of Pinkie from a naïve young thug to a quasi-Nietzschean “artist-philosopher-hero,” what Huyssen defines as modernity’s “suffering loner who stands in irreconcilable opposition to modern democracy and its inauthentic culture” (51). While the conflict between Ida and Pinkie has primarily been discussed in terms of secular and Catholic worldviews, there are several points in the novel where this clash is also mapped onto the terrain of popular/mass amusements. Indeed, as an agent of absolute negation, Pinkie seems singularly allergic to all modes of culture, entertainment and even pleasure. As Pinkie listens to the lyrics of a popular song, Greene writes in sarcastic solidarity: “music, love, nightingale, postmen: the words stirred in his brain *like poetry*” (52; italics mine). What is particularly interesting in *Brighton Rock*’s gynophobic modernism—here and elsewhere—is the slippage between Pinkie’s overt misogyny, the scared loathing of an emotionally retarded and sexually terrified teenage boy, and Greene’s increasingly hostile linkage of grotesque femininity, mass culture, and spiritual contamination. In *Brighton Rock* women and the feminine exist to attach themselves to something else, a “monstrous feminine” to be sure, fleshily enacted by the parasitical Ida and in more pathetic form by the masochistically passive Rose, both of whom seek to drag Pinkie down from his kingdom of masculine autonomy.¹⁰

As further evidence of Ida’s “incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments,” Greene consistently associates her with belief in the supernatural.¹¹ The last item in Ida’s mid-cult cupboard of the “good life” is her Ouija Board, which she consults to begin her investigation of Hale’s death. Her entire operation is funded by faith in her luck at the betting track. And, as Greene continually reminds us, she believes in ghosts, so much so that she appears to have taken the idiotic romantic progeny of Kipling’s “Wireless” as absolute truth. “She knew a woman once who’d seen her husband after he was dead standing by the wireless set trying to twiddle the knob,” we learn in Ida’s introductory chapter. “She twiddled the way he wanted and he disappeared and immediately she heard an announcers say on Midland Regional: ‘Gale Warning in the Channel.’ She had been thinking of taking one of the Sunday trips to Calais, that was the point” (33). Ida, then, actually believes in the sentimental claptrap that fails Rose and Pinkie so miserably. A charitable reading of Ida might suggest that Greene is counterposing the masculine rationality of the detective to the superior powers of feminine intuition. As the novel proceeds, however, moving from Ida’s detective work toward Pinkie’s tortured existentialism, it becomes clear that Ida is less an eccentric-

cally brilliant detective than a burdensomely lucky nuisance.

Is *Brighton Rock* a detective novel? Greene says no, while some of his critics say yes. “Even if he had had the strength of mind to do so Greene could not have taken the detective story out of *Brighton Rock*, for its structure is woven into the fabric of the novel and cannot be excised with the surgical removal of a fixed number of pages,” argues Diemert in his study of Greene’s thrillers. “Whatever Greene might say, *Brighton Rock*, though it is many other things is also a detective story” (133-34). If so, is Ida really a detective? Significantly, there is no crime to “solve” in the novel—we know from the beginning “whodunit,” and even then, it isn’t entirely clear if anything was even done (the coroner, much to the bafflement of Pinkie’s gang and the reader, pronounces Hale dead from “natural causes”—although some critics speculate he was forced to choke on a stick of the candy for which the book is titled). There seems to be little suspense involved in this “thriller” as well, since Ida does not detect so much as stampede her way toward the novel’s final showdown. If Sherlock Holmes in his capacity as a member of a cultural elite surveys and reads seemingly insignificant details against the background noise of the masses, and Philip Marlowe as the American everyman finds himself an alienated subject negotiating the jungle of urban modernity, Ida as a metonymy for the masses simply follows a course of happy accident and moralistic badgering sparked not by a clue, per se, but by the Ouija Board’s meaningless pronouncement of “FRESUICILLEYE.” Thus, as Pinkie attempts to live out *L’Etranger*, he is finally ensnared by the stupidity of a woman who cries at ridiculous movies, reads Warwick Deeping, and actually believes that the dead use wireless to watch over and protect the living. It would be one thing to have Holmes or Marlowe detect your guilt, but what end could be more fittingly tragic, more irrationally cruel for a modernist anti-hero than to be laid low by the accidental brilliance of “one of the people,” a sentimental and meddling lush, no less, who solves the crime, not through semiotic mastery, but by the crude and melodramatic mechanics of accidental meetings, coincidences, and feminine superstition? And therein lies one of the prime mechanisms of the text’s growing contempt for the thriller and its audience. Ida gets her man, fulfilling the most rudimentary expectations of a “crime” novel. But during the process of her investigation, the novel has abandoned both Ida and the genre to instead become a tragedy of abject alienation. In the end, to identify and invest in Ida’s detective quest is to embrace the very mass genres that have reared her—melodrama, romance, occult mystery; in short, everything that is anemia to the modernist hero, be he Philip Marlowe, Stephen Dedalus, or Pinkie.

Ida, in this respect, does not resemble a detective so much as another familiar icon of modern literature, Emma Bovary—an affinity that significantly informs *Brighton Rock*’s gradual generic erosion from thriller

to tragedy. Huyssen observes that Flaubert grew up loving the very same novels that would eventually dominate and kill his famous heroine, making his famous declaration “Madame Bovary, c'est moi” somewhat troubling. While the more “sentimental than artistic” Emma Bovary would become famous as “a woman who tried to live the illusions of aristocratic sensual romance and was shipwrecked on the banality of bourgeois everyday life,” Huyssen argues, Flaubert “came to be known as one of the fathers of modernism, one of the paradigmatic master voices of an aesthetic based on the uncompromising repudiation of what Emma Bovary loved to read” (44-45). Such are the challenges and opportunities that women and mass culture present to modernist man—ineffable Others that allow both a gender and an aesthetic to thrive in renunciation, differentiation and alienated transcendence. Flaubert, it would seem, grew out of his infatuation with the genres that so fascinate the “weak-minded” audience of the popular novel, leaving them instead for weepy, sentimental women so that he might move on to reflect their psychological truths back to them in the excruciatingly uncompromising form of *Madame Bovary*. In *Brighton Rock*, Greene extends this project by making his Emma Bovary a “detective,” one who makes the profundity of modern(ist) man her quarry with “no pity for something she didn’t understand” (56). Ida’s worst crime? She seems completely happy and well adjusted. “You can tell the world’s all dandy with her,” observes Rose bitterly. What could be more insulting to any “serious person” of the era, to be completely hat home in the world, unbridled by guilt, and satisfied with cheap amusements, ridiculous movies, and the most mediocre of fiction.

“Murdering the World”

At the threshold of suicide, Pinkie decides he must kiss Rose to feign sentiment so that she will go through with their one-sided pact. As he leans in to give her a peck on the cheek he confirms what alert readers already suspected: “he was afraid of the mouth—thoughts travel too easily from lip to lip” (263). As Naomi King observes, *Brighton Rock* is obsessed with women’s mouths, which appear throughout the novel in wet and sucking imagery of sexual disgust.¹² And, in keeping with the novel’s conflation of cultural and sexual threats, such imagery also appears in relation to wireless. Either through editorial laziness or cunning modernist parallelism, the feminizing image of a “wet mouth” appears in both of Rose and Pinkie’s encounters with radio, first as a metaphor for the weary vox *humana* droning in Snow’s and then as a personification of the nocturnal (spiritual? ethereal?) void waiting to envelop Rose, Pinkie, and perhaps all of humanity. King opts for a Lacanian explanation of this fixation, linking the text’s overall “obsessive” attention to feminine orality with Julia Kristeva’s work on the abject horror presented by the pre-symbolic maternal body. The novel,

she argues, evinces a persistent anxiety “that phallic masculine identity is dissolving into feminine fluidity,” adding that “Pinkie has a timely horror of being drowned, and would prefer even to die by the razor because ‘no death was so bad as drowning.’” Better to be castrated than devoured, it would seem, at least in Pinkie’s version of the Symbolic. As we have seen, there is little doubt *Brighton Rock* has significant issues with women. Rather than go immediately to the final event horizons of the Lacanian real or the Kristevean abject, however, I think the specificity of this particular reference, its doubled association with wireless programming, suggests a level of historical specificity at work here that should not be dissolved away into the linguistic passion play of the Symbolic or into Greene as a traumatized analysand (or even simply a tortured Catholic). At one level, the text may well be playing with the psychoanalytic horrors of sexual difference; but it is equally clear the novel is in even more explicit historical dialogue with a particularly modernist crisis over the place of man in relation to both women and the masses as threats to masculine energy and power. In this respect, Pinkie’s increasing desperation, carried over into the narration itself, reaffirms Huyssen’s contention that “warding something off, protecting against something out there seems indeed to be a basic gesture of the modernist aesthetic” (47). To the extent the novel retains any status as a “thriller,” its suspense stems primarily from Pinkie’s growing paranoia, an anxiety that gradually transfers from his character to the narration itself.

Accordingly, in a novel so resolutely fixated on “warding off” the threats presented by women, the masses, and feminized culture, Pinkie’s doom is clearly sealed when he gets married and goes to the movies in the same day. In an effort to avoid the ultimate sucking “wet mouth” of consummation, Pinkie drags Rose from the ceremony to the cinema to see a Hollywood movie, a nameless romance that Greene describes with appropriate scorn (“thighs shot with studied care” [195]). But Pinkie’s panicked attempt to avoid “the commonest game under the sun,” what dogs do in the street, is complicated when he must confront Hollywood’s vision of sexual seduction unfolding onscreen: continues Greene, “The two main characters made their stately progress towards the bed-sheets,” to which Pinkie, ever the anti-romantic, whispers furiously to his new bride, “Like cats.” But then the truly unthinkable happens:

The actor with a lick of black hair across a white waste of face said, ‘You’re mine. All mine.’ He sang again under the restless stars in a wash of incredible moonshine, and suddenly, inexplicably, the Boy began to weep. He shut his eyes to hold in the tears, but the music went on—it was like a vision of release to an imprisoned man. He felt constriction and saw—hopelessly out of reach—a

limitless freedom: no fear, no hatred, envy. It was as if he were dead and were remembering the effect of a good confession, the words of absolution: but being dead it was a memory only—he couldn't experience contrition—the ribs of his body where like steel bands which held him down to eternal nonrepentence. (196)

The ambivalent source of Pinkie's tears in this scene speaks to the unstable forces that have given him and the novel shape to this point. In this brilliantly rich conflation of confused emotions, sexual terror, Catholic guilt, class envy, and Hollywood chicanery, the masculine defenses of Pinkie at last give way and drag the young man down into weeping femininity, laid so low he becomes no better than Ida crying ridiculously at half-witted Dickensian treacle at her own local ciné. Pinkie is determined to carry on with his unlikely double-suicide plot, but for this once proudly aloof and characteristically alienated modern anti-hero, there is really nothing left to do but die.

With Pinkie properly emasculated and defeated by Ida, Rose, sex, sentiment, and the silver screen, the novel hurtles quickly toward its two endings, which, to maintain the conceit of the novel's divided identity, can rather neatly be divided into the thriller ending and a more literary denouement. The "thriller," to the extent anyone is still "thrilled" at this point in the novel, ends with Ida and the police cornering the newlyweds just at the moment Rose is about to pull the trigger and kill herself. It is a cheap *deus ex machina* worthy of a novel that has completely lost interest in this aspect of the story. More interesting, of course, is the denouement following Pinkie's fatal flight from Ida, Rose, and all that they have come to represent. After Pinkie falls off the cliff to his death, Ida returns home, looks at the Ouija Board message that began her investigation, and, ever the lazy reader, reinterprets the nonsensical letters to make them fit the events as they actually unfolded. Her brush with Pinkie's higher truths and the integrity of his absolute alienation has clearly taught her nothing—she will forever be of the people, "their amusements" will remain "her amusements" in a world where "there was nothing with which she didn't claim kinship" (76). Rose, meanwhile, ends the novel walking "towards the worst horror of all," making her way to Pinkie's room to retrieve the phonograph record Pinkie recorded for her on the day of their wedding. The reader, of course, knows the full extent of this horror, having witnessed Pinkie venting his angry vitriol at Rose in the recording booth. Thus does the ghost of Kipling's "Wireless" return a final time. Harshly repudiating the haunted wireless genre, the soppy sensibility that produced it, and the feminine culture that nurtures it, Greene actually enables his story's dead lover to speak from beyond the grave. But rather than appeal to the superstition of romantic partners afloat

in the ether protecting their mates from beyond, a weak-minded absurdity that Ida of course still believes, Greene makes real the voice of the dead in the most brute and brutal of materialist physics--a stylus dragging across an acetate recording: "God damn you, you little bitch, why can't you go back home for ever and let me be?" (193). And what more appropriate ending could there be, after all, for a mass thriller that has now wholly transferred its sympathies to a martyred sociopath standing apart from the masses, and who is in the end "whipped away into zero—nothing"? (264). And what is *Brighton Rock*, finally, if not the story of a brave young man driven off a cliff by the relentless pursuit of two women who simply will not leave him alone? As Pinkie himself observes, "Was there no escape—anywhere—for anyone? It was worth murdering a world" (96). Or, failing that, it was at least worth murdering oneself.

Notes

1. Kipling's story chronicles a group of wireless enthusiasts who gather at a chemist's on a cold winter's night in anticipation of receiving experimental transmissions. Instead they encounter the poetry of John Keats as "channeled" through the automatic writing of the store's clerk, John Shaynor, once the young man falls into a drowsy trance.
2. For a more detailed discussion of this genre, see Sconce, Chapter 2. As one might imagine, the stories appearing in the pulp science fiction magazines centered on the mysterious gadgetry of wireless, while tales in more general readership publications focused on the romance. A paradigmatic example of the wireless romance a decade removed from Kipling's tale is Wilson's "Sparks."
3. Diemert notes that *Brighton Rock* had an ambiguous status as an "entertainment" even before Greene himself wrote of the novel's changing emphasis, noting "it was called an entertainment in its first American edition but not in its first British edition published a month later, and subsequent American reprintings removed the subheading" (6). These discrepancies are interesting, not only for what they say about the changing status of the novel, but also for the different conceptions of the American and British fiction markets.
4. See Bourdieu's crucial essays on this issue in Part I of *The Field of Cultural Production*.
5. For a discussion of representation, urbanity, and the masses in early cinema, see Singer.
6. This overly officious declaration—itself a symptom of the indignities facing men among the masses—could easily fit into F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson's infamous survey of advertising techniques in *Culture and Environment*. For an historical account of this promotion's origins, see Routh.

7. Fittingly, what this horror is exactly remains ambiguous.
8. For a discussion of these dynamics, see Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Levine; Radway.
9. John Carey notes how this talent for reading the masses is also a feature of Sherlock Holmes: “Holmes’s redemptive genius as a detective lies in rescuing individuals from the mass. Characteristically at the start of a story he scrutinizes the nondescript person who has arrived at his Baker Street rooms, observes how they dress, whether their hands are calloused, whether their shoe soles are worn, and amazes them by giving an accurate account, before they have spoken a word, of their jobs, their habits and their individual interests” (8-9). On the other side of the Atlantic, meanwhile, pulp detective Nick Carter often astounded the urban masses by repeatedly revealing himself to be in clever disguise as an otherwise invisible mass type.
10. I’m using “monstrous feminine” here following Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*.
11. Greene returned to the (bogus) supernatural in *The Ministry of Fear* (1943). For an account of the novel’s use of the uncanny, see Stewart.
12. King provides an impressive index of how “the text focuses obsessively on women’s mouths, lingering over Ida’s ‘big tipsy mouth’ and the way she eats éclairs, the cream ‘spurt[ing] between the big front teeth’ and settling on the ‘plump tongue’ (p.144), and then on Rose’s lips which arouse revulsion in Pinkie every time he is obliged to kiss them. On first meeting Rose, Judy (who buys tinned sardines and herrings for breakfast) fastens ‘a mouth wet and prehensile as a sea anemone’ on her cheek (p.192). A series of imagery prolongs this fascination: the tide sucks and slides like a ‘wet mouth’ around the piles of the pier (p.93); darkness presses a ‘wet mouth against the panes’ of the pub (p.231), and the opera singer’s voice on the wireless trembles over the stained used tablecloths at Snow’s like ‘the world’s wet mouth lamenting over life’ (p.26). The vision of Rose sucking a stick of Brighton rock merges with that of the sea sucking at the pier’s pillars beneath the Gents’ toilet, giving rise to the anxiety that phallic masculine identity is dissolving into feminine fluidity” (np).

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