The Double Thread of Fiction: 
Voice and Vision in the Novels of Henry Green

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ABSTRACT

Between 1926 and 1952, the English writer Henry Green published nine novels. From the outset, his work showed a particular fascination with the relationship between voice and vision. Green’s early novels, in particular, were characterised by various forms of visual failure – blindness, hallucinations, impenetrable fogs, wartime blackouts – yet at the same time his work contained many striking passages of visual description. There are also contradictions in the way voice is represented throughout his writing. Conversations in Green’s novels are often confused affairs, in which characters lie or dissemble, or simply garble their words; this complete unreliability of the spoken word is a major part of his fiction’s comedy. On the other hand, there are also moments in his novels when voices seem to possess an almost rapturous power, enchanting their listeners with the beauty of song.

This dissertation shows that Green’s writing possessed a double character. It is not simply the case that his novels preferred orality over visuality (though they sometimes did do that). Rather, his work demonstrated the paradoxes of both voice and vision – their powers and their limitations, their clashes and their complementarities. Green’s success as a novelist came from this sense of duality; his finest work was concerned with the nuances of both sight and sound. Only in his last two novels did he abandon the richness of visually-oriented description in favour of a narrative style that consisted almost wholly of reported speech. Though this final phase of his career might be considered in some respects a failure, Green deserves to be regarded as one of the most important English-language novelists of the twentieth century. His work, however, has received much less critical attention than that of his contemporaries. This dissertation undertakes a close reading of his major novels, concentrating on their language and formal elements in order to suggest a new approach to his work that recognises its fundamental duality.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Jeffrey James Poacher
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VOICE AND VISION IN THE NOVELS OF
HENRY GREEN

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