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

Jeffrey James Poacher
LLB (Hons), MA UQ

School of Humanities
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Griffith University

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

April 2009
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
THE DOUBLE THREAD OF FICTION

VOICE AND VISION IN THE NOVELS OF
HENRY GREEN

Jeffrey Poacher
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INTRODUCTION
THE DOUBLE THREAD OF FICTION

Novels were born yesterday, someone once said, so perhaps the best starting-point for any inquiry into their nature lies much further back. In the *Phaedrus*, there is a recognition that all writing has both a vocal and a visual dimension. Written words, Socrates explains in that dialogue, are like paintings in that they always look unchanged and “outwardly preserve a solemn silence”; yet, at the same time, those words can somehow be heard inside their reader’s head. Mulling over this point, Phaedrus suggests that writing should therefore be thought of as having a phantasmal quality – that, in essence, it should be considered a picture of the speaking voice. Phaedrus was right: when we read, sight and sound work together to produce meaning, though the relation between the two can sometimes seem mysterious. A suitable metaphor for this process – for our capacity to hear the silent words we see on the page – might be one that acknowledges the doubleness of written language: two sides of the same coin, so to speak, or a fabric woven from a double thread.

Many of our assumptions about how novels work have been greatly influenced by these somewhat abstract notions of voice and vision. To some extent, this is true of literature in general – it is not uncommon for writers and readers to use these terms when referring, for example, to matters of literary style (“voice”) or philosophical outlook (“vision”). The problem with this, of course, is that such concepts are very large ones indeed – so airy, so protean, that any attempt to record their disparate usages would seem an impossible task. At the same time, it is well to remember that the novel had specifically vocal origins (the word *novel* appears to have come into English from the Romance languages during the fifteenth century with the meaning of news or the

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1 It was Flaubert. Actually he said, “La prose est née d’hier”, but it is clear from the context that he was talking about novelistic prose. See his letter to Louise Colet dated 24 April 1852: *Correspondance*, 4 vols, ed. by Jean Bruneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), vol. 2, p. 79.

recounting of recent events). Some of the genre’s most distinguished practitioners have emphasised this vocal heritage. E.M. Forster, for instance, once suggested that novels were descended from the tales exchanged by our neolithic forebears (whom he memorably described as “shock-heads, gaping round the camp-fire”). Novels with first-person narrators most obviously resemble this kind of story-telling, since they simulate a direct address to a captive audience. But fiction’s vocality has also been conceived in less monological terms – Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia is one well-known attempt to explain how novels can be thought of as a play of many voices. Indeed, there are those who would claim the novel as the literary form that comes closest to “a conversation, whether between friends or acquaintances”. Yet this vocal lineage has also attracted its share of opprobrium. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, there was a concerted effort by some literary avant-gardists “to expel the ghost of the living voice from the machinic structures of modernist writing”, as the philosopher Jonathan Rée put it in his history of the human senses. Even as recently as 2000, the American writer Cynthia Ozick could dismiss the concept of voice altogether as a “term overgrown with academic fungus and by now nearly useless”. But ghosts can prove difficult to exorcise and fungus hard to eradicate. It is still a deeply ingrained habit (and not just in the English-speaking world) to refer to a novel’s character or narrator as having a distinctive voice. In short, our assumptions about the vocal aspects of narrative continue to influence the ways in which novels come to be written and read.

The same, of course, can be said for vision. Before it is anything else, reading is a visual act. This is what the Phaedrus acknowledges: we first meet any written word with


our eyes. But, in the case of novels, notions of visuality carry a heavier freight. We are by now well accustomed to descriptions of the novel-reader’s imagination as something that works in visual terms – that novels (unlike, say, company reports or Hansard) have a particular capacity to make their readers see. Novelists themselves like to emphasise this point. Flaubert, for instance, made extensive use of optical metaphors whenever he discussed the practice and processes of literary fiction; in the same vein, Joseph Conrad once declared that enabling the reader’s vision should be considered the supreme task of the novel. The rise of literary realism in the nineteenth century coincided with a decisive visual turn in Western culture. Fiction came to seem more visually oriented, especially in its attempt to record the countless details of the world as the eye might see them. The barometer hanging on the wall in Flaubert’s “Un Coeur Simple” is a well-known example of this sort of realist convention (though Roland Barthes considered this little more than a trick – in his terms, a “reality effect”). Nevertheless, the inclusion of such a seemingly irrelevant detail as the barometer in Flaubert’s conte marked the growing influence of visuality on the writing of fiction. This influence only intensified in the twentieth century with the development of cinema. “I am a camera,” the narrator announces at the beginning of Christopher Isherwood’s Goodbye to Berlin; he could have been speaking for any number of novelists, from John Dos Passos to Virginia Woolf.

It is always dangerous, of course, to put forward one type of novel as somehow representative of the genre as a whole. Despite the increasing dominance of a visual paradigm, the novel never completely lost its older connections with vocality. At the same time Christopher Isherwood was declaring his affiliation with the lens, the likes of Ivy Compton-Burnett and Samuel Beckett were writing novels that derived almost entirely from the convolutions of speech. In short, a great many fictional works

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throughout the twentieth century owed more to conversation than to cameras. How could it be otherwise? Novels are, after all, rampantly eclectic. In a broader sense, then, it might be said that the genre is still characterised by an inherent doubleness – a capacity to attend to both the sights and the sounds of everyday life.

This is a study of such a duality in the work of the twentieth-century English novelist, Henry Green. Ideas of vision and voice shaped all of Green’s writing in one way or another. This is not simply a matter of how characters might be represented in the act of speaking or seeing (though Green did pay a good deal of attention to those questions throughout all of his work). It is also about how this double thread of voice and vision influenced both the composition and the reception of his novels – their style and structure, their aesthetics and interpretation. Green’s work might justifiably be thought of as *sui generis* – experimental, eccentric, sometimes even obscure. The American author Eudora Welty, among others, celebrated the enigmatic style of his novels (their “blessed oddity”, as she called it). John Updike, another eminent fan, once described Green as an “intensely original writer”, whose avant-garde impulse was “to redeem language from the unfelt smoothness of usage”. An interviewer for *The Paris Review* summed Green up as “a writer’s writer’s writer”; this comment was presumably intended to suggest that a taste for his fiction was a rarefied one (as well as making him sound like some sort of literary *matryoshka*). In short, Green’s novels can seem labyrinthine to their readers. It is hoped that the entwined concepts of voice and vision deployed here might at least offer one way through that fictional maze.

Green published nine novels, the first in 1926 and the last in 1952. From the outset, his work showed a particular fascination with forms of visual failure – blindness, hallucinations, impenetrable fogs, wartime black-outs. At the same time, there are highly lyrical descriptive passages throughout most of his novels – passages that celebrate different kinds of visual beauty, ranging from bucolic evocations of the Gloucester countryside to a lovely portrait of a young woman taking a bath. This is one of several

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contradictions that helps give Green’s writing its double character; another is his
treatment of voice. Dialogue is extensively used throughout all of his novels (indeed, the
last two consist of little else). Yet Green went out of his way to emphasise the utter
unreliability of the spoken word: conversations in his novels often stall or break down
altogether, characters are prone to garble their words, or else listeners are hard of hearing.
(Here it is perhaps worth noting that Green himself was partially deaf for most of his
adult life.) Nevertheless, there are also moments throughout Green’s work where voices
seem to possess a rapturous power – where characters find themselves carried away by
the sound of someone singing or by the mellifluous warbling of a blackbird. Throughout
most of Green’s work, visuality and vocality complement each other. Only in his last two
novels did he abandon the richness and intricacy of visually-oriented description in
favour of a narrative style that consisted almost wholly of reported speech. It will be
argued here that the privileging of voice in this final phase of his writing represented an
artistic failure, one that is perhaps only fully appreciated by comparison with the
achievement of his earlier work.

The aim of the present dissertation is to show that Green’s major novels possessed
a double character that derived from their intertwining of the visual and the vocal. It has
already been acknowledged that the terms of this inquiry, voice and vision, are capacious
ones. But their principal purpose is to provide a framework for examining Green’s
fiction in some detail; they are intended to operate heuristically, rather than
systematically. This is, in short, a study propelled by techniques of close reading. As
such, its attention will mainly be concentrated on the formal elements of Green’s major
novels – style, plot, narration, character and so on. Close reading is arguably the most
pragmatic form of literary analysis, having as its objective the explication of specific
literary texts (rather than, say, the formulation of some set of incontrovertible principles).
Indeed, powerful claims have recently been made for its continuing relevance as a mode
of literary engagement.16

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16 See, for example, Rónán McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* (London: Continuum, 2007) and
pp. 45–57.
Henry Green certainly knew what it was like to come from the right side of the tracks. “I was born a mouthbreather with a silver spoon in 1905”: these are the first words of his strange memoir *Pack My Bag*, written somewhat prematurely when he was in his mid-thirties. But right from the start “Henry Green” was a fiction. The author’s legal name was Henry Yorke; he was the third son of a wealthy industrialist whose factories made, among other things, brewery equipment and cisterns for public toilets. The vocation of fiction came early. While at Eton, the boy precociously began writing his first novel. It was called *Blindness* and was published in 1926 under his non-descript pseudonym (surviving correspondence shows that the young author for a time considered an even blander alternative, “Henry Brown”).

As a literary debut, *Blindness* is an astonishing achievement. Its main character, John Haye, is a student at a school not unlike Eton. Through sheer misfortune, he loses his sight – a stone thrown by an anonymous child smashes the window of the railway carriage in which he happens to be travelling, leaving him permanently disabled. Prior to the accident, Haye had harboured dreams of a literary career; his incapacity now becomes the supreme challenge to this ambition. On the surface, *Blindness* looks like a kind of *Künstlerroman*, a portrait of the artist’s development (its various sections are even sub-titled “Caterpillar”, “Chrysalis” and “Butterfly”). But Green’s surfaces are always deceptive: there are intimations throughout that the butterfly will never take wing and that Haye’s novels will remain unwritten (he realises, for instance, that all his future experience of literature will necessarily be mediated by the nurses who will be employed to read it to him). As was to be the case with all of Green’s writing, romantic notions are continually undercut by the unsentimental details of reality. Nevertheless, the author himself formed the view that *Blindness* was excessively mawkish. Shortly after its

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publication, he told a friend that it had been “the latrine of too many of my youthful morbidities”.\(^{19}\) A decade later, he even included a passage from it in his autobiography as an example of lush over-writing.\(^{20}\)

After Eton, Green went to Oxford where he spent most of his time drinking and playing billiards. Perhaps not surprisingly, he failed to take a degree. Instead, he took a job on the shop floor of one of his family’s factories in Birmingham. This experience was the necessary research for his second novel \textit{Living}, which appeared in 1929; its gerundive title (a practice Green was to repeat) suggests an emphasis on the dynamic processes of life, unadorned by literary artifice. The novel’s epicentre is a Birmingham foundry and most of its characters are working-men and their families, all chattering away in the strange Brummie dialect that the author had encountered first-hand. Christopher Isherwood is reputed to have called \textit{Living} the finest proletarian novel ever written, perhaps because it bore no resemblance to the Marxist paeans to labour that were in vogue at the time.\(^{21}\) Green’s workers are too human to be heroes or ideologues, all the time boozing, joking, and backstabbing (though they are invariably treated by their author with great sympathy). But this \textit{tableau} of factory life was not popular with readers. \textit{Living} sold so few copies that Green was moved to say he had joined “the great army of the unappreciated”.\(^{22}\)

By the 1930s, Green had assumed a managerial position in the family company. But, despite wealth and marriage, he remained an elusive figure. “I write books,” he explained in his autobiography, “but I am not proud of this any more than anyone is of their nails growing”.\(^{23}\) That writing took place out of office hours and on weekends (like Kafka, Green is an inspiration for all part-time novelists). Though having the chance to move in fashionable literary circles, he entirely avoided the limelight (preferring, for instance, only to be photographed from behind, so that all the camera might show was the

\(^{19}\) Treglown, p. 62.  
\(^{21}\) In an interview many years later, Green was to acknowledge this comment by “my very good friend Christopher Isherwood”, but wittily added, “I don’t know that he ever worked in a factory”: \textit{Surviving}, p. 247.  
\(^{22}\) Treglown, p. 98.  
\(^{23}\) \textit{Pack My Bag}, p. 238.
back of his head). The reason for this seems to have been a lingering embarrassment about his work. He once touched on this in an interview:

[S]ome years ago a group at our Birmingham works put in a penny each and bought a copy of a book of mine – Living. And as I was going round the iron-foundry one day, a loam-moulder said to me, “I read your book, Henry.” “And did you like it?” I asked, rightly apprehensive. He replied: “I didn’t think much of it, Henry.” Too awful.24

Green’s next novel was Party Going, published in that fateful month, September 1939. Set in London between the wars, it is perhaps the strangest, the most phantasmagorical of all his fictions. A party of rather well-off young people, about to go on holiday to France, become stuck at a railway station because of a thick fog (though not named in the novel, this is presumably Victoria Station; in those pre-Chunnel days, travellers often took the train from there to connect with the ferry at Dover). Most of Party Going is taken up with the elaborate verbal contredanse performed by this group of affluent twenty-somethings. For two hundred-odd pages, they scheme and gossip, seduce and bicker, all the time revealing the shallowness of their lives. Often they are shown up by those who are less privileged – their porters, cab-drivers and hapless servants. This is a large part of the novel’s comedy. (One contemporary reviewer described Party Going as the sort of book that might result if Groucho Marx tried to write like Virginia Woolf.)25 Things constantly go awry for Green’s callow vacationers: identities are mistaken, directions get scrambled, talk is confused. In the end, it is unclear whether their party ever actually goes anywhere.

It had taken Green almost a decade to finish this, his third novel. At the same time, he was also working on his memoir Pack My Bag (its curious title comes from the final deathbed words of the English philosopher F.H. Bradley). This ironic self-portrait can virtually be read as a naturalist’s field notes on the upper-classes. But death also casts its long shadow over the book, especially in Green’s repeated declarations that he expected to perish soon in the war against Germany (the book was published in early 1940). By the time the Blitz came, Green had joined the Auxiliary Fire Service, an exceedingly dangerous occupation. Once again, his experience was converted into

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24 This was said in his interview for The Paris Review; see Surviving, p. 236.
literature. *Caught*, the first of his three great wartime novels, is set in a London fire station during the Luftwaffe raids of 1941. The firemen are depicted as heroic but also venal – so much so that Leonard Woolf, the novel’s publisher, worried that its hints of inefficiency and government corruption would not pass the wartime censor. But pass it did, selling well and garnering much critical praise.

Green continued to write throughout the war. *Loving*, his fifth and possibly best-known novel, appeared in 1945. Its setting was wartime Ireland, in an opulent castle owned by English gentry and staffed by English servants. The threat of German invasion hangs over the place and is responsible for much of its comic anarchy; the high jinks include upper-class adultery, pilfering servants and brattish children (one of whom strangles a castle peacock). The novel’s central concern (if any of Green’s novels can be dissected in such a way) is the variety of human relationships, the manifold forms of loving. Its principal character is a despotic butler who has an affair with a young chamber-maid and eventually elopes to England. Some years later Green explained the book’s origins:

> I got the idea of *Loving* from a manservant in the Fire Service during the war. He was serving with me in the ranks and he told me he had once asked the elderly butler who was over him what the old boy most liked in the world. The reply was: “Lying in bed on a summer morning, with the window open, listening to the church bells, eating buttered toast with cunty fingers.” I saw the book in a flash.26

This was how Green’s novels seemed to come to him – as situation, rather than as story. Fiction of this kind is not driven by plot but by a fondness for the enigmas of everyday existence. However virtuosic or experimental its style, the result was very much a form of realism, as John Updike liked to point out.27

One enigma that constantly occupied Green was the unreliability of memory. In *Back*, the last of his wartime books, the remembrance of things past becomes a kind of madness. The novel’s main character is Charley Summers, a returned soldier who has just spent several years in a German prisoner-of-war camp (the title is intended to suggest his repatriation, as well as the pitfalls of memory). War has left its terrible mark on

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26  Again, this is from his *Paris Review* interview; see *Surviving*, p. 243.
Charley – he lost a leg during the early months of fighting and appears to be suffering from some sort of shell-shock that often renders him speechless. Charley hobbles his way through the novel in a daze of grief, mourning an old girlfriend who died while he was being held prisoner. This woman’s name was Rose and the everyday use of that word – such as a banal comment that “prices rose” – torments the neurotic Charley. But, through a series of coincidences, he meets and falls in love with Rose’s half-sister, Nancy. Their relationship is complicated, to say the least, by Charley’s delusions about her identity – he refuses to believe that Rose is dead and instead surmises that she has amnesia and is passing herself off as Nancy. For all its sadness, *Back* is probably the most hopeful of Green’s books. With great tenderness, Nancy eventually comes to accept Charley for the burnt-out case that he is. In the final scene, she takes him to bed, where he tearfully calls out “Rose” once more; but Nancy, we are told, “knew what she had taken on”.

After the war, Green once again became closely involved in the family business. Still, he managed to find time for writing (even at parties, he would wander off into a corner and start scribbling away in his notebook). His friend, the novelist Anthony Powell, speculated that this gave his life a double character – that of the artist as businessman. Concluding, his seventh novel, was published in 1948. It is a significant departure from his earlier work, being set in a dystopian England during the early years of the twenty-first century. The protagonist is a septuagenarian scientist called Mr Rock, famous for making some important discovery many years ago (though the precise nature of this is never explained). Now he is deaf and decrepit, living quietly in a cottage on the grounds of a state-run training institute; most of the tension in the novel comes from his hostile relationship with the institute’s authoritarian director. Rock’s days are mainly spent caring for his pets – a goose, a pig and a beloved Persian cat (Green’s writing is so full of imperious felines that he must surely rank among the great ailurophiles of modern fiction). But the director is scheming to evict him from his cottage. To do so, she tries to manipulate his highly-strung grand-daughter, who has fallen in love with the school’s economics master. Like many of the romances in Green’s work, this affair is often described in comic terms:

[She] turned with a smile which was for him alone to let him take her, and helped his heart find hers by fastening her mouth on his as though she were an octopus that had lost its arms to the propellers of a tug, and had only its mouth now with which, in a world of the hunted, to hang on to wrecked spars.\(^{29}\)

The novel has no certain ending – it is unclear how the love affair will develop or whether Rock has staved off the threatened eviction. The title *Concluding* – another example of Green’s ambiguous gerunds – is perhaps meant to suggest the difficulties of making judgements about anything (it also implies Rock’s consciousness of his own impending death). Like so much of Green’s work, *Concluding* has many puzzles that are never explained. One of its first reviewers was Proust’s great biographer, George Painter, who praised the novel’s mysterious workings: “*Concluding* is unforgettable,” he wrote, “and not the least of its ambiguous charms is that the reader will never know just what it is he is unable to forget.”\(^{30}\)

*Concluding* was indeed a conclusion of sorts. In Green’s next two novels, there was a radical change of direction. *Nothing* and *Doting*, both published in the early 1950s, are satires on middle-class middle age; they consist almost entirely of dialogue – gone are the lush descriptions and painterly images of the earlier fiction. These last two novels were largely cut from the same grey cloth; they were not, so to speak, woven with a double thread. Reviewers criticised both books as representing something of a dead end. After their publication, Green fell silent. Alcohol no doubt played a large part in this. One of his friends compared him to F. Scott Fitzgerald: “He drank because he couldn’t write and he couldn’t write because he drank.”\(^{31}\) Like Mr Rock in *Concluding*, Green became a recluse. “Love your wife, love your cat and stay perfectly quiet,” he advised an interviewer in 1963.\(^{32}\) According to Anthony Powell, Green was deeply disappointed that his work had failed to acquire a wide readership.\(^{33}\) Though he claimed to be working on several projects – a play and a history of London’s fire service during the Blitz – nothing came to fruition. In the final decade of his life, Green seldom left the house.


\(^{30}\) Quoted in Treglown, p. 187.

\(^{31}\) Treglown, p. 252.

\(^{32}\) This was in an interview for *The Spectator*; see *Surviving*, p. 284.

\(^{33}\) *Infants of the Spring*, pp. 198–99.
After a long period of ill health, he succumbed to bronchial pneumonia in 1973, his pen having languished for over twenty years.

Doubting: Green, Criticism and Literary History

It is not socially embarrassing, Frank Kermode once suggested, to confess that one has never read any of Henry Green’s novels. This is because Green has always tended to be something of a coterie writer, forever lurking on the porch of renown’s temple. Not so long ago, the novelist Andrew O’Hagan summed up the state of play:

For some time now a whole new audience has been due to Henry Green. He is generally not part of the syllabus in English Studies at British universities, his books have been in and out of print, and there have been very few films made of his works. He is not discussed in the way Virginia Woolf or Evelyn Waugh are, though his best novels are more sonorous and more unexpected than the best of either.

Over the last eighty-odd years there has grown up a slim corpus of criticism devoted to Green’s fiction. But, more often than not, his name is absent from standard works of literary history. Indeed, it is only in the last decade that a full-length biography of him has been published. Nevertheless, the standing of his praisers has always been extraordinarily high – a short list would include the poet John Ashbery, the novelists Elizabeth Bowen and Nathalie Sarraute, and the all-rounders V.S. Pritchett and Tim Parks. Two academic monographs also merit particular mention. The first is Rod Mengham’s The Idiom of the Time, which appeared in 1982. Influenced by Freudian theory and Continental philosophy, Mengham argues that Green’s work is an exploration of the limits of knowledge, “animated by a composite idea involving optics and

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representation” – in short, that Green does his best to obstruct the vision of characters and readers alike.\(^{37}\) A different approach is taken in Michael North’s 1984 study, *Henry Green and the Writing of His Generation*, a detailed examination of the social contexts for English literature during the middle decades of the twentieth century. For North, Green’s central preoccupation was the conflict between the public and private dimensions of modern life.\(^{38}\) Both these studies acknowledge Green’s importance as a writer – in Mengham’s judgement, for “bringing a kind of leaven to the comparative inertness of the novel” or, in North’s terms, for seeking “to enlarge the space available to fiction”.\(^{39}\)

One reason why Green’s work might have received relatively little academic attention over the years is the difficulty in classifying it. Perhaps the most commonly used taxonomic label for his writing is that chimerical adjective, “modernist”. Sometimes this is used as a shorthand way of describing Green’s stylistic innovations – this, for instance, is the thrust of Giorgio Melchiori’s argument that Green’s method has much in common with modernist painting.\(^{40}\) The term can suggest a radical approach to content as well as form; one recent study contends that *Party Going* should be considered a modernist text because it promotes forms of cultural openness, helping to inaugurate a turn away from specifically English modes of insularity.\(^{41}\) “Modernism” has also been deployed as a marker of value, hitching Green’s wagon to an earlier literary tradition – James Wood does this with his claim that Green was one of “the last serious European modernists”, along with D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf.\(^{42}\)

The problem, though, is that the term “modernist” is a notoriously imprecise one. There has not been any dearth of commentators over the years expressing disquiet about


\(^{38}\) *Henry Green and the Writing of His Generation* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), pp. 10–12. (This work will hereinafter be cited as “North”.)

\(^{39}\) Mengham, p. viii; North, p. 216.


its vagueness or its over-determined nature.\footnote{See, for example, Richard Poirier, “The Difficulties of Modernism and the Modernism of Difficulty”, \textit{Critical Essays on American Modernism}, ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (New York: Hill, 1992), pp. 104–14. Poirier argues that “the very cult of modernism is in itself a demonstration of the arbitrariness and impertinence by which literary history is made and remade” (p. 106). Similar views can be found in several of the essays collected in \textit{Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900–1930}, ed. Lynne Hapgood and Nancy L. Paxton (London: Macmillan, 2000).} Part of this imprecision is chronological. Green presents some particular difficulties in that regard. Born in 1905, he might be considered a member of a different generation from the English writers who are usually counted as modernists, like Lawrence and Woolf. Nevertheless, he did begin publishing at the same time their novels were appearing – \textit{Blindness} came out in 1926, only four years after what is often thought of as modernism’s \textit{annus mirabilis}.\footnote{On 1922 as modernism’s apogee, see Michael North, \textit{Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern} (New York: Oxford UP, 1999). This was, of course, the year in which \textit{Ulysses} and \textit{The Waste Land} were first published.} To complicate matters even further, Green’s novels were still being published as late as the 1950s. Perhaps for this reason David Lodge has preferred to categorise him as a “postmodernist” along with Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and Anthony Powell. On Lodge’s analysis, the term “postmodernist” should be regarded as a specifically historical one, encompassing those novelists whose work was done in the wake of the so-called modernists, like Joyce or Woolf.\footnote{Consciousness and the Novel: Connected Essays (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 64.} Taking a somewhat different tack, Carol A. Wipf-Miller has argued that Green moved beyond modernism into what she calls “new realism” (a term that does not seem to have been taken up by other commentators). For Wipf-Miller, much of Green’s work turned away from the supposed formalist obsessions of modernism and “pursued an active and politicized engagement between life and art”.\footnote{“Fictions of ‘Going Over’: Henry Green and the New Realism”, \textit{Twentieth Century Literature} (1998) vol. 44, no. 2, p. 136.} The problem with this approach is that it also posits the existence (indeed, cultural dominance) of a monolithic modernism – a movement against which Green was assumed to be reacting.

However useful they might be for the broader perspectives of literary history, terms like “modernism” are of much less assistance to a style of criticism like that adopted here, one that seeks to pay close attention to matters of textual form and
The emphasis of the present study is not on contexts or classification, but on the peculiar qualities of Green’s fiction – on how his novels work as novels. Therein might lie another explanation for why his fiction has attracted comparatively little academic interest: it is essentially comic in nature. This was certainly the reason given by the critic James Hall as far back as 1957 for the scarcity of academic articles on Green: it is “a symptom”, Hall suggested, “of modern embarrassment in writing about comedy”.

This is arguably why it now seems so necessary to concentrate on the literary qualities of his novels – not just on their jokes, but on their whole fabric of sensuality, tenderness and grim psychology, all of it stitched together by the twin strands of voice and vision. It is necessary because, as the American critic Brooke Allen has suggested, every decade or so Green’s work must be introduced afresh to a new generation of readers.

There are two other matters that need to be mentioned. First, this is primarily a study of Green’s major novels and, as a result, will pay less attention to his short stories or his autobiography (even though some aspects of his work in these other genres did inform the writing of his best fiction). At this point, it also seems appropriate to clarify one particular matter of style (appropriate because Green himself was often obsessed with such matters). In these pages, there has been a conscious decision to use the first person plural. Naturally, this always begs the question of who “we” are. But here the usage has been adopted in the spirit recommended by the philosopher Bernard Williams – by invitation, not by fixed designation. To discourse on what “we” might discover in Green’s fiction seems a fitting gesture of inclusiveness – an over-optimistic gesture perhaps, but one made on behalf of a writer whose work deserves more readers than it presently has.

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47 For a defence of such an approach (and an implicit rejection of some historicist assumptions), see Frank Kermode, “Writing about Shakespeare”, London Review of Books (9 December 1999), vol. 21, no. 24, pp. 3–8.


CHAPTER ONE

Blindness (1926) and Living (1929)

In La Prisonnière, Proust’s Albertine suggests that all of Dostoevsky’s novels might be called The Story of a Crime.\(^1\) Something similar (and similarly extravagant) could be said of Green’s work, in that all of his fictions might be called The Story of a Blindness, since they always involve, metaphorically or otherwise, a kind of visual failure. This can be seen with “Adventure in a Room”, a story from the threshold of Green’s writing career, begun while he was still at Eton and finished some time in 1923.\(^2\)

The story’s unnamed principal character has attended a public school (anagrammatically called “Note”) and is accidentally blinded when a child throws a stone at the railway carriage in which he is travelling: “The stone hit the window, which flew into slivers of razor-sharp glass, which, in their turn, buried themselves with extreme speed in his face” (p. 7). The injured boy is sent home to his family’s rural estate (which sounds a lot like Forthampton, the country house where Green grew up). In this isolated environment, the boy comes to believe that “blindness has its compensations” (p. 8). At times he seems to experience a new order of consciousness, entering “a world of suggestiveness, of delicate, fragile hints of things” (p. 8). The story distinguishes between speech and other sound: “birdsong was revealed to his delicacy of hearing as something really exquisite” whereas “[s]peech he considered harsh and unnecessary” (p. 8). The boy is also visited by terrifying dreams in which his toys and figurines come to life and taunt him. In a moment of abject gloom (“he had lost faith in himself and in all mankind”), he is captivated by the song of a blackbird which “dissolved all the troubles of the world, instantly” (p. 11). But this song is interrupted by the whistling of a delivery man: “the blackbird, of course, flew away out of hearing of such cacophony”. This incident enables the blind hero to recognise his artistic vocation:

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2. The story appears in *Surviving*, pp. 6–13 (all subsequent references will appear parenthetically in this paragraph); it remained unpublished during Green’s lifetime.
He was exasperated into a desperate striving after the beautiful. ... The world was now trying to take away his music, to roughen, to cynicise him with its constant irritations. And he, with his infinite romanticism, resisted it, passionately. He was forced into some sort of definite action, for in inaction he knew there was despair. So he determined that he would teach himself to whistle, whistle that he might talk with his birds, and that he might express all that was in him unexpressed, all the longings, the doubt, the fears. (p. 12)

He begins to practise his strange wordless art until it “attained to as near perfection as possible” (p. 13). In a further dream, his dolls and toys show their contrition and congratulate him for his sublime whistling. The story ends on this triumphant note: “As he woke up a blackbird was welcoming the dawn. He was a man, now” (13). On the face of it, the boy has succeeded in transforming himself into an artist (though some might demur about whistling as a mode of artistic praxis).

The story is clearly a fantasy, styled as an “adventure” and incorporating strange oneiric elements. Of course, it is also the precursor to Green’s 1926 novel Blindness, in which the schoolboy John Haye loses his sight in similar circumstances.3 (“One would love to know,” John Updike once mused, “what incident gave Green his fantasy of blindness”).4 This sudden loss of sight is the beginning of a tension between voice and vision that will occur again many times in Green’s writing. Blindness is devastatingly real for the schoolboy characters in both the story and novel, but in Green’s later work the impediments to vision are metaphorical, or they take more mundane forms like wearing a blindfold or averting one’s eyes. In any event, visual failure of one sort or another is a hallmark of his writing from first to last – so much so that it might even be called an authorial signature. For the critic Michael Wood, this idea of signature connotes an author’s distinctive habits, both stylistic and thematic, that make a text immediately identifiable as the product of that particular author.5 “Adventure in a Room” also introduces another of these signatures, the rapturous power of voice. The story’s

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3 Blindness (1926; repr. London: Hogarth, 1977). All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text of this chapter.
5 Wood uses the term “signature” in relation to the thematic preoccupations and linguistic continuities of Nabokov’s fiction: The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction (London: Pimlico, 1994), pp. 23–27. For reasons not germane here, Wood contrasts his idea of signature with a more limited notion of style.
schoolboy hero is by no means the last of Green’s characters to be transported on the wings of song. Here the vocal enchantment is avian in origin, but in later works the singers might be foundry workers or football fans or night club performers. What is remarkable is that this preoccupation – this signature – can be found in a story written in *limine*, while the author was himself a schoolboy. Green chose to use a pseudonym for the duration of his literary career, but even at the outset his writing was strongly, individually, “signed”.

**Unseeing: The Sensory Conflict of Blindness**

*Blindness* begins before John Haye’s accident. The hero is still at school (this time called “Noat”), keeping a diary in which he records both his literary obsessions and his sense of estrangement. “What a force books are!” he insists (p. 34). He has a particular fondness for what he calls “the most dreadful, awful, supremely great book,” *Crime and Punishment*: “it cuts one open, tragedy after tragedy, like a chariot with knives on the wheels” (p. 33). Dostoevsky is accordingly lauded as an exemplary figure: “an amazing man … with his epileptic fits which were much the same as visions really” (p. 33). Haye also declares himself “an absolute slave” to Gogol and copies into his diary a lyrical passage from *Dead Souls*:

> But surely this is most beautiful:

> *The trills of a lark fall drop by drop down an unseen aery ladder, and the calls of the cranes, floating by in a long string, like the ringing notes of silver bugles, resound in the void of melodiously vibrating ether.*

He is a poet: and his book is in very truth a poem. It is Gogol. (pp. 25–26)

Haye fantasises a glorious future for himself as “the English Anatole France” (p. 16), a veritable “Napoleon of literature” (p. 26). But, even at this idealistic stage, he is troubled about his own literary ambitions. When one of his stories is accepted for publication in the school magazine, he admits that “there is a sense of degradation
attached to appearing in print” (p. 24) and the “paltry humour” of the story is said to “sicken” him (p. 29); later he records how he is bogged down in his efforts to write a play (p. 33). This seems to be part of a more general doubt about the value of any form of art in the modern world. Noting that music could now be “composed by scientific formulae” and that painting was being superseded by the camera, Haye laments that “[r]omanticism, all spiritual greatness, is going” (p. 29).

These misgivings are, of course, soon complicated by his terrible injury. In a move typical of Green’s obliquity, the railway carriage accident occurs off-stage and is only revealed by some brief correspondence between two of Haye’s school-friends. The unfortunate victim (who is not only blinded but horribly disfigured by the shattered glass) begins his new life as an invalid at Barwood, the large country house owned by his family (again, this is clearly modelled on Forthampton, Green’s ancestral home at Tewkesbury in Gloucestershire). Here he is cared for by his kindly step-mother, his old nanny and a retinue of servants (his father and natural mother are long dead and he has no siblings). Haye bears his misfortune with considerable stoicism. “One must not slobber, sentimentality was intolerable,” he counsels himself (p. 50). Indeed, he quickly develops a dread of excessive “sentimentality”, especially as it is manifested in the cloying sympathy of his nanny. But he is consoled by the idea that “[like] all blind men, he would do everything by touch and would have tremendous powers of hearing” (p. 58). And his literary ambitions remain undiminished, as he continues to believe that he is “infinitely superior to the common ruck” (p. 58).

In his study of the cultural contexts of Green’s work, Michael North cites Blindness as a leading example of what he calls “the literature of debility”. Many of the male writers who began their careers in the 1920s, North argues, felt a lingering guilt about not having served in the Great War. As a result, these writers tended to characterise their art as a struggle against some physical handicap, “identify[ing] the beginning of a literary career with an accident or illness that brings normal, everyday life to an end”. But an equally powerful context for Green’s novel was fiction that sought to explore modes of consciousness. At Oxford, Green began reading Proust and this was to have a decisive effect on his own novel. There are also some close parallels between

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6 North, p. 27.
Blindness and “The Blind Man”, a story by D.H. Lawrence first published in 1919 (and one not discussed by Michael North). The hero of Lawrence’s story is Maurice Pervin, a war veteran who had been blinded and disfigured while fighting in Flanders. Though suffering from occasional bouts of depression, Pervin is said not to regret his loss of sight: “a certain exultance swelled his soul” in his newfound intimacy with the sticks and stones of the real world.\textsuperscript{7} Lawrence’s story cannot really be regarded as one of Michael North’s fictions of debility; it is more a study of the psychological and sexual effects of blindness, especially in Pervin’s relationship with his wife. By the same token, Green’s Haye also insists that blindness is not so catastrophic, though he acknowledges the perils of romanticising the heightened capacity of his other senses:

There was so much to find out, and, in a sense, so much to discover for others, for when one was blind one understood differently. A whole set of new values had arisen. And being blind did not hurt so long as one did not try to see in terms of sight what one touched or heard. (p. 151)

[S]ight was not really necessary; the values of everything changed, that was all. There was so much in the wind, in the feel of the air, in the sounds that Nature lent one for a little, only to take away again. Or was there nothing in all these? (p.158)

Haye assures himself that blindness entails a different order of consciousness: “when one was blind,” he decides, “one understands differently” (p. 151). Not surprisingly, he begins to develop an acute aural sensitivity (and here it is worth noting that Green prepared for the writing of the novel by walking around the garden at Forthampton wearing a blindfold).\textsuperscript{8} Some of the finest things in Blindness are the descriptions of natural sound, many of which tend to emphasise the special powers of Haye’s listening: the air is said to be “full of messages” (pp. 132–33) and the trees make “sly noises” that are barely audible to anyone but the blind man (p. 184). Indeed, the novel might even be called Rousseauistic in its preference for the dynamics of sound over the stasis of imagery.\textsuperscript{9} Like the hero of “Adventure in a Room”, Haye is often enraptured

\textsuperscript{8} Treglown, p. 40.
by the birdsong he hears around him (pp. 80, 87). But he is also wary about exaggerating the pleasures of melodious nature:

It was … charming to think of the trees as being in conspiracy with the birds to make life more endurable, but of course they weren’t. One lived, that was all, and at times one lived more than at other times. But they were charming illusions, and they became real if you believed them. (p. 161)

As has already been pointed out, Green’s fiction has various moments of aural intensity and sometimes these have an avian source. But the scenes of wondrous birdsong in *Blindness* are tempered by a powerful anti-pastoral sentiment; one chapter full of sumptuous descriptions of the countryside is ironically entitled “Picture Postcardism”. Haye certainly delights in Barwood’s soundscape, but he detests rural society for its tedium and small-mindedness. After his accident, he dreads being confined to this semi-feudal world of parish fetes and farmerly bickerings: “The life of the century was in the towns, he had meant to go there to write books, and now he was imprisoned in a rudimentary part of life” (p. 89). *Blindness* makes much use of this opposition between city and country – perhaps a further trace of Proust’s considerable influence.¹⁰

Haye’s heightened aurality is not limited to the noise-making of nature but also entails a greater attention to the subtleties of the human voice, ranging from the echoes of the choir in the local church (p. 150) to the roaring crowd of a distant football match (p. 203). “Voices had become his great interest,” it is explicitly acknowledged at one point (p. 149). The novel makes much use of vocal attributes, especially to represent the consciousness of different characters. There are, for instance, several rambling interior monologues by Haye’s step-mother about the problems of managing the Barwood estate (pp. 67–72, 77–80, 213–14); these are marked out by her upper-class idiom and her habit of dropping g’s.¹¹ This technique also gives the reader access to the minds of minor

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¹¹ Mrs Haye’s diction is probably modelled on that of Green’s mother; see Treglown, p. 9. The dropping of g’s was once a feature of rural upper-class pronunciation in southern England; see David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), p. 39.
characters like Haye’s adoring nanny, who constantly frets about his dim prospects for love throughout a ten-page monologue:

She had seen him grow up right from the beginning. And he had gone blind—it couldn’t have been worse!—so that now he could never have a good time with the young ladies or nothing, poor Master Johnnie! (p. 169)

Would he marry now? And would a young lady want to marry a blind young man? Ah, but if they knew her Master John of course they would. She ought to know him, she had known him longer than anyone now, and he was so good and kind-hearted even if he was a bit rough at times, but then all young people were like that. She would like to see [him have children] but she might go off at any minute, the doctor said so, it was her heart, she wouldn’t last on to see him. (p. 172)

There is a particular pathos to these wayward monologues (what the critic James Wood has in another context called “mental safaris”). They are at once comic and touching, especially in their effort to show how an old woman like the nanny might worry about her own mortality:

And the cough was getting worse, it wouldn’t go till it had killed her. But Mrs. Haye would give her a fine funeral with a stone which would have an angel on it maybe. Beautiful she always thought they looked, them tombstones as had angels on ’em. (p. 174)

Thought is perhaps seldom like this – verbalised into sentences, a lecture delivered by the self to the self. (“We think not in words but in shadows of words,” Vladimir Nabokov once said.) But this is how Green shows consciousness at work, using a method not dissimilar from that of *Mrs Dalloway*, published only a year before. What is especially striking about the interior monologues of *Blindness* is the discursive liberty that the author gives to his characters. The nanny’s speculation about her own death (complete with an angel-topped headstone) is an early example of Green’s preparedness to allow his characters the freedom to fabulate.

Haye’s nanny is right to worry about his prospects for love. As well as being a kind of *Künstlerroman*, *Blindness* is also a novel of sexual awakening. Haye’s stepmother is also anxious on this score:

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It was so terrible, he would never marry now, she would have no grandchildren. The place would be sold, the name would die, there was no one. … He would not meet any nice girls now, he could never marry. A girl would not want to marry a blind man. All her dreams were gone, of his marrying, of her going up to live in the Dower House—that was why the Evanses had it on a short lease. She would have made friends with his wife and would have shown her how to run everything. His wife would have made changes in the house, of course, and it would have been sad seeing the place different; but then the grandchildren, and he would have made such a good father. Why was it taken away quite suddenly like this? But then they might still find some girl who had had a story, or who was unhappy at home, who would be glad, who would not be quite—but who would do. He must marry. (p. 71)

It is almost as if Mrs Haye and the nanny had been reading Freud’s essay on the uncanny where blindness is equated with what is there called a castration complex. But hope is at hand for Haye in the form of Joan Entwhistle, the daughter of a local defrocked priest. As Mrs Haye predicted, Joan has a “story” – she lives in poverty with her alcoholic father, whose violent physical abuse has scarred her face. Haye begins walking out with Joan, much to the chagrin of his nanny (who thinks of the girl as a “hussy”: p. 170). Intimate details are exchanged: Joan admits her father’s abuse (p. 196), while Haye discloses his ambition to write. Joan, however, realises the improbability of Haye’s literary plans, observing that “it would be so difficult when one could not see the page” (p. 191). Obliquely, it is revealed that they become lovers (p. 200), but their affair is to be short-lived. Haye tells Joan of his intention to leave the country in order to pursue a literary career in London; they discuss the possibility of Joan accompanying him but recognise that this will never happen. With regret on both sides, they agree to part.

Not surprisingly, what had first attracted Haye to Joan was the “eager note” in her voice (p. 149). But literature also plays its part in his idealisation of her (with the help of an authorial nod to Proust):

So that they would go for walks together, and he would get her to lead him to the top of Swan’s Wood to look upon the view there and listen to her eager voice. …

… A wind would come down to wreath rings about them—how lyrical! But [Joan] would be so charming; she must be, and she had such strong hands. Besides, her voice was lovely; there was something wild in

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it and something asleep there as well, as if she too had lived alone and had many things to tell. (p. 152)

From the outset Haye acknowledges that Joan “was an illusion – a lovely one” (p. 159). It is not long before he is complimenting the girl on having “lovely blue” eyes – though they are, in fact, dark brown (pp. 181–82). Haye also insists on calling her “June” because she reminds him of that summery month: “I think June is such a lovely name, so much nicer than Joan” (p. 163). Jeremy Treglown has suggested that Haye attempts to appropriate Joan by using a name of his own choosing. But perhaps the matter is more complicated than that. As will be seen, Green’s characters often worry about onomastics. For many of them, the act of naming is more an exercise of imagination than an exercise of power. Haye, for instance, notes the fluidity of the names we give to colours, flowers and birds (pp. 86, 178); later he concedes that his use of “June” is both arbitrary and transitory (p. 204). To some extent, Joan seems to share this attitude – she calls her male cat by a female name, apparently because her ailurophobic father irrationally categorises all cats as female (p. 196). This blurring of names points to some of the matters that will continue to occupy Green over the course of his literary career – the tension between appearance and reality, the uncertainty of identity, the motif of doubling. Haye’s invention of “June” must be seen against this background. It is only when the lovers part for good that he reverts to her true name: “Good-bye, Joan,” he says (p. 205).

At one point, Haye’s fantastic construction of Joan/June includes a romanticised view of her poverty:

“It must be wonderful to be poor.”
“How do you mean? You’ve never been poor in all your life. So how can you tell?”
“But poor people are always much happier than rich people on the cinema. The cinema used to be the only way I had to see life.”
“But what do you think of scrubbing floors all day, and of cooking food, and of having to look after your father who is ill, and all that?”
“Is he ill, June?”
“Yes, at least he thinks he is.”
“I’m sorry. But you won’t always be poor?”
“As far as I can see.”

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15 Treglown, p. 58. Michael North is of a similar view, suggesting that Haye “consciously forces Joan to become a fictional character acting out a plot of his own invention” (p. 20).
“But one day a fairy prince may spirit you away to a place of luxury. Think of it.”
“Gracious, no! Why should he?”
“He would have every inducement. These things often happen, you know, here and there.”
“I don’t think so.” (p. 183)

In a suggestive reading, Rod Mengham has argued that Joan functions as Haye’s virtual Doppelgänger. Certainly, there are resemblances – they have both suffered facial scarring and their names are eerily consonant (John/Joan/June). But Joan is hard-headed where Haye is a fantasist. Twice she tells herself that “dreaming never did anyone any good” (pp. 102, 120); nor does she harbour any lofty notions about literature. A closer parallel to Haye is Joan’s father, the defrocked parson Entwhistle. Like Haye, Entwhistle is a writer manqué. (His name itself seems to inscribe the virtuosic whistling by the artist-protagonist of the earlier story, “Adventure in a Room”.) Just as Haye craves literary fame, Entwhistle dreams of writing a “great book … that would bring him recognition at last, perhaps even a letter from the Bishop” (p. 111). But, of course, Entwhistle never puts pen to paper. Joan tells Haye that her father is “a poet an’ imagines things”, though she immediately clarifies this description by admitting that “he doesn’t write, but he talks beautiful” (pp. 183–84). These words could just as easily be applied to her blind lover.

Haye is eager to leave the country life at Barwood so that he might pursue a literary career in London. He explains this to Joan as their affair is ending:

“Oh, to be in a town again, to hear a barrel-organ, for instance, across the street through gaps in the traffic! And all the rush there, and the thousands of people. I’d give anything to be there and just listen, so much would be going on …” (p. 200)

Mrs Haye has far less confidence in her stepson’s prospects as a writer. In a conversation with her friend, an upper-class neighbour called Mabel, she twice refers to Haye’s writing as a “hobby”:

16 Mengham, p. 8.
17 For instance, Joan recognises the contrived nature of the bodice-ripping fiction she prefers (p. 138) and does not share her lover’s veneration of poetry (p. 180).
“But he seems to think that one can’t write books in the country. Though all the books that you and I used to read, Mabel, like Jane Austen, were written about the country. Still, he thinks that he can’t, and I have always told him to try, but it must be so different when one is blind. So what he wants is to go away, Mabel, that is what it all comes to.” (p. 219)

Mabel is aghast at the idea of the Hayes’ moving to London and adds a word of caution about the acoustics of that city: “think of the noise,” she counsels (p. 219). But Mrs Haye falls in with her stepson’s wishes and sells Barwood. Haye is overjoyed: “Think of all that one would write when one got to London,” he assures himself, “great things were going to happen there” (p. 223). But London is not what he had hoped. The rooms in their town-house are stuffy and reek of cut flowers (a reversal, perhaps, of the idyllic garden at Barwood). He begins to feel “too lost, too tired to raise his head above the clatter of the street” (p. 239). Though he enjoins himself to write, he takes no practical steps to do so. Instead, he constantly despairs about the urban soundscape – the “frightful” noise of the traffic (p. 241) and the “thudding” of barrel-organs (p. 243).

The novel ends with an ambiguous aural episode. One day Haye hears some nearby church bells and is seized by “a wild joy”: “he loved bells and, inexpressibly happy, he was swept back to Barwood and June” (p. 249). Like the schoolboy hero of “Adventure in a Room”, Haye is enraptured by a sound (though not, on this occasion, by a voice). However, any suggestion of romanticism is almost immediately undercut – it is, in fact, the onset of Haye’s first epileptic fit. His step-mother calls out to him in an attempt to bring him round, but the boy feels that he is soaring through the air:

He was rising through the mist, blown on a gust of love, lifting up, straining at a white light that he would bathe in. He half rose.

“John!”

And when he bathed there he would know all, why he was blind, why life had been so to him. He was nearer. To rise on this love, how wonderful to rise on this love. He was near now.

“John!”

A ladder, bring a ladder. In his ears his own voice cried loudly, and a deeper blindness closed in upon him. (pp. 252–53)

The ladder his semi-consciousness mind demands must surely refer to the “aery ladder” made by the trilling larks in Dead Souls – this was the passage that Haye had copied into his diary while still at Noat. In these final pages of the novel, it is almost as if Haye is reviving all of his old literary enthusiasms. Epilepsy is, of course, also the malady
suffered by Dostoevsky, one of the other literary heroes of his diary. Following this scene, the novel ends with a letter Haye writes (or, presumably, dictates) to one of his former school friends:

"Dear B. G.

"They tell me I have had some sort of a fit, but it has passed now. Apparently my father was liable to them, so that anyway I have one behind me after this. But it is so divine to be in London again near to you, and with the sun shining down on me as I lie in bed as if it had never shone before, while underneath, in the street, the traffic glides past in busy vibrations, I am so happy to be in the centre of things again, and to be alive. How stimulating a town is—but perhaps you think me silly. You have led such a different life to mine, I hardly know what you think or feel. Come round and look me up again, you know how I love talking. I have had a wonderful experience. I am going to settle down to writing now, I have a lot to tell. Mamma read me your article in the “New World” and it was wonderful—really, I mean, for that is not flattery. Why am I so happy today? Yrs, John. (p. 254)

There is, however, some considerable doubt as to whether Haye will in fact settle down to write. At the end of his seizure, it is said that “a deeper blindness” had closed in on him. The connection with the epilepsy of his long-dead father is also discouraging: Mr Haye was certainly no Dostoevsky in disguise, having been described by his wife as someone who “even found letter-writing almost impossible” (p. 218). On this basis, it is doubtful whether Haye’s fit actually unleashed his genius. The novel’s conclusion also raises some difficult questions about the nature of artistic experience. Blindness can be read as suggesting that the public and performative dimensions of literature – the sort of fame coveted by both Haye and Entwhistle – are somehow inauthentic. Paradoxically, what matters is the artistic nature of inner experience. Green’s later fiction will be full of characters who fabulate, telling elaborate stories to themselves or to anyone who might listen, but never actually becoming writers.

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18 Michael North believes that he does (p. 34); John Updike thinks otherwise: “Green Green”, Hugging the Shore, p. 329. The name “Haye” may itself encode artistic failure; for what is hay (“Haye”) if not dead grass, the opposite of green (“Green”)?
Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a revolution began taking place in the way literature looked. Advances in printing technology made it easier for authors to pay very close attention to how their words might appear on a page. This meant that texts could more readily assume radical forms; extreme examples of this could be found in the typographic experiments of the Russian Futurists and the English Vorticists. After the Great War, writers like Joyce continued this revolution of literary appearances: in the “Aeolus” chapter of *Ulysses*, for instance, the text is invaded by journalistic captions, while the “Ithaca” chapter ends with an over-sized full stop. New methods of typography assisted authors to maximize the ambiguity of their work. But readers of a novel are apt to feel something is wrong if they become puzzled by punctuation or if they begin noticing individual words as words. Such a sense of readerly disquiet might be thought of as falling within the purview of what the Russian Formalists called *ostraneniye*. This term, first used by Victor Shklovsky in 1917, literally means “making strange” and is usually translated as *defamiliarization*. For Shklovsky, art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object or composition; the purpose of any artistic creation is to make the audience (be they viewers, readers or listeners) notice the artifice on display and thereby abandon, even if only momentarily, their deeply ingrained habits of perception. Techniques of defamiliarization are by no means new (Shklovsky cites Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, with its textual squiggles and paragraphs of asterisks, as a classic example). But novelists of the early twentieth century seemed particularly attracted to methods of visual defamiliarization as a direct challenge to prevailing literary conventions.

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The textual oddities of *Living*, Green’s second novel, must be seen in this context. There is, for instance, the highly erratic punctuation – at times one has the impression that the book’s commas have been abducted. Arabic numerals are used throughout: “20 yards”, “6 weeks”, “2 hands” and so on (a quirk which is also found in Molly Bloom’s rambling monologue). Green also prefers the baroque spelling “syrens” for the hooters that regulate factory life (the word is a common one in the book). The novel’s gerundive title suggests a close relationship with the real world but the visual eccentricities of its pages constantly remind the reader of its fictionality. This is also the case with *Living*’s strange acoustics. The novel’s prose sounds like a blend of working-class idiom and Biblical orotundity: otiose constructions are common (“she thought in mind”); syntax is often inverted (“You were to him speaking”); and, as in some dialects of northern or western England, definite and indefinite articles are frequently omitted.

This sense of estrangement is obvious from *Living*’s first page. The novel begins like a documentary film, with a view of the city from above:

Bridesley, Birmingham.
Two o’clock. Thousands came back from dinner along streets.
“What we want is go, push,” said works manager to son of Mr. Dupret.
“What I say to them is—let’s get on with it, let’s get the stuff out.”
Thousands came back to factories they worked in from their dinners.
“I’m always at them but they know me. They know I’m a father and mother to them. If they’re in trouble they’ve but to come to me. And they turn out beautiful work, beautiful work. I’d do anything for ’em and they know it.”
Noise of lathes working began again in this factory. Hundreds went along road outside, men and girls. Some turned in to Dupret factory.

The first half of the novel has a sense of crowdedness about it, almost like a *tableau* done by Hogarth, with people jammed together in cinemas and pubs or simply walking around after knock-off time. The title gestures to this immersion in a hectic world – as Michael

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23 *Living* (London: Hogarth, 1929). All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text of this chapter.

24 Questions of literary influence are never an easy matter with Green; in an interview, he claimed not to have read *Ulysses* until after *Living* had been completed (*Surviving*, p. 246).

25 Treglown (p. 138) notices that Green also uses “syrens” in *Caught* and seems to regard this as a mis-spelling. In fact, the variant “syrens” appears throughout Green’s work – for instance, in *Back* (London: Hogarth, 1946), p. 35.
North has suggested, the expression of life as a present participle is both Green’s method and his theme. Perhaps as a result of this wide-angled perspective, there is no single dominant character in the first hundred or so pages. The works manager in the opening passage is Arthur Bridges, who has been in charge of the Dupret factory for many years. As his name implies, Bridges is something of an intermediary between management and the workers, having himself come up from the ranks of the foundrymen. But he is also a cantankerous fusspot, constantly feuding with all and sundry. In particular, he has to contend with Richard Dupret, the twenty-something son of the factory’s owner who has taken over the running of the company in his father’s absence. (The ageing Mr Dupret senior is said to have become “shaky” (p. 38) and eventually takes to his bed after “slipping on dog’s mess” (p. 56) and falling in the street.) Bridges resents Richard as the upstart usurper of the much-admired “Chief”. Like many of Green’s novels, there is an issue here of generational conflict, with the old (Bridges is sixty) lined up against the young. Bridges remains convinced that he is the only man capable of running the factory. “I’m father and mother to them”: he says these words twice in the novel (pp. 1, 148) as a declaration of what he sees as his special relationship with the working men. But they certainly do not share his view of things, referring to him as “’Tis ’Im” behind his back; like much else in the novel, this nickname is not really ever explained but it seems to refer to Bridges’ habit of sneaking up on the foundrymen while they are working (pp. 147, 158).

Like John Haye in Blindness, Bridges is an inveterate fantasist. In his mind, he is always fictionalising the world, even to the point of persuading himself about various implausibilities (not the least of which is his own virtue):

Later Mr. Bridges sat in chair in his office.

Mr. Bridges in his thinking and in most of his living was all theatre. Words were exciting to him, they made more words in him and wilder thinking.

Sometimes liquid metal foundrymen are pouring into moulding box will find hole in this, at the joint perhaps, and pour out. Sometimes stream of metal pouring out will fall on patch of wet sand or on cold iron, then it will shower out off in flying drops of liquid metal. To see this once or twice perhaps is exciting. But after twice, or once even, you just go to stop hole up where metal box is pouring.

North, p. 55.
So with Mr. Bridges.
You were to him speaking, and he began quietly answering, then, suddenly, he was acting, sincere in feeling, but acting, and words were out pouring, fine sentiments fine. At first you said, ‘fine old man’ in your mind, at last you were thinking only how to plug him. And with him this was not only with his talking, it was also in his silent thinking.

So in his thinking he thought now Mr. Dupret is dying. He thought how he’d worked 15 years for Mr. Dupret. ‘And never a cross word between us.’ He began now in his thinking. He made Mr. Dupret into angel beaming from sky, he saw Mrs. Dupret and all their servants weeping in front parlour. He saw slavey bring Mrs. Dupret cup of tea from kitchen, ‘from humblest to the highest’ he was saying in his thinking, without her ever having asked for a cup. He was seeing doctors, great surgeons going in and out of room where the Chief was lying. Inside he for life was fighting. Mr. Bridges thought then how all had to come to it, ‘great and small, King and navvy.’ He thought one day he would die, the wife would die.

And he thought then, sobering, he was too old to get another job and what would happen when young Dupret was head of business? And he couldn’t afford to retire, wife had made him spend all the salary, were hardly no savings. What would happen to them? But then he thought the Chief was sure to put someone older as partner to young chap, or adviser, or trustee. You couldn’t put kid like that at head of business, government wouldn’t allow it. No, he thought, forgetting grieving. (pp. 112–14)

The narrative voice in Living shares the Brummie idiom of its working-class characters. But the strangeness of the language in this passage seems to lie outside the patterns of idiomatic usage. There are, for instance, the multiple prepositions (“it will shower out off in flying drops of liquid metal”); the sinuous locutions (“You were to him speaking”, “words were out pouring, fine sentiments fine”); and the queer redundancies (“in his thinking he thought”). James Wood has pointed out that, though Green is often praised for his “ear” or “instinct” for speech, it is not realism, as such, that one is praising; the speechifying in Green, whether it is done by characters or narrators, is always more inventive than it would be in actual life.27 The result is an acoustic strangeness that, in Shklovsky’s terms, has the potential to change the habits of the reader’s perception.

Bridges is wildly inventive in this passage. For no good reason, he jumps to conclusions and makes things up (like the parade of surgeons attending the ailing Mr Dupret or the “slavey” handing Mrs Dupret a cup of tea). His reverie covers a good deal

of ground ranging from workplace gripes to his own inescapable mortality (shades of the nanny in *Blindness*), and ends with a consoling fiction – the possibility of an external authority (perhaps even the government!) intervening to restrain Richard Dupret from taking control of the company. There is also, in this interior monologue, an attempt to humanise time. Bridges’ narrativity is grounded in a sense of finitude: he refers back to the past (his memory of a supposedly congenial relationship with old Mr Dupret) and projects forward to the future (his presentiments of death, including his own). The passage is a moving one because our own patterns of thought will perhaps at some point resemble those of Mr Bridges. In consoling himself with a story, Bridges is performing one of the functions that we often look to novels to perform. Like the blinded John Haye, Bridges does not actually produce a work of art; rather, his creative endeavour lies within. In this respect, Edward Stokes is only half right in saying that there are few artist-figures in Green’s fiction; creativity, in Green’s world, does not connote the production of texts but rather the practice of spinning tales, either to others or to oneself.28

Green’s knowledge of working-class idioms expanded after he failed to take a degree at Oxford and began working on the floor of his father’s Birmingham factory. This was in 1927; he stayed for two years, lodging in boarding-houses with foundrymen and their families.29 During this time he developed a keen ear for the conversation of the working men; in *Pack My Bag*, he described them as “unsurpassed in the spoken word” (p. 241). But the contours of Green’s biography seem only a partial explanation for *Living*’s stylistic strangeness. The amplitude of the novel’s prose also has something of a scriptural quality about it, with its onrush of sentences and its obtrusive declamatory rhetoric: “At first you said ‘fine old man’ in your mind, at last you were thinking only how to plug him” (p. 113, emphasis added). More than any other of Green’s novels, *Living* uses repetition in a way that echoes the Hebrew Bible; the result – even when describing something as modern as a foundry’s production processes or a couple dozing on a train – is a style that sounds distinctively antique yet somehow vital:

Standing in foundry shop son of Mr. Dupret thought in mind and it seemed to him that these iron castings were beautiful and he reached out fingers to them, he touched them; he thought and only in machinery it seemed to him

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29 Treglown, pp. 63–67.
was savagery left now for in the country, in summer, trees were like sheep while here men created what you could touch, wild shapes, soft like silk, which would last and would be working in great factories, they made them with their hands. He felt more certain and he said to himself it was wild incidental beauty in these things where engineers had thought only of the use put to them. He thought, he declaimed to himself this was the life to lead, making useful things which were beautiful, and the gladness to make them, which you could touch … (pp. 6–7)

She put head on his shoulder, their hair whispered together, both had yellow hair. Train moved on now, smoothly, like water the land glided past outside. He rested his head on hers where it rested on his shoulder. So their heads inclined one to the other, so their breathing fell in one with the other, so they took breath together in one breath as they had been, once before in night. (p. 221)

This claim about the submerged biblical rhythms of Green’s prose might at first seem an eccentric one. Throughout his life, Green showed very little interest in religious matters. In his autobiography, he does record a brief religious mania he had at school, during which time he went so far as to write a sermon on the Apostle Peter.30 But this enthusiasm was very much an isolated event – towards the end of his life, Green declared in an interview that he had no beliefs of any kind.31 The scriptural echoes in his novels were more likely to have been acquired second-hand from his reading of the idiosyncratic works of that eminently strange Victorian, Charles Doughty. Green had been introduced to Doughty’s writing while at Oxford;32 in fact, Doughty was very much in the air during the 1920s, when his books were being read by the likes of Ezra Pound, W. H. Auden and Wyndham Lewis.33 None of these writers, however, was so admiring as Green who, in 1941, published a long essay called “Apologia” praising Doughty’s genius:

His style is mannered but he is too great a man to be hidden beneath it. It does not seem possible that future generations will be able to date one of his paragraphs, he seems so alone. His style is constant throughout, seems to be habitual, but, on analysis of this last, is found to vary with his subject. He is often obscure. He is always magnificent. (Surviving, p. 96)

31 Surviving, p. 284.
32 Treglown, pp. 51–52.
Doughty cultivated a highly original prose style, as Green was later to do. Born in 1843, he studied geology at Cambridge but later turned his attention to early English literature. After some years of desultory tourism (during which he managed to learn Arabic), he began an arduous journey through what is now Saudi Arabia. In 1888 he published *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, a two-volume account of this dangerous expedition. This monumental book was written, as T. E. Lawrence put it, “in a style which has apparently neither father nor son”; Doughty had come to despise Victorian English and sought a return to the language of Chaucer and Spenser. It is hard to pinpoint exactly how this strange work influenced Green’s writing; John Updike has suggested that it at least gave the young novelist a kind of “innovative courage”. What is important for present purposes is the degree to which Green was struck by the orality of *Arabia Deserta*, even speculating that Doughty intended the book to be read aloud. Some sense of this performative dimension is given by the book’s first sentence, when a Damascene friend asks Doughty about his harrowing expedition:

Tell me (said he), since thou art here again in the peace and assurance of Ullah, and whilst we walk, as in the former years, toward the new blossoming orchards, full of the sweet spring as the garden of God, what moved thee, or how couldst thou take such journeys into the fanatic Arabia?

One of the principal sources for the declamatory style of Doughty’s prose was the Bible, as Green noted in his essay “Apologia”. In particular, *Arabia Deserta* often imitates Hebrew poetic rhythms, both in its tendency to repetition and in the technique known as

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34 Charles Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921). This is the standard modern edition and, as can be seen from his comments on the book’s introduction, almost certainly the version that Green read.

35 Lawrence’s comment appears in his introduction to the 1921 edition of *Arabia Deserta* (vol. 1, p. 27). Doughty’s rejection of modern English is discussed by Anne Treneer (pp. 25–27).

36 Updike, “An Introduction to Three Novels by Henry Green”, *Hugging the Shore*, p. 316. In Michael North’s opinion, Doughty taught Green how to “resist the urge to make experience simple and intelligible, instead of crabbed and difficult” (p. 59). Rod Mengham makes little mention of Doughty’s influence (p. 16).

37 *Surviving*, p. 96.

“parallelism” (the juxtaposition of two halves of a sentence without the use of a connective).\textsuperscript{39} These strange cadences can often be found in \textit{Living}:

Griping sorrow was in void in him, but felt he could draw into him all winds of air for sympathy with him, that he must take hold on someone and clutch him so he would not go away and say all the sadness that was in his heart to him, and suck the sympathy back from that one. (p. 121)

Suddenly with loud raucous cry she rushed at the baby, and with clatter of wings all the pigeon lifted and flew away, she rushed at baby to kiss it. (p. 269)

But \textit{Arabia Deserta}’s influence on Green’s work was not just stylistic. In “Apologia”, Green pointed out that Doughty “makes no heroes of his Arabs, indeed he treats of them as treacherous, fanatical and light-headed”.\textsuperscript{40} In the same vein, Doughty declines to glorify any of his own achievements. The motivations of \textit{Arabia Deserta}’s narrator remain largely unexplained; the question about the purpose of his journey, posed in the book’s first sentence, is never really answered. Arriving in Jidda at the end of his trek, Doughty records no emotions; the last line of his long book simply reads: “On the morrow I was called to the open hospitality of the British Consulate”. Green was much impressed by this doughty attitude, observing that, even “at the end of one of the great journeys and great escapes of history”, this phlegmatic traveller had “no word of relief or even farewell”.\textsuperscript{41} In this respect, Doughty’s chronicle can be considered a departure from the various forms of “heroic” masculinity that circulated in Victorian culture.\textsuperscript{42} Such unembellished characterisation may also be aligned with that found in the Old Testament. Gabriel Josipovici has suggested that it is impossible to “sum up” or “make sense” of the characters in the Hebrew Bible; this position is to be contrasted with the psychologised forms of subjectivity developed in the New Testament, which were to exercise a


\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Surviving}, p. 96.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 91.

considerable influence on the realist novels of the late nineteenth century. Robert Alter makes a similar point in his analysis of biblical narrative, describing the conception of character in the Old Testament as “unpredictable, in some ways impenetrable, constantly emerging from and slipping back into a penumbra of ambiguity.”

This last description could also be applied to the characters of *Living*, especially the enigmatic Richard Dupret. He is first seen on the novel’s first page, touring the foundry with Mr Bridges; some seventy pages before the novel’s end, he simply disappears off-stage (with, as Green said of Doughty, “no word of relief or even farewell”). Dupret has an artistic sensibility, but he is also intellectually pretentious and opinionated. On his tour of the foundry, he astonishes Bridges by commenting on the “beautiful face” of one of the workers (p. 3); later he invokes Ruskin as he contemplates the aesthetics of iron castings (p. 7). Dining with his mother, he proclaims there to be “a kind of romance” about the foundry, insisting that the metal-work was “very moving” (p. 36). Such effusions sound false, even to the ears of Mrs Dupret, who evinces little interest in her son’s table-talk. Green is at pains to show that Dupret is actually unimaginative; any excursion into the young man’s consciousness is usually framed by his habit of nose-picking (pp. 30, 76, 110). Resentment clouds much of his thinking – he constantly moans about his dismal love life and is particularly bitter towards his tyrannical father: “Why, he said in mind, why could not the old man die?” (p. 110). These self-pitying monologues do not compare favourably with the wild theatre of Mr Bridges’ thinking.

In *Pack My Bag*, Green was to praise the vivid conversation of the Birmingham workers; the “great hilarity” of their story-telling (which he described as “unadulterated by literature”) easily surpassed the dull pomposities of the chatter he had heard at Oxford (pp. 241–43). Not surprisingly, Richard Dupret’s palaver usually falls into this latter class. His tour of the foundry is described by Tarver, the company’s draughtsman, in a conversation with the latter’s wife:

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45 On the autobiographical dimension of *Living*, see Treglown, pp. 79–81.
He had a lot of this educated jargon, I didn’t understand much of it, though I got a bit nearer to it than old Bridges. He went on about what a fine looking chap – beautiful, that’s the word he used – a man in the foundry was. I don’t know how an iron moulder can be beautiful but there you are.

(p. 80)

Mrs Tarver scornfully comments that Dupret “must be a dandy … if that’s all he thinks of in the works” (p. 80). Dandy or not, Dupret is just as awkward in dealing with members of his own class. At a posh party, his attempts to chat up a girl lead only to acute embarrassment, as if his words had erected “bastions around citadel of his personality” (p. 60). Throughout the novel, he continues to baffle others with his verbal gaucherie:

Mr Dupret sat alone with Bridges in his office. He was very calm, he hated all of them now in a bored way.

“Mr. Bridges,” said he, “we’ve got to have what the French call a little explanation.”

The Froggies, Mr. Bridges said in mind, nerves on edge, the Froggies what have they got to do with it damn ’em. (p. 179)

Dupret’s awkwardness seems directly related to his misanthropy. On one occasion, he denounces (at some length) the entire “loathsome” human race, noting that “they did not laugh at your jokes” (p. 62). It is worth remarking that this diatribe makes mention of a particular kind of linguistic failure – the tendency of Dupret’s jokes to fall flat. The philosopher Ted Cohen has suggested that jokes are “devices for inducing intimacy” – that is, for enabling the recognition of affinities between people. Consequently, the failure of a joke represents a threat, even if only momentarily, to one’s conception of a shared humanity. In this respect, Dupret is almost the polar opposite of Bridges. While the voluble Bridges fantasises himself as “father and mother” to the foundrymen, the tongue-tied Dupret seems incapable of any form of fellow-feeling. Early in the novel he speaks contemptuously of the “lower classes” (pp. 51–52); subsequent events do not appear to temper this view. But his opinion of his own privileged set is just as scornful: “Death, death, sackcloth and ashes,” he says to himself when recalling a dance he had recently attended (p. 76).

One afternoon Dupret becomes so fed up with workplace intrigues that he ventures out into the streets around the factory. As he walks, he broods on the aimlessness of proletarian life which he decides is even more futile than his own:

And what was in all this, he said as he was feeling now, or in any walk of life – you were born, you went to school, you worked, you married, you worked harder, you had children, you went on working, with a good deal of trouble your children grew up, then they married. What had you before you died? Grandchildren? The satisfaction of breeding the glorious Anglo Saxon breed? (p. 187)

On this walk, Dupret passes a local girl but, to his eyes, she is non-descript almost to the point of invisibility: “she was so like the others” (p. 188). Then, hearing the neighbourhood children at play, he shudders with a sense of foreboding: “they’ll work, they’ll marry, they’ll work harder, they’ll die” (p. 188). Dupret’s views on social life recall the bleak lines of Eliot’s “Sweeney Agonistes”: “That’s all the facts when you come to brass tacks. / Birth, and copulation, and death.”

But Dupret soon forgets about these larger social questions and resumes stewing over his own problems.

Most readers would surely disapprove of Dupret’s profound egocentrism. After a society girl rejects his amorous overtures, he begins to mope extravagantly, even going so far as to claim that any thought of the girl made him physically ill (p. 143). Later he meets her again at a dinner-party but is utterly tongue-tied in her presence. This results in another bout of melodramatic self-pity: “he moved off feeling if he could shoot himself he would” (p. 169). In this respect, Dupret might be said to be following in his father’s footsteps. When he takes to his bed after his fall, Mr Dupret senior simply decides to ignore the visitors to his sick-room, including members of his family (p. 91). In an effort to stimulate her husband’s recovery, Mrs Dupret arranges for a “well-known courtesan” to attend him, but even this is to no avail (p. 92). In one of the book’s most striking images, the ailing paterfamilias is likened to a submarine stuck fast on the ocean floor (p. 93). After a lifetime of sullenness, Dupret père’s final descent into silence is perhaps not surprising. His son later recognises that a similar sort of solitude will likely be his

\[47\] Early versions of “Sweeney Agonistes” were published in 1926 and 1927, some two years before Living appeared. It has also been pointed out that Dupret’s melancholic monologues sometimes echo The Waste Land: see Melchiori, The Tightrope Walkers, pp. 189–94.
own fate: on one of the last occasions he appears in the book, the younger Dupret resolves to adopt his father’s morose attitude of workaholic self-absorption (p. 170).

Words often fail the egotistical Dupret but he is not alone on that score. *Living* has what Seymour Chatman would call an overt narrator – one who is responsible for the novel’s diegesis, however much he might try to remain in the background.\(^4^8\) Sometimes this speaker can be lost for words and sometimes he will ramble nonsensically:

[C]louds were blown away or melted, *I don’t know*, only all of a sudden spring nodded from a clear sky … (p. 189, emphasis added)

What is a town then, how do I know? (p. 228)

[E]ach house had generally a mother and complacent father, procreation, breeding, this was only natural thing there is in that miserable thing home, natural to them because it was domesticated. Procreating was like having a dog, in particular spaniels. Fido who I’m so grateful to. Miserable people. (p. 228)

These moments are intended to give the illusion of orality. The novel often sounds like an anecdote, with the immediacy of improvised speech. It is for this reason that the narrator tends to use the same idiolect as the novel’s working-class characters. There is, for instance, an absence of articles in the narrated description of events:

Evening. Was spring. Heavy blue clouds stayed over above. In small back garden of villa small tree was with yellow buds. On table in back room daffodils, faded, were between ferns in a vase. (p. 11)

In morning Mr. Dupret came to office. (p. 96)

Young Mr. Dupret sat at bottom of garden down by where flowed river Thames. (p. 114)

In an interview Green explained this absence of articles as a desire to make the book “as taut and spare as possible, to fit the proletarian life I was then leading”.\(^4^9\) But at times the prose of *Living* is not so much taut as it is sprawling:

And Dale asked him why he went round with Tupe then and Mr. Gates said me never and Dale said he seen him and Joe Gates answered it might have been once. (p. 29)

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\(^4^9\) *Surviving*, p. 246.
But he was sincere in his thinking the old place wanted a rouser and in his thinking he was always building, always building in his thinking. (p. 57)

This sort of reiteration has a biblical ring to it – one that can also be heard in *Arabia Deserta*. The various techniques of repetition found in the Old Testament were, it seems, primarily designed to assist in its oral delivery. By adapting such techniques, the narrative mode of *Living* works hard to create an impression of orality – that is, an impression of a story-teller, rambling away inside the reader’s ear.

This foregrounding of an anecdotal narrative style diverges from the conventions of much realist fiction. Typically, a realist novel will attempt to avoid any reference to its own processes of telling, as the French structuralist critic Philippe Hamon has explained:

> Realist discourse, like pedagogic discourse, will in general reject reference to the process of articulation, and move instead towards a “transparent” writing dominated only by the transmission of information. This leads to what could be called a neutralization or a detonalisation of the message, that is to say, to a symmetrical absence of participation by author and reader.

*Living* presents an account of factory life that is anything but transparent. A narrator tells the story of the Dupret foundry, sometimes digressing and sometimes getting the facts muddled. This anecdotal quality is also suggested by various references to the temporal aspects of narration. “And now time is passing”: this sentence occurs twice in the novel (pp. 90, 260), emphasising that chronology governs not just the events being narrated but also the act of narration itself. “Now, as has been said,” announces the narrator at another point (p. 143); elsewhere a descriptive interlude is prefaced with the words, “Then, as we know …” (p. 167). By invoking the anteriority of what has already been narrated (“as has been said”, “as we know”), the narrator is attempting to bolster the credibility of this particular version of events, as any story-teller might.

The working-class girl ignored by Richard Dupret on his lunch-time walk through Birmingham is Lily Gates, the main character in the second half of the novel. Like Joan Entwhistle in *Blindness*, Lily is sincere and gentle and kind (women from poor backgrounds tend to be good-hearted in Green’s fiction). Lily is the daughter of Joe...

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50 Alter, pp. 90–93.
Gates, a loud-mouthed moulder at the Dupret factory; her mother is apparently long dead and there is no mention of any siblings. But unlike Joan in the earlier novel, Lily is full of illusions. Her flighty consciousness is often associated with birds on the wing (pp. 131–32, 205–06, 217) and at one point she is described as being “all dreams” (p. 161). This romantic outlook may be attributed in part to the influence of the cinema. Indeed, almost as soon as she appears in the novel, Lily is off to the movies, immersing herself in the tritest of celluloid love stories (pp. 15–16). As her movie-going suggests, Lily’s way of apprehending the world is overwhelmingly visual. In one scene, she looks down onto her neighbourhood from a nearby hill (thereby reprising the aerial shot of Birmingham that occurs in the opening pages):

She saw in feeling. She saw in every house was woman with her child. In all streets, in clumps, were children. Here factories were and more there, in clumps. She saw in her feeling, she saw men working there … And then all over town sound of hooters broke out. Men and women thickly came from, now together mixed, and they went like tongues along licking the streets. (p. 108)

But Lily rarely sees things without some kind of distortion; here the reader is alerted to the uncertainty of her observation by being twice told that she “saw in feeling”. It soon becomes apparent that this bird’s-eye view of the city is a figment of her dozing mind – she is eventually brought back to reality by her boyfriend’s kiss.

The house Lily lives in with her father is owned and presided over by Mr Craigan, an ageing moulder at the Dupret foundry. Having no family of his own, Craigan loves Lily like a daughter (p. 173). Lodging in the household is another Dupret employee, a young man called Jim Dale. Craigan tries to encourage a relationship between Dale and Lily, hoping that they will marry and eventually care for him in his dotage (pp. 77, 88, 161, 174). But Lily has other ideas. Bert Jones, also a Dupret foundryman, has begun to court her. Often the young couple go to the local movie-house together, providing further stimulation to the daydreams of the cineaste Lily. One afternoon she happens to see a black man on the street and this makes her recall an advertisement that had recently screened at the cinema promoting a brand of tea (the connection is merely the fact that

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52 In such an anfractuous novel, it is no surprise that Lily’s family circumstances are never really made explicit (see pp. 13, 94–95). Similarly, her age remains unclear, though it seems she is old enough to marry.
the advertisement had featured black-skinned women picking tea on a plantation). Lily then begins to fantasise about life in the tropics: “in images she saw in her heart sun countries, sun, and the infinite ease of warmth” (p. 128). The fantasy comes again when she is next at the movies:

This film was of the tropics and again as when she had seen that black man in the streets all her muscles softened under the influence of dreams and imagination of that warmth. She felt in her heart it must be a soft thing, not the cruel beating heat it is. (p. 160)

This typifies how Lily is often incapable of seeing the world as it is. Instead, she perceives things “in feeling” or “in her heart” (and here the narrator points out that her fantasy about the tropical climate falls far short of the truth). Embroidered throughout the novel is this opposition between appearance and reality, between personal fiction and social fact. Lily will not be the last of Green’s characters to live in a world of optical illusions.

Craigan, by contrast, is much more attuned to what he hears. Taciturn by nature, he frowns on Joe Gates for talking too much (p. 21) and reprimands a gossipy lad at the foundry for “tell[ing] tales” (p. 23). As a boy, Craigan had sung in a choir (p. 94) and now, as an old man, still enjoys the occasional concert (pp. 57–58). But chief among his pleasures is listening to the wireless, which he does “every night of the week except Mondays” (p. 54). Indeed, it could even be said that domestic order is maintained through his voice. At home, what he says, goes: Lily is not permitted to take a job (pp. 13, 17–18, 46, 77), the working men must be served “hot meals every night bar Fridays” (p. 209), windows must remain closed in the evenings (p. 160), and so on. But, unlike the Dupret ménage, Craigan is no tyrant. Rather, he is presented as a wholly benevolent character whose sense of family is paramount:

Home was sacred thing to him. Everything, his self-respect was built on home. If he had no home to go back into at evening then he would have to move to another town where none knew him. As it was shame for the Hebrew women to be barren so in his mind was it desolation not to have people about him in his house, though he had never married. (p. 153)

Nevertheless, Craigan’s is a house divided. Joe Gates has begun to drink heavily and makes no secret of his contempt for the old man. The good-natured lodger Jim Dale has become morose as a result of his thwarted love for Lily. Craigan himself is
increasingly conscious of his age and worries that the foundry will soon pension him off. He senses that his authority at home is waning, especially in his influence over his beloved Lily: “everything was slipping away from him” (p. 182). In desperation, he takes her aside and counsels her not to attach herself to the unreliable Bert Jones: “Love’s all right for them that ’as Rolls Royces,” he warns her, “but for the wives of working men it’s the money that comes in regular at the end of the week that tells” (p. 174). But the young couple have already started planning their escape, with Jones advocating a move to Canada (pp. 162–63). Out of the blue, Lily suggests they emigrate to the tropics and take jobs on a tea plantation: she “told him then of film she had seen” (p. 166), insisting that the tropical climate would be pleasantly warm (though the reader has already encountered the narrator’s view of its “cruel beating heat”). This is nothing more than fantasy, prompting Jones to call the girl a “crazyhead” (pp. 167, 175). But, like the nanny in Blindness, Lily’s desperate fantasies can be deeply moving. One of the signal achievements of Green’s fiction is his representation of the inner lives of people who might otherwise be considered unremarkable. In Living, the dreams and schemes of working-class characters like Arthur Bridges and Lily Gates are more affecting than the lugubrious ponderings of privileged snobs like Richard Dupret. It is little wonder that Evelyn Waugh told Green that he “liked the rich people parts [of the novel] less than the poor”.53

But there is more to Lily than pipedreams. At times she feels a deeper impulse that can only be described as maternal:

I am I, why do I do work of this house, unloved work, why but they cannot find other woman to do this work.

Why may I not have children, feed them with my milk? Why may I not kiss their eyes, lick their skin, softness to softness, why not I? I have no man, my work is for others, not for mine. (p. 109)

Lily thinks this as she lies alone in her bedroom, brooding over how she is unappreciated in the Craigan household. This longing for children is explicitly connected with her conception of identity and appears unrelated to any sense of affection she might have for Bert Jones. In short, motherhood provides Lily with what she believes is her only opportunity for self-assertion. When Richard Dupret takes his walk through the streets of

Birmingham, he shudders when he sees the local children at play; but, in the very same scene, Lily’s response is exactly the opposite: “I must have babies,” she exhorts herself (p. 188).

Change is in the offing for the Craigan household. After being caught in a downpour and then having to work all day in wet clothes, Craigan falls ill and takes to his bed (p. 172) – a similar fate to that of Mr Dupret senior. Then, in a shocking scene, the volatile Joe Gates strikes his daughter in the course of an argument about housekeeping money:

[Gates] said ever since Craigan had been sick he had felt a new man. He was the girl’s father, when she asked for a clout he’d give her one. What business was it of the old man’s he said if he had kicked his daughter where it would hurt her most, and that’s what he would do next time. He went and, greatly daring, he tried to drink all the money that night he had taken for a week’s work, thing he had not done since he was a lad. (p. 192)

When Lily reports her father’s violence to Bert Jones, the young couple resolve to leave Birmingham and elope. Their destination proves to be neither Canada nor the tropics, but Liverpool. Jones had assured Lily that his parents lived there; this, however, proves to be one of his many lies (he has not, in fact, heard from his family for several years). After a nerve-wracking train journey, the couple arrive in Liverpool with nowhere to go. They wander around aimlessly, looking for anyone who might remember Jones’s parents. Lily progressively becomes distraught, so much so that she seems to renounce her ocularcentrism and almost wills herself into a sort of blindness: “Well she just wouldn’t look any more if it only made her shivery” (p. 231). After hours of walking, Jones simply abandons the exhausted girl in the dark maze of Merseyside streets. This leads to one of the most poignant scenes in Green’s fiction – that of Lily clutching her meagre luggage, stranded in a city she does not know (p. 238).

Back in Birmingham, the Craigan household has disintegrated in Lily’s absence. Both Craigan and Joe Gates have been sacked by the Dupret factory on account of their age; in response, Gates goes on a bender and is arrested for public drunkenness (p. 211). Bereft over Lily’s departure, Jim Dale also decides to leave the house for good: “I’m not goin’ to stay ’ere when she’s gone,” he tells Craigan (p. 232). The old man has his own problems: as well as being sick and unemployed, he begins to blame himself for Lily’s
flight. But his guilt proves short-lived: after her abandonment by Jones, Lily has no choice but to return to Birmingham. “Dear heart,” Craigan gently comforts the tearful girl after she comes home, “don’t grieve so” (p. 239). When her sobbing subsides, Lily relates the sorry tale of her aborted elopement, though she extemporises a few details in order to show Jones in a better light. The narrator points out that Lily believes these minor embellishments as soon as she utters them (p. 244); in this respect, she is one of the many characters in Green’s work who are instantly persuaded by their own extemporaneous fictions. Eventually she confesses her regret at ever having gone away with Jones, but insists that their intentions had merely been “to better ourselves” (p. 245). This prompts a gentle rebuke from Craigan: “You were dreamin’,” he tells her, adding that “[n]othin’ dain’t ever come of dreams” (p. 245).

The following day Lily receives a visit from her neighbour, a young woman called Mrs Eames who is heavily pregnant with her second child. Lily suspects that Mrs Eames already knows about her aborted elopement with Jones and fears that this will soon become a topic of neighbourhood gossip. But in fact the pregnant woman has no interest whatsoever in the story of Lily’s adventure with Jones: “she was too full of her child which was due at any time now” (p. 245). Indeed, pregnancy seems to give Mrs Eames an air of superiority, though Lily misinterprets this as some sort of moral judgement on her own conduct. At this point the narrator intervenes to emphasise the difference between how things are and how we imagine them to be:

Is nothing wonderful in migrating birds but when we see them we become muddled in our feeling, we think it so romantic they should go so far, far. Is nothing wonderful in a woman carrying but Mrs Eames was muddled in her feeling by it. As these birds would go where so where would this child go? She thought this and Lily in her thinking now was simpler still, as she had done wrong so she had to suffer for it, thought she. Both sat intent, not saying anything now. Their relation one with the other was like 2 separate triangles. (p. 246)

Mrs Eames makes no attempt to answer her own enigmatic question and the narrative quickly moves on. When conversation resumes, she once again emphasises her complete indifference to Lily’s escapade with Jones: “I don’t want to ’ear, not now anyway, I got too much on my mind with [the baby] coming” (p. 247).
Yet curiously Mrs Eames’s question provides the novel with its epigraph (“As these birds would go where so where would this child go?”). In itself, this is highly unusual: epigraphs are almost always extra-textual in origin (such as the snippet of Petronius that prefaces The Waste Land or the slab of Pushkin that introduces The Possessed, to choose two of the countless examples). In Living, there is no acknowledgement that the source of its epigraph is actually one of its own characters (and a minor one at that) – even though it is likely that few readers would notice this fact. As with so much else in the novel, there is a faintly biblical ring to the phrasing of Mrs Eames’s question (perhaps because the word “where” is repeated for emphasis). Indeed, the question might be taken for some kind of parable, ripe for the reader’s analysis. What, then, should be made of this association of migratory birds with an unborn child’s destiny? Perhaps it is intended to imply the contrast between Lily’s flighty outlook (romance, elopement and so on) with the realism of the maternal Mrs Eames (though, as Giorgio Melchiori has pointed out, there are always risks in claiming Green’s fictive birds as symbols of anything).54 Perhaps Mrs Eames’s failure to answer her own question should be read as suggesting that the course of human lives is as unpredictable as birds on the wing; various characters throughout the novel are certainly buffeted by the winds of chance and uncertainty. Yet somehow these do not seem entirely satisfactory explanations. Epigraphs usually pose a question or present a theme that is subsequently illuminated by the text, but this is hardly the case with Living. The novel as a whole sheds almost no light on its epigraph; Mrs Eames’s question seems unanswerable. But such open-ended puzzlement conforms to Green’s view of literature as an art that does little to clarify the reality it seeks to describe.55

A kind of equilibrium is slowly restored to the Craigan household. Joe Gates returns after his release from the lock-up, unchastened but now lacking the money for any further binges at the pub. Craigan has become essentially bedridden and begins to dwell on the past: “he grew remote in the memory of his young days” (p. 255). In Green’s

54 Melchiori, pp. 192–93.
55 An unrelated scene earlier in the novel has another enigmatic question concerning birds. Richard Dupret, at a house party in the country, considers the similarities between looking at a woodcock and looking at a chandelier; for some mysterious reason, he decides that this is “a parable” with some special significance for his own chaotic love affair (pp. 137–38).
early fiction the processes of memory are often associated with listening: as has already
been noted, the bells of a London church seemed to play their part in stimulating John
Haye’s intense recollections of his life in the country at the end of Blindness. The past is
aural for Craigan as well – memory is said to have “enchanted him like noise of bells”
(p. 256). Lily begins to sit at the old man’s bedside. Occupied with caring for him and
other household duties, she at first seems content not to go out: “she was like anyone
getting better after long sickness” (p. 255). Michael North argues that this amounts to a
permanent withdrawal into a solipsistic state of “private convalescence”, but there is
ample evidence in the book’s final pages that Lily intends resuming her participation in
the wider world. One sign of this is that she begins to watch the vast pigeon flocks of
Birmingham from a bedroom window; she also starts listening to the sounds of Mrs
Eames’s newborn baby next door: “So day after day and slowly her feelings began to
waver too and to make expeditions away from herself, though like on a string” (p. 262).
When Craigan gives her money to go to the cinema, she is able to rediscover the
pleasures of the screen. Gradually her optimism returns: “Everything, so she felt, was
beginning for her again” (p. 267).

In the novel’s final scene, Lily decides to visit Mrs Eames. The two young
women go for a walk through the neighbourhood, taking Mrs Eames’s newborn with
them in a pram. The sight of the baby blowing bubbles “was moment of utter bliss for
[Lily]” (p. 268). On their walk they pass the house of a local pigeon fancier. Through
the strategic placement of grain, this man encourages his birds to alight on the hood of the
pram. The novel ends with Lily impulsively driving off these birds: “Suddenly with loud
raucous cry she rushed at the baby, and with clatter of wings all the pigeon lifted and flew
away, she rushed at the baby to kiss it” (p. 269). Lily’s actions here are another example
of the book’s many enigmas. Shooing away the birds might be thought to connote an
abandonment of her flighty romanticism in favour of the social and biological
imperatives of motherhood. But, as with Mrs Eames’s epigraphic question, the reader is
likely to remain puzzled by this strange conclusion to an unresolvedly strange text.

It seems fitting, however, that a novel called Living should end in medias res.
The reader can only speculate how the Craigan household might hold itself together or

56 North, p. 78.
whether Lily will one day satisfy her maternal longings. But the final ambiguous scene
does at least convey a sense that things will go on for the characters and that another
name for living is persisting. Continuity is, after all, one of the novel’s chief concerns.
Several of the characters are alert to the deep, inexorable currents of biology and
anthropology that run beneath the surface of everyday life. Craigan, for instance, holds
that the rhythms of work provide the only true sense of order in men’s lives (p. 204).
Similarly, Mrs Eames likes to present her motherhood as part of some timeless cycle of
fertility – at one point she purports to explain her desire to have children simply by
saying, “Because, because” (p. 25). Even the narrator will sometimes espouse grand
unities; in the middle of a scene describing Lily at the cinema, there is this interpolation
about a vast human commonness:

A great number were in cinema, many standing, battalions were in
 cinemas over all the country, young Mr Dupret was in a cinema, over
 above up into the sky their feeling panted up supported by each other’s
 feeling, away away, Europe and America, mass on mass their feeling
 united supporting, renewed their sky. (p. 59)

Living, in other words, has something of an epic aspect. Contemporary critics like
Walter Allen praised it for what was recognised as its realism, especially in its depiction
of the working-class. But the novel is not a document of les petits faits vrais of
proletarian life, or at least not primarily so; Green’s aesthetic intelligence is Proustian
rather than Balzacian. Coincidentally in the same year that Living was published, Walter
Benjamin’s celebrated essay on Proust appeared. As every reader knows, the great
subject of Proust’s novel was time. According to Benjamin, what mattered most about
La recherche was the highly convoluted nature of Proustian temporality – the epic sweep
of temps perdu hidden beneath the textures of quotidian experience. “We know that in
his work Proust did not describe a life as it actually was,” Benjamin wrote. Instead,
Proust drew on a range of devices – the mimicry of other voices, the shocks of mémoire
involontaire – to explore these interfoldings of past and present. Benjamin was to
elaborate on this theme in “The Storyteller”, his well-known essay about the work of

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Nikolai Leskov. The art of story, in his somewhat apocalyptic account, has largely disappeared in modern times. For Benjamin, this was a result of the rise of the novel, which is not concerned with storytelling so much as with the “dissemination of information”. As against the novel’s perplexing flood of information, story encapsulates oral wisdom and primordial experience; Leskov could still be considered a storyteller because his work was deeply rooted in Russian folkloric tradition. Benjamin regarded truth as a fundamentally acoustic phenomenon, so he praised writers like Leskov, Proust and Kafka for preserving the storyteller’s voice in their fictions. Frank Kermode has summarised Benjamin’s view in this way:

Story belongs to a time before the machine devalued human experience; being the communication of experience as authenticated counsel; it belongs to wisdom, which is truth in its epic aspect. ... Information, which is absent from story, is critical to the novel; and the greatest novelists, Kafka and Proust, achieve that greatness by finding ways to convert the novel into story, information into wisdom.

This is precisely what Green does in Living. Its very title gestures to the epic ambition of presenting “authenticated counsel” about experience in general; that is, it seeks to deal in untailored truths rather than doling out information. The cultivation of rhetorical strangeness is an important element in this. Living prizes repetition like the Hebrew scriptures; it wears the guise of an anecdote like Russian folktales; it offers up parables like the New Testament. Through such means, it becomes, in Benjamin’s terms, a story. As is obvious to any reader, Living swerves away from the conventions of realism. What Benjamin said of Proust applies equally here: in Living, everything transcends the norm. This Proustian comparison would probably have pleased Green. In Pack My Bag, he observed that Proust was essential reading for anyone who cared about literature; in the same passage, he recorded his delight at being told by an Oxford...

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60 Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, Illuminations, pp. 88–89. This essay was first published in 1936.
63 For a study of the anecdotal nature of the Russian folktales known as skaz, see Jeremy Hicks, Mikhail Zoshchenko and the Poetics of Skaz (Nottingham: Astra, 2000).
64 “The Image of Proust”, p. 197.
don that he resembled Charles Swann, though hastily adding that he was not himself a Jew (p. 210). Proust even makes an appearance of sorts in *Living* when the scatter-brained Mrs Dupret asks her sullen husband for advice about tipping the servants:

> The most absurd person of course was Proust, she said – her voice hazed with wonder. He had given enormous tips, big, huge, it was fantastic, she said sitting down by the bed, he had thought nothing of giving 200 francs to a waiter who brought his, his – well any little thing, but then he was not a gentleman she murmured, enviously almost. …

> Mr Dupret said Jews had brought the Continent to a ridiculous state with extravagant tipping, that was why he would never go abroad. (pp. 83–84)

One of Proust’s *bêtes noires* was the deadening effect of habit. “The greatness of true art,” his narrator claims in *Le temps retrouvé*, consists in revealing “that reality which lies far removed from the one in which we live”.65 In this respect, there is a connection with Shklovsky’s concept of *ostraneniye* and its insistence that art’s purpose is to startle people out of their enslavement to the familiar. Yet, in *Living*, literature can sometimes seem little more than a habit for the characters. Studying Ruskin, for instance, does nothing to diminish Richard Dupret’s shallow egocentrism. Craigan is said to read the works of Dickens “over and over again”; when Lily asks the old man if he ever reads anything else, he answers, “No, why should I?” (p. 55). On two occasions, Dickens does at least provide Craigan with a comfort of sorts – when he anxiously waits up for Lily to come home, he likes to rest a copy of *Little Dorrit* in his lap, though he does not attempt to read it (pp. 161, 207). But this is merely the consolation of a familiar talisman. Here, as elsewhere in Green’s fiction, books barely figure in the lives of the characters.

By contrast, voice in the novel can possess a special power not found in writing. One of *Living*’s most extraordinary scenes takes place in the foundry when a young worker called Arthur Jones suddenly bursts into song.66 The reason for this, it is later revealed, was the birth of his son the night before.

> He was Welsh and sang in Welsh. His voice had a great soft yell in it. It rose and rose and fell then rose again and, when the crane was quiet for a moment, then his voice came out from behind noise of the crane in

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65 *A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 4, p. 474. For the slightly different translation by Scott Moncrieff et al, see *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 6, *Time Regained*, p. 253.

66 This man is unrelated to Bert Jones; the shared last name is merely another instance of the doubling that is common throughout Green’s work.
passionate singing. Soon each one in this factory heard that Arthur had begun and, if he had 2 moments, came by iron foundry shop to listen. So all through that morning, as he went on, was a little group of men standing by door in the machine shop, always different men. (pp. 89–90)

The foundrymen are moved by the sound of Arthur’s voice, not by the meaning of his words; they ask him to sing in English but he continues, unintelligibly to them, in his own language. The singing lifts old Craigan’s spirits: “work seemed light to him this morning who had only 3 months before he got old age pension” (p. 90). Even the doltish Joe Gates begins to hum along to the tune. The lovelorn Jim Dale has a different reaction—he is so moved by the sorrowful beauty of Arthur’s singing that he walks off the job and goes for a drink. This is one of Green’s signatures—an Orphean moment of vocal enchantment. The Welsh song transports the working men to that other “reality” mentioned by Proust’s narrator; Arthur’s voice melts his listeners, just as the singing of Orpheus was said to move rocks and trees. (Indeed, the effect of the singing on Jim Dale is at one point likened to an acid dissolving a steel girder.) It is immaterial that the singer and his audience all work in a foundry, or that the song is an ephemeral one. In Green’s fiction, “the greatness of true art” is sometimes like that.
CHAPTER TWO

Party Going (1939)

The foundrymen of Living delight in the singing of Arthur Jones even though they cannot fathom any of the Welsh words of his song. There is a similar moment in Party Going.¹ In this novel, a group of well-off young people assemble at what is presumably Victoria Station in London, preparing to depart on the boat-train for a holiday in France. Their plans are thrown into disarray, however, when an impenetrable fog descends upon the city, resulting in the cancellation of all train services. One of the party is a nervy young woman called Julia Wray, who becomes especially intimidated by the crowds of commuters also stranded by the pea-souper. Julia’s party of rich young socialites are able to take rooms in the hotel that is built over the station, while the thousands of less fortunate travellers are compelled to wait on the concourse below in very cramped conditions. This spectacle of massed humanity terrifies Julia, especially when an ominous chant of “WE WANT TRAINS” starts up (the capital letters are Green’s). But her fears are later assuaged when some members of the crowd begin to sing:

If they had been angry individually at first at the delay, and at not being able to get in or out [of the station], they were now like sheep with golden tenor voices, so she was thinking, happily singing their troubles away and being good companions. What she could not tell was that those who were singing were Welshmen up for a match, and what they sang in Welsh was of the rape of a Druid’s silly daughter under one of Snowdon’s wilder mountains. She thought only they knew what it meant, but it sounded light-hearted. (p. 152)

As in Living, the unintelligibility of the song does not diminish the listener’s pleasure. Indeed, the fact that Julia cannot understand the words of these Welsh football fans is one of Party Going’s sinister jokes. Julia has a particular dread of the crowd breaking into the hotel and defiling any young women they find there; the notion that she derives comfort from a song about “the rape of a Druid’s silly daughter” is no doubt intended to be part of the novel’s dark comedy. Because the Welsh singing soothes Julia’s mind, she

¹ Party Going (London: Hogarth, 1939). All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text of this chapter.
begins to think of the crowd in different terms. Fifty pages later, she gazes down on the
crowded concourse again and is struck by what she now regards as a spectacle of ovine
docility (“they were so like sheep herded to be fold-driven”). According to Julia, this
docility is a matter of national character: “Dear good English people, she thought, who
never make trouble no matter how bad it is” (pp. 249–50). Of course, her view is well
wide of the mark (and not just because members of the crowd are Welsh rowdies, rather
than good English sheep). As is made clear in the opening pages, the crowds have a habit
of behaving badly whenever the station becomes fogbound – on a previous occasion,
there had been a riot.

This scene might be read as a kind of synecdoche, suggesting some of the larger
questions at stake in the novel. In the first place, it exemplifies the novel’s obsession
with secrets. The comedy depends on the reader having some inside information
unavailable to Julia – namely, the nationality of the singers and the sexual violence
commemorated in their song. A lot of Party Going is like this, with characters in turn
lacking or possessing special knowledge. At times the conversation among the members
of the stranded party comes to resemble a game of Chinese whispers, in which secrets are
constantly being scrambled or withheld. Secondly, the scene shows form being
privileged over content. Julia is enchanted by the sound of the football fans “worrying
the carcase of an old song” (as the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas described this particular
characteristic of his countrymen), though things might have been different had she
spoken the language and known what the song was about.2 In broad terms, this might be
equated with Green’s own literary agenda, where questions of form can often outweigh
any question of meaning. Arguably, this marks Party Going as a work of its time. A
revolutionary attitude to form was a hallmark of many of the novels written entre les deux
guerres; as Valentine Cunningham has noted, this preoccupation was still very much in
the air during the late 1930s, as demonstrated by the “anti-novels” of Woolf (The Years,
1937), Beckett (Watt, 1938) and, above all, Joyce (Finnegans Wake, 1939).3

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Party Going appeared in the same month that Hitler invaded Poland and was the only novel Green published during the 1930s, that “low dishonest decade” of Auden’s phrasing. The book’s final page records its place and years of composition as “London, 1931–1938”. Its origins, however, can be traced back further. In the mid-1920s, Green started sketching a story first called “Terminus”, then “Bank Holiday” and finally “Excursion”, in which factory workers are left waiting at a Midlands railway station for their annual outing to begin.4 At around the same time, he also commenced a novel provisionally entitled “Mood”, which was destined never to be completed; it featured a young society girl not unlike Julia Wray, out walking through London’s most fashionable streets.5 These abandoned projects show that Party Going had a long gestation. As a result, it possesses something of a Janus face, combining the frivolity of the twenties with the increasing gloom of the late thirties.6 Julia and her flashy friends might have strayed from the pages of Evelyn Waugh’s Vile Bodies (1930) or Anthony Powell’s Afternoon Men (1931), but there is also a decidedly ominous note to Party Going, one that it shares with Pack My Bag, the autobiography that Green was working on at the same time as the novel.7 It is strange to think of Party Going in these terms – as an exemplar of inter-war pessimism – when it is clearly also the most mercurial of Green’s fictions. Yet, throughout the novel, there is the sense of a looming apocalypse. At one point a voice is overheard invoking doom for the crowd that has congregated around the station: “What targets,” the unidentified speaker says, “what targets for a bomb” (p. 178).

The experience of reading Party Going is not unlike being trapped in an echo chamber. Voices reverberate throughout the novel, often mauldering or meandering aimlessly. The speakers tend to be unreliable, which only adds to the general sense of confusion. Indeed, the veracity of the spoken word becomes a paramount (if not paranoid) concern for many of the characters – their ears are constantly alert to the ways

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4 Treglown, p. 107. The final version “Excursion” is collected in Surviving, pp. 64–74.
6 Michael North has described the novel as presenting an “ignorant privileged world left over from the twenties, infected with the mood of Munich” (p. 80).
7 Indeed, Pack My Bag opens with a prediction of the author’s imminent demise in “the war which seems to be coming on us now”; the memoir is then justified on the ground that one should “put down what comes to mind before one is killed”: p. 5.
in which a voice might harbour or betray a secret. Throughout *Party Going*, there is a deep distrust of what people say. Green was to elaborate on this notion of vocal uncertainty in a 1950 essay, “The English Novel of the Future”:

> It is not to be supposed that any reader believes any more of what he is told in narrative than he ordinarily believes, in life, of what someone is telling him. In life we most of us have the most extraordinary reservations about what we hear. The novelist should never forget … that everything put forward by him, however definite, is taken by the reader with a grain of salt.\(^8\)

The idea that stories are fundamentally untrustworthy is as old as philosophy itself—Plato, for one, had observed that narration (*mythos*), as opposed to rational discourse (*logos*), tends to be incapable of verification.\(^9\) In *Party Going*, it is almost as if the characters had been studying the *Protagoras*, so strong is their propensity to disbelieve one another. Such scepticism does not seem unjustified, as several members of the party are habitual liars; even the *ingénue* Julia, for instance, regularly traffics in deception. It is hardly surprising, then, that *Party Going* comes across as a bewildering text— in Jeremy Treglown’s view, not since Laurence Sterne has there been a novelist “more willing to take his readers up false paths”.\(^10\)

At the centre of this web of secrets and lies is the novel’s narrator. As in *Living*, the narratorial voice used in *Party Going* is often an anecdotal one, giving the impression that the novel is being recounted by a (more or less) real person. On occasion, this narrator even seems godlike, possessing inside knowledge that no ordinary human storyteller could possess. Yet it is also striking how much the narrator does *not* know, or at least does not say; important matters of plot and character remain unexplained. One of the concerns of the present chapter is to examine this question of what might be called the narrator’s intermittent omniscience. This is perhaps one of the qualities that the French experimental novelist Nathalie Sarraute had in mind when she implied that Green’s work had some parallels with the *nouveau roman* of the 1950s.\(^11\) But Green’s preference for

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\(^10\) Treglown, p. 109.

mystery over clarity can also be disorienting for his readers. This means it is sometimes difficult to speak of his novels as having any particular theme. *Party Going* is a decidedly agnostic novel where even the minor characters are unburdened by any sense of higher purpose. Certainly, the Bright Young Things in the relative comfort of the station hotel have no use for literature (“that overblown trumpet”, as their author himself once called it);\(^{12}\) one aim of the present chapter is to show how the written word is slighted here, as it is elsewhere in Green’s fiction.

By way of further introduction, it might also be said that *Party Going* is the funniest of Green’s novels (“almost every page sent us into fits of laughter,” claimed one reviewer).\(^ {13}\) This is due in large part to the gaffes and crossed wires of its conversations. Green once suggested that the recurring sense of conversational muddle in his work originated in his own experience of deafness:

> [T]he very deaf, as I am, hear the most astounding things all round them, which have not, in fact, been said. This enlivens my replies until, through mishearing, a new level of communication is reached. My characters misunderstand each other more than people do in real life, yet they do so less than I.\(^ {14}\)

Much of *Party Going*’s comedy derives from the speech and conduct of the characters themselves, rather than from the observations of an editorializing narrator. As James Wood has pointed out, this is a significant difference between Green’s comedic method and that of, say, Evelyn Waugh.\(^ {15}\) In *Party Going*, Green mines the vision and language of his bored travellers for comic effect – the laughable is often seen through their eyes and described in their voices. In this respect, his characters have a high degree of autonomy; they are not rigidly controlled by their author (as they might be in a story by Nabokov), but are free to wander around in a daze of unknowing (as they might in a story by Chekhov).\(^ {16}\) This is a strategy designed to make the characters sympathetic, even

\(^{12}\) *Pack My Bag*, p. 238.


\(^{14}\) “The Art of Fiction”, *Surviving*, p. 239.

\(^{15}\) *The Irresponsible Self*, pp. 283–85.

\(^{16}\) Here it is worth remembering that Nabokov once described his characters as “galley slaves”; Chekhov, on the other hand, suggested that the guiding principle of his art was “complete freedom” (*Anton Chekhov: A Life in Letters*, trans. Rosamund Bartlett and Anthony Phillips (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 67).
when they are tedious snobs about to go on an undeserved holiday. As with Chekhov, Green never really dislikes his characters, irrespective of how foolish or selfish they are. His sympathetic approach contradicts the assumptions of some celebrated theorists of comedy. Beginning with Plato, comedy has often been thought of as a kind of malicious pleasure afforded by the discomfiture of others. This ancient view “opened the door to an inadequate understanding of the comic” – in particular, it led to the notion that comedy was somehow divorced from sympathy. In the twentieth century, the assumption that comedy involved an absence of emotion resurfaced in the theories of Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud. But, as will be argued here, Green’s comedy does not work like that. *Party Going* is a novel that seeks to engage the reader’s sympathy by acknowledging that folly is universal. We laugh at the spluttering talk of its characters because their vacuous monologues and embarrassing *faux pas* might be our own.

**Muddling: The Mysteries of *Party Going***

*Party Going* begins with an accident. In dense fog, a bewildered pigeon has flown into the balustrade of a city building and fallen dead at the feet of a passer-by. The feet belong to Miss May Fellowes, a fifty-one year old spinster who seems to have lost her mind. The setting is London between the wars, in the late afternoon of a winter week-day. Miss Fellowes is visiting Victoria Station in order to see off her niece, a young woman called Claire Hignam who is one of a party of affluent young people catching the boat-train to France. The dead pigeon causes Miss Fellowes considerable distress. For some mysterious reason, she picks it up and takes it into the station toilet where she proceeds to wash its grimy feathers. This act is witnessed by two elderly nannies, “dressed in granite with black straw hats and white hair” (p. 8). These women are also in some way attached to, or possibly employed by, Miss Fellowes’ family; likewise, they

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“had only come [to the station] to wave good-bye” (p. 8). Not surprisingly, the nannies are aghast at the spectacle of a dead bird being washed and then wrapped in brown paper like a parcel.

Interspersed with this strange scene are descriptions of the other members of the travelling party. The youngest of them is Angela Crevy, who is being farewelled at the station by “her young man”, Robin Adams. Angela has not known the other travellers for long and sees the trip as an opportunity to ingratiate herself with them; it is also a way of tormenting the hapless Robin (Angela clearly enjoys being cruel to her boyfriend). As they enter the station, Angela and Robin run into Miss Fellowes, by now said to be feeling faint. “I wonder,” Miss Fellowes asks them, “if you would mind throwing this parcel into the first waste-paper basket” (p. 12). Robin obliges, but as soon as the couple moves on, Miss Fellowes inexplicably retrieves the pigeon parcel from the bin. It is not unusual in *Party Going* for a character to do something that seems absurd or irrational. This is what David Garnett meant when, reviewing the novel for *The New Statesman*, he described it as having the flavour of something “written by Groucho Marx if he had fallen under the spell of Virginia Woolf”.19

Like Green’s other novels, *Party Going* has its version of blindness, only this time on a massive scale. The city is enveloped in a “pall of fog” (p. 14); visibility is so reduced that the trains will not be running for hours. Making her way on foot through these gloomy streets is Julia Wray. In the darkness, she is said to have “lost her name and was all at once anonymous; if it had not been for her rich coat, she might have been any typist” (p. 16). Julia’s principal purpose in going on this holiday is to spend time with Max Adey, the extravagantly wealthy young man who is funding the entire venture. But Max’s intentions (and even whereabouts) are always uncertain: “none of them [on the trip] knew if he was going to come or not” (p. 17). Indeed, Julia suspects that the trip might simply be a ruse on Max’s part to get her out of the country in order that he might “gad about London with her gone and go to bed with every girl” (p. 18). Julia’s other source of anxiety concerns what she calls her “charms”. These are trinkets that she has had since childhood: an egg with elephants in it, a wooden pistol and a small painted top. Without these charms, she is reluctant to travel; her present fear is that her maid forgot to

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pack them in her luggage. Julia is, to say the least, highly superstitious. As she walks to the station, she pauses on a footbridge and looks down “at stagnant water below” (the sense of stagnation runs throughout the novel). At that moment, three seagulls fly under the bridge, which Julia takes as a good omen: “she thought those gulls were for the sea they were to cross that evening” (p. 19). The hermeneutic urge is irresistible for Green’s characters, especially when it comes to the haphazard flight of birds.

The rakish Max is the party’s primum mobile and not just because he is paying the bills. The female characters gravitate towards him; he becomes the chief subject of their conversation and the chief object of their desire.20 (Even Miss Fellowes in her dissociated mental state seems eager to ask Angela Crevy about him.) When the novel begins, Max is found at home, debating whether to join the party at all – even though the trip seems to have been his suggestion in the first place. The furniture in his flat, though luxurious, is entirely fake (p. 32), underlining its owner’s habitual duplicity. Max has a reputation for womanising. “Dark and excessively handsome”, he is rumoured to have enjoyed a long affair with “an older woman, richer than himself” (p. 89), though the narrator observes that this was in fact untrue. Max appears to be in two minds about going on the trip to France; this is because of a reluctance to leave his latest lover, a beautiful young socialite called Amabel. Their affair is clearly a tempestuous one, not least as a result of his simultaneous involvement with Julia Wray. When Amabel telephones, Max falsely makes plans for dinner with her, having decided in the course of their conversation to leave for France (pp. 34–35). But it does not prove easy to give Amabel the slip; she is well and truly used to the hollowness of Max’s promises.

Gradually, the other members of the party begin to assemble at the station. Claire Hignam is accompanied by her husband, Robert; Angela Crevy carefully pronounces their last name as “Hinnem” (p. 12), thereby demonstrating that even the utterance of a name can constitute a form of admission to this exclusive social circle. The tickets for the trip are being held by Evelyn Henderson, who is perhaps the most level-headed of the group (for no apparent reason, the narrator often switches to a fuller version of her name, 20

According to Green’s biographer, the character of Max was based on the 1920s socialite, Aly Khan, the son of the Aga Khan (Treglown, p. 106).
The final traveller to arrive is a young man with the strangely symmetrical name of Alex Alexander. The narrator explains that the stage is now set: “at last all of this party are in one place … even if they have not yet all come across each other” (p. 39). Edward Stokes has described *Party Going* as a kind of comedic ballet, with the characters coming together and then drifting apart in a whirl of combinations. At times these interactions can be adversarial. Robert and Claire constantly bicker, while Alex and Angela squabble over a recent social scandal involving a celebrated gate-crasher known as Embassy Richard. Angela is perhaps the most marginalised member of the party; she is always committing *faux pas* and worries that the others are keeping secrets from her (one commentator has even suggested that she is the novel’s scapegoat). Despite these tensions, the members of the party still see themselves as a distinct group, separated by rank and privilege from the thousands of other unhappy travellers stranded by the fog.

As the station and its precincts become increasingly crowded, Miss Fellowes is unable to find her niece. Fearful that her light-headedness might return, she decides to sit for a while in the bar located on the station concourse (the dead pigeon remains “wrapped up on her lap”). In one way or another, Miss Fellowes always seems to be under surveillance throughout the novel. In the bar, for instance, she is eyed off by a mysterious man described as a “rough-looking character” (p. 24); for some unknown reason, he repeatedly winks while he sits beside her. The two black-garbed nannies are also watching and they are amazed to see Miss Fellowes order a glass of whisky. By this stage Max has arrived at the station and he too goes to the bar, where he happens to meet Robert Hignam; together they notice that Miss Fellowes is now beginning to look distinctly unsteady on her feet. Robert tracks down Claire and advises her “to go and have a peek” at her aunt (p. 51). Out of concern for Miss Fellowes, Max decides to take rooms in the hotel built over the station (though another factor seems to be his preference to wait out the fog there in the hope of avoiding any further contact with Amabel). It is hastily arranged for the discombobulated Miss Fellowes to be carried into one of these

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21 See, for instance, pp. 26, 29, 50, 52, 56, 60.
rooms. This strange procession includes the two silent nannies and “that same man who had sat next to her, he who winked” (p. 63). As she is being put to bed, her parcel falls from her grasp revealing the dead pigeon (p. 70), much to the horror of Claire and Evelyn. Miss Fellowes will remain in this room for the rest of the novel, drifting in and out of consciousness. This becomes something of an inconvenience for the travelling party; Claire, in particular, worries that she will need to stay behind to care for her aunt. The hotel doctor is summoned, but he simply suspects Miss Fellowes of being drunk. The exact state of her health is never made clear, just as it is never explained what happens to the dead pigeon after it fell out onto the hotel room floor.

At times this sense of confusion engulfs almost everything. No one seems to know when the trains will run again. The railway authorities proceed to erect a series of steel shutters around the station hotel, thereby fencing off the mass of ordinary commuters stuck on the concourse; this is done because of the riot that had taken place the last time the station had been fogbound. It does little, however, to placate the members of the travelling party; Julia Wray even says that “in this awful place I wondered whether we weren’t all dead really” (p. 59). One contributor to the confusion is the so-called “mystery man” (p. 80), first seen sitting beside Miss Fellowes in the station bar and then accompanying her (though uninvited) into the hotel. In appearance, this man is non-descript yet somehow menacing: a “little man”, “clean and stiff”, dressed in black with “a shabby bowler hat”, looking “like another escaped poisoner searching for victims” (p. 82). Every now and then he pops up in the midst of the travelling party and engages its members in conversation. At random his accent shifts from Yorkshire to Brummagem to what is described as “an educated voice” (p. 80). This strange allophonic ability proves disconcerting for Alex Alexander who concludes that the man must be the hotel detective. Alex is said to “lose his nerve” and starts offering the man drinks (p. 80). This assumption about the man’s occupation seems to be unwarranted – at one point, the narrator calls him “that false detective” (p. 168, emphasis added). Claire Hignam explains that Alex leapt to this conclusion simply because he had seen too many films where detectives sported bowler hats (p. 85). Alex claims, however, that he had worried

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24 Julia is not the only character to have such morbid thoughts. Passing through the foggy streets on his way to the station, Alex “likened what he saw to being dead and thought of himself as a ghost” (p. 37).
the supposed detective “might make trouble for Miss Fellowes if he was not kept amused” (p. 80). In any case, the man is given to dire pronouncements about the old woman’s health, variously describing her as “terrible bad” (p. 179), “mortal bad” (p. 169) and “a goner” (pp. 170, 204). Robert Hignam is unimpressed by these medical speculations, dryly telling the mystery man that “you know better than the doctor then” (p. 170). Like Mr Bridges in Living, the characters of Party Going, even the minor ones, habitually lay claim to knowledge that they simply do not possess. Robert then decides to exploit this self-confident little man: for ten bob, the man is retained to find a way out of the hotel and locate Julia Wray’s man-servant, who had been left behind on the station concourse guarding her luggage (p. 169). However, this task proves inordinately difficult. In the process of searching for an exit, this “stranger on a mission” (p. 177) attempts to meddle in the affairs of some of the other travellers who are waiting miserably in the hotel corridors, but his efforts at intervention are either ignored or rejected. Eventually he does locate Julia’s servant and tries to persuade him to hand over the luggage. These entreaties are also categorically rejected and the mystery man then disappears into the crowd, never to be heard from again.

In a celebrated reading, Frank Kermode has likened this strange character to the Greek messenger god Hermes.\textsuperscript{25} Certainly, the mystery man does possess several Hermetic attributes: he speaks in different tongues (or at least accents), he is given to running errands and he might even be said to have a degree of shiftiness about him (“a rough-looking character”, as he was first described). But in other respects his powers are far from godlike. Though he does manage to unnerve Alex, the rest of the party tends to ignore him. Max professes not to care about the man’s identity (or his cadging of drinks), while Robert is only concerned with employing the man for his own ends. As Robert’s paid emissary, the man proves utterly incompetent. Instead of crossing boundaries with Hermetic ease, he struggles to find a way out of the hotel: it “was like trying to get out of one world into another” (p. 174). Hermes is also reputed to be a capricious god, a maker of mischief in human lives. But even here the mystery man fails; his attempts to meddle in other people’s business are invariably rebuffed. Nevertheless, Kermode is right to say that this gadfly is an emblem of the novel’s irreducible mystery. Like the dead pigeon,

\textsuperscript{25} The Genesis of Secrecy, pp. 5–15.
the man’s role in the text is to defy explanation: it is never made clear, for example, why
he winked when he first sat next to Miss Fellowes or even why he chooses to switch
accents mid-conversation. These eccentricities point to the man’s untrustworthy nature,
coinciding with the view that Green was later to express in his 1950 essay, “The English
Novel of the Future”, that in fiction, as in life, we must take what we hear *cum grano
salis*.26

With no trains running, the party is now stuck in the aptly named Terminus Hotel.
One of the main topics of their incessant chatter is the public controversy surrounding
their acquaintance, Embassy Richard. As the narrator explains in a long parenthetical
aside, Richard was in the habit of going to parties uninvited. It had recently transpired
that some unknown person had stolen sheets of his stationery; this was then used to write
letters to various London newspapers requesting that their social columns include an
apology from Richard for his unavailability to attend a particular reception at a foreign
embassy. In fact, Richard had never been invited to this reception at all. The embassy’s
ambassador is incensed when he sees the notices of apology printed in the newspapers.
“[T]hinking to strike out for a host’s right to have what guests he chose” (p. 21), the
ambassador had proceeded to contact the press himself, pointing out that he did not even
know Richard, let alone invited him to an official function. An outcry ensues: “the whole
subject was now being discussed at length everywhere and in two solicitors’ offices”
(p. 21). The members of the travelling party have strong opinions about Richard’s
conduct. Angela and Alex engage in an especially acrimonious debate about the affair,
though Alex often seems to lose the thread of his own argument (pp. 65–69, 104). At one
point, Evelyn Henderson joins in the discussion; she is sceptical about the various
rumours concerning Richard’s conduct and candidly asks, “Does anyone know, really
know, that it’s true?” (p. 68). This question would seem to have a broad application to
the conduct of all the novel’s characters, going far beyond the trivial circumstances of
Richard’s gate-crashing.

Deception comes easily to these Bright Young Things, so much so that the
narrator confesses “how impossible it is to tell what others are thinking or what, in

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26 See note 8, supra. Sebastian Birt in *Concluding* also has the ability to change accents and vocal
registers seemingly at will; again, this appears to indicate the unreliability of anything he says.
ordinary life, brings people to do what they are doing” (p. 149). Partly as a consequence of this general untruthfulness, the characters are always jumping to conclusions or getting the wrong end of the stick. Early in the novel, for instance, Claire and Evelyn inquire of Max’s whereabouts from his servant, Edwards; but Edwards “had learned never to give information about his gentleman to ladies” (p. 38), so the two women assume from his non-committal responses that Max must be in the lavatory (in fact, at that moment he is drinking in the bar). Like the paralysed city itself, the conversation of the characters is often hard to negotiate. Max, in particular, has a habit of making gnomic statements. This, for example, is his cryptic description of Embassy Richard: “if he was a bird, he would not last long” (p. 64). When Julia hears him say this, she immediately “asked him what on earth he meant and got no answer” (p. 65). As well as the obvious comic effects, this fog of unknowing makes it difficult for the characters (and for the reader) to establish what precisely are the facts.

One of the many wrong-headed assumptions made by the travelling party is that access to the hotel had become impossible after the railway authorities erected their steel shutters. This is what Claire tells Miss Fellowes’ maid over the telephone: “we are simply in a state of siege you know,” she declares, “no one’s allowed in or out” (p. 123). But the hotel is not as impregnable as Claire believes because, halfway through the novel, Amabel arrives. In all of Green’s fiction, there is no character more dazzling. Amabel’s beauty mesmerises anyone she encounters: on her walk to the station, men who see her “fingered their ties, stepped exaggeratedly to one side, or turned and followed mumbling to themselves” (pp. 135–36). She is the darling of the social pages, a genuine celebrity: “to be with her was … as much as it might be for a director of the Zoo to be taking his okapi for walks in leading strings for other zoologists to see” (p. 140). Her sole purpose in coming to the station is to locate Max; as the narrator starkly puts it, she “was not going to bother with the others” (p. 143). Amabel is herself very rich and this is why she finds Max so attractive: “Rich people cling together because the less well off embarrass them and there are not so many available who are rich” (p. 134). As it happens, Max is not available when Amabel arrives; at that moment, he is off on another floor of the hotel, trying desperately to seduce Julia. But this time his charm fails to work. “It’s too early in the day yet for that sort of thing,” Julia declares, repelling his advances. In spite of her
childlike demeanour, Julia knows how to be manipulative. Shrewdly, she mollifies Max by bestowing a single kiss on his cheek; with the holiday stretching ahead of them, she reasons that “it would never do to start too fast and furious” (p. 115).

When Amabel learns of Max’s absence, she arranges to take a bath, ostensibly because she “got so dirty” on her walk to the station (p. 139). This bathroom scene is almost voyeuristic in its lavish description of her naked beauty:

As she went over herself with her towel it was plain that she loved her own shape and skin. When she dried her breasts she wiped them with as much care as she would puppies after she had given them their bath, smiling all the time. But her stomach she wiped unsmilingly upwards to make it thin. … She stood out as though so much health, such abundance and happiness, should never have clothes to hide it. (p. 173)

Amabel’s vanity is monumental. Admiring her reflection in the bathroom mirror, she decides that her face is “more beautiful than anything she had ever seen” (p. 171). Her self-indulgent bathing routine can be contrasted with that other act of washing in the novel – the “pious” cleaning of the dead pigeon by Miss Fellowes, which seemingly was motivated by some kind, albeit eccentric, urge (p. 25). There is nothing kind about Amabel; alone in the hotel bathroom, she can think only of herself. She had come to the station to claim Max and, when he returns after his interlude with Julia, that is precisely what she does. The two of them go off together into one of the other rooms where they immediately begin to kiss. This is followed, somewhat surprisingly, by conversation rather than copulation. It emerges, much to Max’s annoyance, that Amabel had spent the previous evening in the company of Embassy Richard. Such candour is, however, a rarity, since the talk of this gilded couple is otherwise full of dissembling and prevarication. “I’ve come to know I can’t trust a single thing you say,” Amabel chides Max (p. 219), even though her own honesty is just as questionable. Exhausted by their chatter, the couple then fall asleep (as with the eloping lovers in *Living*, Green likes to show his couples enjoying a nap). They are woken by the cheers of the crowd on the concourse: the railway authorities have at last begun posting new times on the departures board. Max gets up, smoothing his clothes and straightening his tie. “What’s the hurry?” asks Amabel. Her fur coat falls open, revealing that she has nothing on underneath. But
Max makes no attempt at intimacy. “There are times I hate you,” Amabel declares in response (p. 228).\textsuperscript{27}

This sort of ambivalence is everywhere in \textit{Party Going}. Miss Fellowes, it should be recalled, had come to the station to see Claire off; yet, in her semi-conscious state at the end of the novel, she realises “she had always disliked Claire, just as she had never got on with her mother” (p. 214).\textsuperscript{28} Emotions in \textit{Party Going} are usually mixed emotions; the characters are prone to loving and hating at the same time. Julia Wray typifies this capacity to swing wildly between extremes of feeling. One minute she dreads the crowd breaking into the hotel and being “dirty and violent” (p. 235); the next, she is overwhelmed by their singing and thinks of them as gentle beasts ready to be “shepherded into pens” (p. 249). Her romantic attachment to Max oscillates in a similar fashion. When she hears he is away consorting with Amabel, Julia pronounces such conduct “revolting” (p. 235) – even though she had been alone with Max herself in very similar circumstances only an hour or so before. This changeability is an important part of Green’s version of realism; his characters seem authentic because they are so often in two minds about things. It is as if the dense fog mentioned in the novel’s first sentence had spread even to their inner lives.

Max and Amabel eventually rejoin the rest of the party in the hotel suite. A telephone call from the station-master’s office – another of the novel’s disembodied voices – advises that the trains will soon be running again. But several of the travellers are still uncertain about leaving. Claire seems prepared to do so, although she continues to worry about the condition of Miss Fellowes. Julia is delighted to be going at last (especially since she has noticed the tension between Max and Amabel), but still frets about her missing charms. For his part, Max regrets that Amabel now seems intent on accompanying them: “he would much rather [she] stayed behind” (p. 251). From his conversation with Amabel, Max had learned that Embassy Richard is also waylaid at this station hotel. Max has little time for Richard, having earlier described him as a “poisonous chap” (p. 66), yet he now takes the extraordinary step of telephoning

\textsuperscript{27} Several pages before this scene, it had been made clear that Amabel is naked under her fur coat (p. 221).

\textsuperscript{28} The sentence is itself ambiguous. It is unclear whether Miss Fellowes is referring to her own mother or to Claire’s mother (Miss Fellowes’ sister).
Richard’s room and inviting him in for a drink. Angela and Alex see this as their chance to get to the bottom of Richard’s recent *esclandre*. When Richard arrives, he tells the assembled party that he was the author of his own “little bit of trouble”: “I put that thing in all the papers about my not being able to come to something or other” (p. 254). This, of course, contradicts the version of events given by the narrator concerning the theft and misuse of Richard’s stationery by an unknown person.\(^{29}\) When Richard admits that “the town’s too hot to hold me now” (p. 254), Max suggests that he accompany the party on their trip to France. Julia immediately senses that Max’s offer is designed “to keep Amabel occupied with someone for herself” (p. 255). Richard replies ambiguously to this invitation – “well yes, I might” – but Max treats this as an unequivocal acceptance, commenting that things were now “fixed”. Amabel, however, is also aware of some scheming afoot and asks Richard if joining their party would complicate his existing travel plans. “I can go where I was going afterwards,” Richard answers with a mysterious smile, bringing the novel to a close.

Thus *Party Going* ends as enigmatically as it began. The travellers remain stalled, frozen in the act of leaving without ever actually doing so. Embassy Richard’s smile, like that of the Cheshire Cat, seems to linger over this scene of impending departure, a final pointer to the novel’s perplexity. It has been suggested that “modern fiction is a literature of bewilderment”, one that lays bare the “fundamental hermeneutic and semiotic processes” governing our world.\(^{30}\) *Party Going* is like this (though fortunately its jokes prevent it from ever sounding like an exercise in epistemology). Green did not suppose that fiction’s role was to demystify; life can be a muddle, he declared in one of the very last things he wrote, “but the great writers do not make it plain, they palliate, and put the whole in a sort of proportion”.\(^{31}\) The puzzles and bafflements of *Party Going* rarely admit of solutions. Amabel’s inquiry to Embassy Richard suggests as much, since it presents one of the profoundest of all human concerns: where are any of us going? Like

\(^{29}\) Other critics do not appear to have noticed the contradiction; see, for instance, Michael North (p. 96).


\(^{31}\) This was in a brief piece he wrote for *The Times* in 1961: *Surviving*, pp. 281–82.
the smilingly evasive Richard, the reader cannot help being disconcerted by such a question, one that is unanswerable but beautifully posed.

**Telling: Secrets and Narration in *Party Going***

“People are such liars,” Green once observed.³² Given such a belief in universal mendacity, it should come as no surprise that his characters are great benders of the truth. In *Living*, both the workers and the managers at the Dupret factory engage in various forms of deception, usually with a view to securing promotion or some other sort of favour. This is the case with *Party Going* as well, where the characters are never loath to lie if it is to their own benefit. Max, for instance, lies about his travel plans in an effort to avoid Amabel (pp. 34–36), and then lies again by claiming that he had always intended for her to accompany him (p. 217). Both Alex (p. 54) and Angela (pp. 102–03) lie about their respective travel arrangements in order to exaggerate their familiarity with Max. Julia lies to Max about the origins of her charms, apparently because she does not want to disclose too many of her childhood secrets (pp. 110–12); Max immediately lies back, telling her that he had played with dolls as a boy, a claim made solely to increase his chances of a successful seduction (p. 111). When Julia catches up with Claire and Evelyn after her tête-à-tête with Max, she greets them by saying, “Well there you are”, said “in such tones [that] she might have been telling them how hard it had been for her to find them, and as though she were saying she had been looking for them all that time she had been upstairs with Max” (p. 166). Her rival Amabel is just as adept at subterfuge. Upon arriving at the station hotel, she is able to convince Angela that she had always intended coming on the trip to France and had merely been delayed by the fog (pp. 138–39, 164). Amabel behaves as if she is taking Angela into her confidence – she begins “to make secrets”, as the narrator puts it (pp. 138, 143). But this is done out of duplicity: Amabel had quickly realised that “the other girls would be against her coming, so that it seemed

³² Again, this was in his 1961 piece for *The Times: Surviving* p. 280.
policy to make one friend at once” (p. 143). No one, it seems, can be trusted. When Embassy Richard appears at the end of the novel, he proceeds to greet each member of the travelling party:

He said, “Why, hullo, my old dears,” and shook hands all round. If he could he took each hand in one of his, if only one was offered, then he took hold with both hands. He did not shake, he pressed as though to make secrets he would never keep, as though to embrace each private thought you had and to let you know he shared it with you and would share it again with anyone he met. (pp. 253–54)

The characters of Party Going are wilfully dishonest if this advances their romantic entanglements or covers up one of their manifold indiscretions. But on many other occasions their mendacity seems to serve no purpose at all. It is unclear, for instance, why Max lies about his initial decision to take rooms in the station hotel (he claims he had an appointment with his lawyer); Julia cannot fathom the reason for such a “fairy tale” (p. 58). In Kantian fashion, this sort of dishonesty might be called adiaphorous – that is, it seems inessential or at least lacks any particular consequence, except perhaps to emphasise the general condition of human untruthfulness. The dialogues of the travelling party are full of such moments when one of the interlocutors will lie for no reason.

But this is not the only type of conversational pitfall found throughout the novel. At other times, a dialogue will simply run off the rails because of a character’s sudden confusion. Just as Alex loses track of his argument about Embassy Richard, Amabel slips up when she is weaving one of her webs of deceit to entrap Max, though she does not even notice the inconsistencies in her story (p. 223). Conversations in the novel become garbled in other ways. Characters might be unable to make themselves heard over background noise (p. 48) or else might simply choose to ignore what is being said to them (pp. 20, 29, 142). On other occasions, the narrator intervenes to point out that a character’s words are meaningless – when the petulant Angela calls Alex “darling”, for instance, it is immediately made clear that this has “no significance” (p. 117).

As against this chorus of unreliability, the narrator’s voice is the most authoritative in the novel. At several points, this authority is bolstered by incorporating references to the reader into the rhetoric of narration (a strategy familiar from Living):
… the rich who rule worlds such as we describe … (p. 89, emphasis added)

… there was her power over him as we shall see (p. 134, emphasis added)

… Amabel look[ed] at her nails like you and I gaze into crystals (p. 148, emphasis added)

*Party Going*’s narrator often knows a great deal about the characters. This is suggested by the occasional proleptic aside: “[Claire] began to speak like the older woman she was to become” (p. 237). At other times, the narrator reveals secret information – for instance, that Evelyn is the “least well off” member of the party (p. 145) or that Max did not have an affair with an older woman as all his friends supposed (p. 89). But the narrator’s omniscience is by no means total and many things remain obscure. Great mysteries of the novel – such as whether the party will ever actually go anywhere or why Miss Fellowes picked up the dead pigeon – are not the subject of any narratorial disquisition. Indeed, the reader is occasionally left with the impression that the narrator *does not know* the answers to these questions. When Miss Fellowes takes possession of the pigeon on the first page, for example, the only narratorial comment offered on her bizarre conduct is that “everything [is] unexplained” (p. 7). In this instance, the narrator seems to be just as much in the dark about things as the characters themselves.

*Party Going* often conveys a sense of being narrated by an actual person, albeit someone who does not participate in the events of the story. This personification is suggested in part by the collaborative language used to address the reader (“we”, “you and I”), implying that the process of narration is some form of extended anecdote. As was the case with *Living*, this narrator is a shadowy figure. Nevertheless, the novel is not an instance of what narratologists would call *covert narration*, where the narratorial presence tends towards invisibility. Eudora Welty made this point about Green’s fiction when she said that “his novels have a mind”, which she explained as “a

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33 It should be said that “omniscience” is not a term favoured by all narratologists; on this point, see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 96.


35 Rimmon-Kenan, pp. 97–99.
temperament that streaks the most marvellous colour through the work”. In a radio address given in 1950, Green himself expressed similar views, likening the role of the novelist to “someone telling a story as a casual acquaintance in the pub might”.  

There are also grounds for the reader to speculate about the gender of Party Going’s narrator. It is self-evident that literary texts activate certain expectations in their audience. A title, for instance, might predispose the reader to approach the text in a particular manner: as Peter J. Rabinowitz has shown, calling a play The Tragedy of Hamlet is a way of warning us how that play is going to end. Such readerly expectations might derive from pre-existing cultural attitudes or they might simply be based on intuition. Assumptions about a narrator’s gender are part of this reading dynamic in which the text and its audience interact to produce meaning. Often an assumption about the narrator’s gender will arise from the stated name of the author—that is, an ostensibly male author will be supposed to use a male narrative voice (it has been pointed out by the narratologist Susan Sniader Lanser that, in most circumstances, readers equate the author with the narrator). Historically, these sorts of assumptions have shaped the reception of a literary text. This can be seen, for instance, in the reception history of Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw”, where that story’s anonymous frame narrator has generally been assumed to be male even though there is no direct textual evidence on this point.

In the case of Party Going, there are generalized hints throughout the novel that it is being narrated from a male perspective. Sometimes this is suggested by particular narratorial rhetoric. In one instance, there is an extended description of the fog as an alluring woman with long hair; the overhead lights of the station are likened to the eyes of this foggy seductress so that “[it] was like she was looking down at you from under long strands hanging down from her forehead” (p. 199), where that use of the second

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36 Welty, p. 254.
37 “A Novelist to His Readers”, Surviving, p. 139.
40 Michael J. H. Taylor has described how James plays with the “natural tendency” of readers to see the story’s narrator as male: “A Note on the First Narrator of ‘The Turn of the Screw’”, American Literature (1982) vol. 53, no. 4, pp. 717–22.
person implies a male narrator speaking to another male. The sense that the narrator is male can also be attributed to the manner in which unfavourable views on women are presented. On a number of occasions, the reader is given access to the thoughts of Alex Alexander about the female members of the party:

[Alex] suddenly felt more strongly than ever before how these girls were a different species and were quite definitely hostile. … [I]t struck him again how women always seemed to expect things, and for that matter, events even, to be brought to them for their pleasure, in white cotton gloves on plates. (p. 148)

It was all the fault of these girls. It had been such fun in the old days when they had just gone and no one had minded what happened. … [I]f you were girls and went on a party then it seemed to him you thought only of how you were doing, of how much it looked to others you were enjoying yourself … Or, in other words, you competed with each other in how well you were doing well and doing well was getting off with the rich man in the party. (pp. 195–96)

It was not Amabel’s fault, she was all right even if she did use him, it was these desperate inexperienced bitches, he thought, who never banded together but fought everyone and themselves and were like camels, they could go on for days without one sup of encouragement. (p. 196)

Alex’s opinions stand out to such an extent that a reader might justifiably infer that they are endorsed by the narrator. No other character is given such an opportunity to speak his or her mind about the opposite sex (at times Julia and Amabel deplore Max’s duplicitous behaviour, but their views relate only to his specific actions and not to men in general). By contrast, Alex’s hostility is couched in very broad terms and is allowed to go unchallenged, leading to the impression that the narrator agrees with him. Indeed, it does not seem a coincidence that the narrator also refers to sexual adventures with “girls” when describing the disconsolate crowd marooned on the station concourse: “it [i.e. waiting] was beginning to wear thin until only those who were getting off with girls could say they were enjoying themselves” (pp. 199–200). In this connection, it also seems that Green himself regarded Party Going as espousing a male point of view: in a letter written in 1939, he explained the novel as “principally a sympathetic attack on girls aged between 21/29 [sic]”.41 This masculine perspective is a reminder that narration is

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41 Treglown, p. 104.
never entirely impartial – or, as Seymour Chatman puts it, that the narrator has always “stacked the cards in a particular way”.42 Overt markers of a narratorial persona draw attention to the drift or flavour of the narrator’s discourse; in Party Going – unlike, say, Hemingway’s story “The Killers” – there is no pretence of a detached observer.43

This foregrounding of a narratorial persona also implicitly acknowledges the limits of fiction’s power to represent reality. David Lodge has written about the “epistemological confidence” of Victorian fiction – its belief “that reality can be known, that the truth about human affairs can be told, and that such knowledge and truth can be shared collectively”.44 By the early twentieth century, many novelists were not quite so confident. For writers like Virginia Woolf, the emphasis fell instead on the construction of reality by (or within) a single mind.45 But this position assumed that fiction was able to represent mental life in all its depth and variety, as is made clear in Woolf’s celebrated essay, “Modern Fiction”:

The mind receives a myriad of impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms … Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness.46

The narratorial standpoint taken in Party Going suggests the opposite position – that it is impossible to record all the “atoms” of mental experience, much less trace some pattern among them. For such a narrator, there will always be gaps in the record. “We certainly do not know what other people are thinking and feeling,” Green declared in a 1950 radio broadcast; this view is almost identical to the doubts expressed by Party Going’s narrator about “how impossible it is to tell what others are thinking” (p. 149).47 The narrator of the novel is knowing but not all-knowing; there is much he can tell but there is also much

42 Story and Discourse, p. 148.
43 For narratologists, Hemingway’s story is the locus classicus of “neutral” or “objective” narration: see, for instance, Rimmon-Kenan, p. 97.
44 Consciousness and the Novel, pp. 49–50.
47 This radio broadcast was republished as “A Novelist to His Readers” (Surviving, p. 139).
beyond his ken. Yet, in reality, this is what anecdotes are like: as Frank Kermode has shown, there are always secrets that work against the narrative sequence of any story, sometimes even in ways unknown to the narrator.\(^{48}\) Green’s anecdotal mode of narration is perfectly suited to creating this sense of uncertainty. In the disorderly, talkative world of *Party Going*, often the narrator is merely one voice among many.

**Uttering: The Secrets of Voice in *Party Going***

There is a famous scene in Proust’s *La Prisonnière* that emphasises the status of novels as commodities, rather than as artistic creations. It occurs after the funeral of the celebrated writer Bergotte, when the book-sellers of Paris carefully arrange copies of his work in their shop-windows as a “symbol of his resurrection”.\(^{49}\) The scene reminds the reader that books have a value unconnected with their aesthetic merit – Bergotte’s resurrection is intended to be a commercial one. In Green’s fiction, books are sometimes represented like this – as trinkets, divorced from any question of their artistic purpose. Of course, this accords with the author’s declared indifference to literature. In *Pack My Bag*, it will be recalled, Green announced that he was not proud of his books, “any more than anyone is of their nails growing”; perhaps just as disingenuously, he went on in the same passage to praise the orality of working-class culture, suggesting it was evidence of “how little literature counts”.\(^{50}\) Not surprisingly then, the self-satisfied characters of *Party Going* have almost no interest in reading. The London apartments of Max and Amabel, decorated in identical ways by the same interior designer, contain the same fake books (described as “dummies” and “only bindings”, yet bearing the same titles: p. 133); the implication is, of course, that philistinism goes hand-in-hand with snobbery. The only member of the group whose thoughts are inflected by literature is Alex Alexander and


\(^{50}\) *Pack My Bag*, p. 238.
this happens just once. On his way to the fogbound station, Alex imagines himself to be “a Zulu, in the Zulu’s hell of ice, seated in his taxi in the part of Umslopagaas with his axe” (p. 37). Thus Party Going’s only explicit reference to another work of fiction concerns a popular novel far removed from Green’s aesthetic imperatives – namely, She by H. Rider Haggard.

This apathy towards literature is an example of the general distrust of the written word found throughout Green’s fiction. The Bright Young Things recognise, for instance, the essential triviality of the newspapers whose columns have stoked the fires of the Embassy Richard scandal – “that silly business”, as Alex calls it (p. 46). In a similar vein, Evelyn deplores the press’s obsession with celebrity, which had “sanctified” the decidedly unsaintly Amabel “by constant printed references as though it was of general concern what she looked like or how beautiful she might be” (p. 145). Amabel is again associated with the triviality of writing in one of the novel’s most enigmatic scenes. After taking her bath, she decides to trace her name in one of the steamed-up wall mirrors in the hotel bathroom:

The walls were made of looking-glass, and were clouded over with steam; from them her body was reflected in a faint pink mass. She leaned over and traced her name Amabel in that steam and that pink mass loomed up to meet her in the flesh and looked through bright at her through the letters of her name. She bent down to look at her eyes in the A her name began with, and as she gazed at them steam or her breath dulled her reflection and the blue her eyes were went out or faded.

She rubbed with the palm of her hand, and now she could see all her face. (p. 171)

Rod Mengham has pointed out that the single letter “A” is “reminiscent of Hester Prynne’s ‘token of infamy’” in Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, thereby emphasising Amabel’s “fondness for sexual intrigue”. The mirror writing is, for Mengham, “an emblem of the importance of subliminal meanings”, hinting at the furtiveness and fragmentation of sexual identity. By contrast, Valentine Cunningham insists that the scene should be read in terms of what he calls its “circumambient context”. Rather than interpreting Amabel’s gesture as a self-reflexive one, Cunningham argues that it is an act “rippling outwards into the dense textures of the wider literature and history of the

51 Mengham, p. 48.
period” – in particular, that it signifies a typically 1930s tension between solitude and mass society (in this case, the juxtaposition of Amabel’s retreat into a mirrored bathroom with the plight of the less privileged travellers who are crammed together in their thousands on the concourse below).52 But what both these readings overlook is the ephemerality of Amabel’s writing. Lettered in steam, it cannot, of course, endure; but in any event its beautiful author intervenes, rubbing the mirror clean to afford a better view of herself. This unbookish narcissist is the only character in the novel who writes anything and, unsurprisingly, what she chooses to write is her own name. Amabel’s gesture serves as a reminder of how little writing counts in le beau monde.

Amabel is associated with signatures in another, more sinister way. Claire tells Evelyn a story she had heard about the beautiful socialite:

> Even those who went to bed with her never were allowed to see her with no clothes on, because someone quite early in her life had carved his initials low on her back with an electric-light wire, or so Embassy Richard had told her [i.e. Claire]. (p. 155)

No verification of this story is offered elsewhere in the novel (and Embassy Richard might be thought of as a dubious informant). Other circumstances appear to contradict the story – it appears that Max has indeed been allowed to see Amabel naked. But the story has a life of its own, just like the rumour about Max’s affair with an older woman or the seemingly interminable debate about Embassy Richard’s gate-crashing. Verba volent, scripta manent, runs the old maxim, but in Party Going the reverse seems true. It is orality, not textuality, that endures: Amabel’s gesture of signing her name in steam lasts only a moment, but the tittle-tattle about her body being “signed” seems to circulate endlessly.

Amabel does allow her lovers to see her naked and, according to Max, always uses a different voice when she has no clothes on – a “private tone”, one that “mocked” the listener (p. 179). The characters of Party Going are very sensitive to vocal styles. The Hignams, as has already been noted, seem especially fussy about the pronunciation of their name (a quirk that also appears in “Mood”, the unfinished precursor to Party Going).53 A voice can mark someone as an outsider; it is for this reason that the multi-
accented “mystery man” appears so sinister. A voice can also disclose otherwise hidden aspects of someone’s subjectivity. The way we speak reveals much about us – about our age or gender, our ethnicity or schooling. (Indeed, the word “utter” once meant to disclose secrets.) Importantly in this respect, the novel refers several times to Alex Alexander’s tone of voice – that is, to its high pitch and occasional shrillness (pp. 44, 56, 67, 79). These ostensibly feminine vocal qualities are surely intended to suggest an aspect of Alex’s character that is never really made explicit – namely, his homosexuality.

None of Party Going’s commentators appears to admit the possibility that Alex is gay. However, the novel suggests this in several ways (in addition to the stereotype of having an effeminate voice). When Alex imagines himself as one of Rider Haggard’s Zulus, he fantasises that he is “on his way to see She, or better still Leo” (p. 37, emphasis added). In her dealings with Alex, Amabel believes that he is “not supposed to care about girls” (p. 191). On another occasion, when Alex declares his reluctance to spend the night at the station hotel, the irascible Angela tells him that “it’s the most pansy thing I ever heard you say” (p. 118). At several points, Alex is linked with Embassy Richard whose homosexuality is also implied. When Richard’s name comes up in conversation, Alex describes him as “very fetching” (p. 66). The narrator observes that there is a close resemblance between the two men: upon Richard’s arrival at the hotel, he is described as being “not unlike Alex and when he spoke his manner was much the same” (p. 253). Indeed, Richard addresses the assembled party as “my old dears”, an expression that Alex

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54 Vocal pitch as a sign of male homosexuality has a long literary history. It has been suggested, for instance, that Chaucer’s feminine-voiced Pardoner should be considered in this way: see Gregory W. Gross, “Trade Secrets: Chaucer, the Pardoner, the Critics”, Modern Language Studies (1995) vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 1–36.

55 Rod Mengham speculates that Alex “is impotent with women of his own class but not necessarily with [working-class women like] Amabel’s maid” (p. 47). Bruce Bassoff describes Alex as “effete” and “epicene” but takes the matter no further: Toward “Loving”: The Poetics of the Novel and the Practice of Henry Green (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1975), pp. 135, 138, 162.

56 As Green’s readers would have known, this refers to Leo Vincey, the hero of Rider Haggard’s novel.

57 When Amabel reveals to Max that she had spent the previous night with the notorious gate-crasher, she defends her conduct by saying, “It was only Richard and you know what he is” (p. 222, emphasis added).
had earlier used to describe Max (p. 63). Once again, it is a case of vocal style suggesting the speaker’s true nature.

Novels generate protocols for their own interpretation; this, in part, is what is meant by Wayne Booth’s claim that authors make their own readers. Alex’s implicit homosexuality is one example of how *Party Going* writes the rules for its own reading. Once the reader recognises the possibility that Alex is gay, other events in the novel may be seen in a different light. When Alex first appears in the text – even before any suggestion of his homosexuality – he is shown being rude to his cab-driver, who comments acidly, “Another bloody one of those” (p. 38). This is, of course, a stock expression used to describe homosexuals; as Green might have known, it is even used by Proust. Alex leaves the cab without paying his fare, which makes the driver “hysterically angry” (p. 39). The driver thereupon pursues Alex through the crowd amassed at the station, eventually catching up with him and demanding payment. A row ensues until Alex decides “to move with the taxi driver out of earshot where they went on gesticulating, though it was obvious now that they were suddenly on the best of terms” (p. 50). Read in light of the hints about Alex’s nature, the suddenness of this reconciliation might be explained as a recognition of a shared sexual proclivity. To be sure, there is no irrefutable evidence that this is what transpires between Alex and the driver; rather, the point is that, as part of the dynamics of reading, contingent details can be co-opted into the larger hermeneutic enterprise to support a hypothesis about textual meaning. Other aspects of Alex’s behaviour can also be understood in this light. For instance, Alex is the only member of the party who believes the multi-accented “mystery man” to be a hotel detective. Indeed, this stranger causes Alex to “lose his nerve” (p. 80); no one else in the novel is intimidated in such a way. The reader can surmise that this agitation is an example of the paranoia that many homosexual men living in 1930s

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59 *A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 4, *Albertine disparue*, p. 241; *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 5, *The Fugitive*, p. 762. Proust’s expression is *il est comme ça*, which his translators give as “he is one of those”.

60 This process is discussed by Rimmon-Kenan (pp. 118–23).
England might have felt – a justifiable paranoia about detectives, surveillance and prosecution.\footnote{This paranoia about detectives is suggested in an exchange between Alex and Claire (pp. 236–37).}

Voices can identify people as sharply as any part of their physiognomy. It is by his master’s voice that the dog Argus knows that the beggar before him is Ulysses, just as it is a “trick” of the voice that enables Gloucester to recognise the garlanded Lear.\footnote{The Odyssey, book 17, lines 317–18; King Lear, act 4, scene 6, line 106.} Similarly, it is Alex’s manner of speaking that alerts the reader to the secret aspects of his character. Here Green – like Homer, like Shakespeare – is drawing on the reader’s experience of the individuality of human utterance. The revelations of Alex’s voice stand in marked contrast to the unreliability and duplicity of so much else that is said in the novel. Another meaning of the word “utter” is to put something false into circulation – a forged cheque, for instance, or a fake coin – and this describes most of the conversation in Party Going, the gossip and lies that constantly circulate among the characters. The paradox, then, is that vocality in Party Going involves these two senses of “uttering” – the circulation of falsehood and the revelation of secrets.

**Forbearing: The Comedy of Party Going**

Theories of comedy generally come unstuck when confronted with the diversity of modern fiction. This can be seen with the philosopher Henri Bergson’s rather emaciated conception of the comic spirit. In his turn-of-the-century essay *Le Rire*, Bergson averred that comedy was “usually accompanied by an absence of feeling”; he went on to conclude that laughter “would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or
kindness”.63 This approach offers little purchase on fictional characters like Joyce’s Bloom or Svevo’s Zeno – deeply humane bumbler for whom readers feel enormous affection. Likewise, Sigmund Freud’s notion of jokes as a phenomenon rooted in the subconscious provides only a limited insight into modern comic novels. Freud insisted that comedy is a manifestation of some “blocked” emotion, thereby transforming people into something like automatons or mechanical puppets.64 In their different ways, both these theories assume that comedy involves laughing at something. The novels of Proust or Evelyn Waugh might be said to work in this fashion: we laugh at the hypocrisy of Legrandin in *Du côté de chez Swann* or of Lord Copper in *Scoop* because the comedy of these novels is essentially satirical. But not all comic fiction is like this. In Chekhov and in Green, it is more a case of laughing with the characters than laughing at them. This sort of comedy fundamentally involves the reader’s sympathy in ways denied by Bergson and Freud.

Everyone knows that a joke tends to unravel if it is dissected. For this reason, it might not be either desirable or possible to devise a theory of comedy that has a universal application. As one recent commentator has suggested, comedy must be thought of “multilaterally”, since it is a term that can refer to a wide range of genres, tones and effects.65 This raises the question of the ways in which *Party Going* might be considered a comic novel. In the first place, its comedy depends on, roughly speaking, a sense of sexual equality. This is a *sine qua non* for the comic spirit to flourish, according to George Meredith. In an essay on the subject first published in 1877, Meredith argued that true comedy can emerge only when relations between the sexes are on a more or less equal footing:


[T]here will never be civilisation where Comedy is not possible; and that comes of some degree of social equality of the sexes.... [W]here women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty – in what they have won for themselves, and what has been granted to them by a fair civilisation – there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure Comedy flourishes.⁶⁶

Party Going is riven with the prejudices of class, yet there is clearly a measure of sexual equality between the characters. This is not confined to the affluent party-goers in their hotel room but can also be found among their put-upon servants waiting below, as suggested by a lovely scene involving Julia Wray’s valet, Thomson. As the narrator eventually explains, “Thomson’s trouble was sex” – that is, “his mind ran on for too long about girls” (p. 203). While he is waiting in the cold, dutifully guarding his mistress’s luggage, Thomson spies a girl hovering nearby and boldly entreats her for a kiss. Much to his surprise, she obliges, before disappearing back into the crowd (p. 160). Another servant who witnesses the encounter prudishly calls it “disgusting”. Thomson is indignant in his defence of this most natural form of human contact:

“And what’s disgusting? Lord, what’s in a kiss? It don’t mean nothing to her, nor anything to me, but it did make an amount of difference when I hadn’t ’ad my tea. ... [I]t’s fellow feeling, that’s what I like about it. Without so much as a by your leave when she sees someone hankering after a bit of comfort, God bless ’er, she gives it him.” (p. 162)

Among the privileged characters, the women often have the upper hand. To great comic effect, Angela toys with the feelings of her jealous fiancé Robin – “putting him through a hoop in some fabulous way”, as Alex describes it (p. 122). Alex himself is no stranger to such manipulation: he is so overwhelmed by Amabel’s charm that he decides women are “more powerful than men” (pp. 191–92). When Amabel begins to scratch his hand affectionately “with one long vermillion fingernail”, Alex is delirious with pleasure: “if he had been her pussy cat he would have purred” (p. 192). Like Circe, Amabel has the power to turn men into beasts – which can be very funny. Max, with a different set of desires from Alex, is so enraptured by her beauty that “he smiled into her jewelled eyes like any Fido asking for his bone” (p. 182).

A lot of *Party Going*’s humour derives from animal comparisons. When Amabel and Julia eye off Max, they are likened to “cats over offal” (p. 181); later, after her intimate frolic with him, Amabel’s smug demeanour suggests “a cat that has just had its mouse, coming among other cats who had only had the smell” (p. 241). As has already been seen, Green’s comic metaphors contain a virtual menagerie – crowds resemble sheep, girls resemble camels, and associating with a beautiful socialite is like walking out with an okapi. These metaphors are visual and precise; they depend on the reader’s capacity to imagine how it is that young women might look like cats or camels. But in a novel so attentive to the vagaries of the human voice, it seems inevitable that much comedy will also be found in the characters’ conversation. When the two nannies witness Miss Fellowes washing her dead pigeon in the station lavatory, the washroom attendant comments, “She won’t be long” (p. 10) – as if cleaning up a dead bird was the most ordinary thing in the world to do in a public toilet. There is a similar moment when Evelyn counsels Claire not to worry about her aunt’s bizarre behaviour:

“I think what we are both afraid of,” said Evelyn, “is that parcel she had and what was inside it...[I]t was her having picked that pigeon up somewhere and then seeming so ill. She can’t have bought it or she would have had it delivered, unless she got it off a barrow, but then they don’t sell them on barrows. D’you see what I mean? But if she just found it dead and picked it up what did she want it for, it was so dirty? I’m sure that’s what’s been worrying us, but when you come to think of it, darling, there’s nothing in it, is there? What is it after all? Now if it had been a goose or some other bird. No, that isn’t so I don’t suppose it would have been any less odd. Anyway it is definitely not a thing to worry about.” (pp. 211–12)

*Now if it had been a goose or some other bird:* sometimes the world of *Party Going* seems to be teetering on the brink of madness. So much of the novel is unexplained that inexplicability itself becomes a joke. A further example of this is Alex’s scrutiny of the armchairs in the hotel room, which he notices are “covered in modified plush, that is plush with the pile shaved off so that those chairs were to him like so many clean-shaven port drinkers” (p. 194). This is an exact observation, yet a mysterious one. It suggests Alex’s sense of social difference: port-drinking connotes a self-satisfied bourgeois world, one from which a man like Alex might feel excluded. The observation works as comedy because it is startling to think that a chair might resemble a middle-
aged, middle-class Englishman. Here the reader must follow the sudden lunge of Alex’s mind. This is one of the distinguishing features of Green’s comic style: the humour often tends to be generated by the characters themselves, rather than by any direct narratorial intervention.

According to Bergson, laughter is a “corrective” – that is, it performs a social function in its repudiation of various kinds of human folly. A similar view has recently been advanced by Erich Segal. In The Death of Comedy, Segal emphasises this social dimension, arguing that “laughter is an affirmation of shared values”; the titular death of comedy is attributed to modern forms of literary art that ostensibly promoted absurdity and intellectualism. It would be difficult, however, to consider Party Going as a comedy that promoted social cohesion. True, it does satirise the self-absorption of the rich and the deviousness of girls like Angela and Amabel. But a reader would be hard-pressed to find anything moralising in its approach. Green shows no interest in transforming the moeurs of his generation, nor does he attempt to pass judgement on the libertinage of his characters. If anything, Party Going stresses the divisions within society. Alex, for instance, laments the “dull antagonism” of modern life, noting that it lacked any “fellow feeling” (p. 195) – which is, of course, the expression used earlier by the servant Thomson when he praised the girl on the station concourse who had suddenly kissed him. Nervy Julia, in constant dread of the hoi polloi, magnifies this sense of division: when the crowd begins chanting for trains, she declares that “one must not hear too many cries for help in this world” (p. 100). With characters as flighty and fissiparous as these Bright Young Things, it is hard to see how Party Going affirms any sense of shared values.

Green’s method as a comic novelist can perhaps be better understood when seen against the backdrop of literary history. The writer V.S. Pritchett once suggested that English comic fiction can be grouped into two classes (he thought Dickens was a special case in a class of his own). On the one hand was what might be called the “masculine”

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67 Laughter, p. 197.
tradition, represented by Fielding, Austen, Trollope, George Eliot and Waugh – writers who were “robust and hard-headed”, “morally tough” and “believ[ing] in good sense”. By contrast, a second group of writers valued “imagination and sensibility more than common sense”; Pritchett called this the “feminine tradition” and said it included Sterne, Peacock, Meredith, Firbank, Joyce and other novelists whose work was “disorderly, talkative, fantastical”. This division was, Pritchett admitted, far from precise: the two traditions constantly “mingle, separate, mingle again”. Nevertheless, it is a useful distinction for examining comic method. The “masculine” writers in Pritchett’s taxonomy are much more likely to exert a strict control over their fictional worlds, with their comedy often derived from narratorial observation, whereas the “feminine” writers are apt to allow their characters a greater degree of autonomy. It is to this second group that Green’s novels belong.

Given that everything in a work of fiction is created by the author, it seems slightly odd to speak of a character’s autonomy. Yet, as Terence Doody has argued, some fictional characters possess (or, at least, have the appearance of possessing) greater freedom than others; as has been suggested already, the people of Chekhov’s stories, say, do not seem to be under the authorial thumb in quite the same way as those created by Nabokov. In a radio broadcast in 1952, Green declared his preference for such autonomous fiction: “The conventional approach by a novelist in which he presumes to know all about his characters, what they are thinking and feeling at any moment, seems to me as dead as the dodo.” In true to this principle, the comedy of *Party Going* often originates in the drift of its characters’ minds. But autonomy has its price. James Wood has pointed out that Green’s is “an art of dishevelled purpose” that can “take the reader to the limits of patience”. This is an accurate judgement: there is a certain waywardness about *Party Going* that can sometimes lead to frustration. However, that is also a mark of Green’s special kind of realism. In the world outside novels, conversations do descend into farce and people can be as tedious as Green’s stranded socialites. The wayward

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72 *The Irresponsible Self*, p. 289.
characters of *Party Going* cultivate a readerly sense of forbearing – a recognition that we must put up with muddles, that we must tolerate oddity and unreason, both in others and in ourselves.
Like most of Green’s novels, *Caught* has its moment of rapturous song – this time not, however, in Welsh. It takes place in a Soho night club where the chanteuse, a “famous coloured lady”, captivates the audience with “her low rich voice”.\(^1\) Fittingly, the prose describing this scene is itself melodious – one paragraph-sized sentence, for example, runs on for almost 140 words. Members of the audience, in their “hyacinthine, grape dark fellowship of longing”, are deeply moved by the performance, so much so that their own sexual small-talk is seemingly transformed by the song into some kind of elemental human truth (p. 112). This must be one of the scenes that Rod Mengham has in mind when he writes of the “constant sensation of phantasmagoria in *Caught*”.\(^2\) The “blue lime” trained on the singer, for instance, makes one member of the audience think he is “looking through Christmas cracker paper” (p. 111). There is in the novel a sense of shimmering unreality and not just because much of the action takes place in the strange polychromatic light of jazz clubs or the lurid firestorms of the Luftwaffe’s raids on London. There are also radical shifts of chronology, with the narrative flitting backwards and forwards in time with occasionally vertiginous effects. All of this suggests a wartime reality that is convoluted – an atmosphere of “anxious muddlement”, as the text has it (p. 36). At this point, it would not seem out of place to recall Schlegel’s notion of novels as arabesques.\(^3\) For Schlegel, the ideal novel was a kind of fanciful intertwining, a blend of fantasy and mimesis. From beginning to end, *Caught* is like that – a work of arabesque design with a complicated relationship to reality.

Yet it is surprising to find that this most ramified of Green’s novels has such a censorious narrator. In both *Living* and *Party Going*, the narrator seemed to know little

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\(^1\) *Caught* (London: Hogarth, 1943), p. 111. All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text of this chapter.

\(^2\) Mengham, p. 89.

more than his characters did about the events befalling them. *Caught* is different; here the narrator flaunts a superior knowledge and has a particular liking for correction. “How wrong he was,” the narrator will declare about one of the characters, before going on to point out the nature of some alleged error.\(^4\) As Jeremy Treglown has observed, this kind of omniscience should not be confused with omnipotence: the narrator “knows what his people are doing but knows, too, that in an imaginatively truthful story, they can’t be saved from it”.\(^5\) By highlighting various mistakes of the characters, *Caught*’s narrator accentuates, rather than dispels, the novel’s sense of muddle. It is not the case, as Rod Mengham suggests, that these narratorial interventions have a parodistic aim, somehow exposing the ontological limits of novel-writing.\(^6\) Instead, they are a demonstration of fiction’s great capacity to give form to the contradictions of human experience.

In this respect, *Caught* makes a great case for irrationality. It is a text that is being pulled in two directions at once – between extreme verisimilitude (its effort to depict life during the chaos of war) and extreme artificiality (its gusts of intense lyricism and its bursts of narratorial meddling). This tension does not admit any orderly resolution. The reader of *Caught* is likely to be left with the impression of a narrative that is highly curlicued but open-ended. Schlegel’s notion of the arabesque novel, it should be pointed out, owes something to *Tristram Shandy*, where a series of squiggles sketched by the narrator purported to chart the development of the story (which, of course, never really reached any conclusion).\(^7\) *Caught* is like that – a non-linear narrative full of dead ends and forking paths. In this overgrown garden, characters have the freedom to wander. Their thinking is sometimes at a tangent to the main events of the plot; at other times, they become lost in thickets of their own fantasy. This irrationality might be contrasted with, say, the novels of Jane Austen. In *Northanger Abbey*, for instance, Catherine Morland is constantly engaged with the task of winnowing gothic daydreams from her

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\(^4\) Rod Mengham provides a comprehensive list of these narratorial interventions (p. 103). In his view, they amount to “a series of crass intimations by an omniscient author”, which he sees as a sign of the “widespread depreciation” of literature (especially the novel) brought about by the war and its attendant sense of cultural crisis.

\(^5\) Treglown, p. 131.

\(^6\) Mengham, pp. 103–05.

thoughts in order to arrive at some empirical truth. *Caught*’s intentions are quite the reverse. Its characters remain trapped by their own fictions, both large and small. Green gets reality right by showing how often people get it wrong.

**Entrapping: Abduction and Vision in *Caught***

*Caught* is alone among Green’s novels in having a disclaimer in its front-papers. “This book,” a prefatory notice announces with lawyerly caution, “bears no relation, or resemblance, to the National Fire Service, or any individual of that Service.” It is likely that Green’s publishers insisted on this disclaimer – they were certainly nervous about the novel’s frank sexuality and, more generally, about its depiction of London’s wartime firemen as venal and incompetent. The characters in *Caught*, according to the disclaimer, “are all imaginary men and women”. On the face of it, this is an avowal of the novel’s status as a work of fancy, not of fact. But the disclaimer then tries to have it both ways, claiming that its characters, while “not drawn from life”, were nevertheless “founded on the reality of that time”; it then goes on to say, enigmatically, that “in this book only 1940 in London is real”. These cautious words were no doubt intended to deflect the watchful eye of the censor; but their prevarication also suggests that the novelist’s principal aesthetic challenge - how to represent the realities of human experience – might be even more daunting in a time of war.

It has sometimes been said that the literature of the Second World War, at least in the English language, is a comparatively impoverished one. The American critic Samuel Hynes, himself a distinguished veteran of the Battle of Okinawa, has put it this way:

[The Second World War] has not produced a canon of classic war books, as the First War did. You can test the truth of that proposition very simply: make a quick list of the great books of the First War; then list the

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8 Treglown, pp. 135–36.

great ones of the Second. The first list will come quickly and will be more or less the same for any English or American reader: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Good-bye to All That*, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, *A Farewell to Arms*, Owen’s poems. The second list will come slowly if it comes at all, and will have no uniformity from reader to reader. The canon of the Second War does not exist.¹⁰

For whatever reason, the literature of World War Two did not seem to penetrate the collective imagination in the same way that the works of, say, Remarque and Owen did during an earlier era.¹¹ But this is how matters look in retrospect; it is not necessarily how they looked to writers at the time. For Green, the war seemed to offer a new field of fictional possibilities. In fact, this was the most fertile period of his writing career: as well as some stories and criticism, he completed three novels between 1942 and 1945.¹² In his essay on Doughty (which appeared, it should be recalled, in 1941), Green insisted that it was the novelist’s task, “[n]ow that we are at war”, to develop a style appropriate to the circumstances of the day.¹³ The proper approach, he suggested, was some version of realism. This is what he meant when he advocated writing “in the idiom of the time, as Doughty without doubt wrote in the idiom of the real Arabia, and not of Araby”.¹⁴ *Caught* strives to do exactly that. Admittedly, its form and style are often oblique: there are dizzying time shifts, soaring descriptive passages and meandering soliloquies (the last done in the voices of individual characters). Given these arabesque elements, it is little wonder that Richard Roe, the novel’s main character, feels that he is “play acting” and at one point appears to doubt the reality of his own existence (pp. 28, 57). Nevertheless, *Caught* can still be considered a work written in the idiom of its time – a novel grounded in historical reality, as its disclaimer tacitly acknowledges.

In several respects, Roe’s background closely follows the contours of Green’s biography. Like his creator, Roe is upper-class and public school-educated; his family

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12 *Back* was completed in mid-1945, though it did not appear until the next year: see Treglown, p. 173.

13 “Apologia”, *Surviving*, p. 96.

14 Ibid., p. 97.
has a large country house in Gloucestershire that resembles Green’s ancestral home at Forthampton. Roe seems to be aged in his mid-thirties, as the author himself was when war was declared. In the extant manuscript of the novel, Roe is given a five year old son called Sebastian (the same name as Green’s only child); when the book was published, the name of the boy was changed to Christopher. As with much of Green’s fiction, *Caught* depicts a fractured family relationship: Roe is a widower and Dy, his dead wife’s sister, now has the primary responsibility for raising Christopher. Dy also seems to have become the object of Roe’s affections, though the nature of their relationship is never really made clear. When war breaks out, Roe leaves his position as manager of an industrial concern and takes up a posting in the Auxiliary Fire Service (his desultory training for this had occurred some time in late 1938 or early 1939). Most of the novel is set around the London fire station where Roe is assigned. Like the narrating self of *Pack My Bag*, Roe declares that he is “certain of death in the immediate raid he expected to raze London to the ground” (p. 28). But it is months before the Luftwaffe launches its attack; the action of the novel mainly takes place during this period, the so-called Phoney War (from September 1939 until August 1940). *Caught*’s time-scheme is, however, a complicated one: events are often related analeptically and, as Edward Stokes has shown, not without chronological error.

The commander of Roe’s station is Sub-Officer Albert Pye, a “Regular” (that is, a career fireman) newly promoted to supervise the inexperienced Auxiliaries. To some extent, Pye can be thought of as Roe’s alter ego: as Rod Mengham has pointed out, their names can be joined together to give the Greek word for fire (*pyro*). But, unlike Roe, Pye’s origins and sympathies are resolutely working-class – he is sometimes given to rants against capitalism and “the powers that be” (pp. 19, 57). Until shortly before the war, Pye had lived in London with his sister, neither of them having married. Then some

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15 See Treglown, p. 130 and Mengham, p.222.

16 For instance, by the end of the novel, the couple are habitually calling each other “darling” (pp. 181, 185, 192). Dy also seems to be jealous of Roe’s other romantic attachments (p. 176). Bruce Bassoff has described this as an “anticipative sexual relationship” (*Toward Loving*, p. 162).

17 Stokes, pp. 105–11.

18 Mengham, p. 97. Michael North has recently observed that this nominative combination is meant to suggest “the enforced anonymity of war”: “World War II: The City in Ruins” in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, ed. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), p. 450.
time in 1938 or early 1939 (the novel is often murky about dates), Pye’s sister bizarrely abducts a small boy from a shop who turns out to be Christopher Roe. This incident is more pathetic than it is sinister: the boy is not harmed in any way, though the delusional Miss Pye is committed to a mental institution as a result. It seems that Pye feels a mixture of guilt and resentment over his sister’s fate – guilt for the unenviable task of signing her committal papers and resentment for the regular payments to the doctors charged with her care. During the instructional lectures he delivers to Roe and the other Auxiliaries, Pye often makes “a dark reference to his sister’s little trouble” (p. 20). Only Roe is able to fathom these veiled allusions but he says nothing about it to any of the other men; throughout the novel, the abduction casts a pall over his relationship with Pye.

By chance, one of the other Auxiliaries has also learned of Christopher’s kidnapping. This is Arthur Piper, an impoverished veteran of the Great War and, at almost sixty, the oldest of the firemen at Roe’s station. Piper is obsequious to anyone in authority. This is manifested in his annoying habit of repeating the last few words of anything said to him by an officer. Sometimes he does so inaccurately – “he echoed wrong” (p. 21), as the narrative has it. This practice of meaningless repetition is an example of Caughť’s vaudevillian comedy: “once started, nothing would stop Piper and before long he was saying ‘That’s so’, or ‘Of course’, every five minutes” (pp. 21–22). Roe believes the old man to be “utterly harmless” but the narrator makes it clear that this assumption is wrong (p. 42). Indeed, Piper turns out to be much more malicious than his doddering manner suggests.

“The whole point of a fireman,” Green explained in a memoir published in 1960, “is that he is endlessly waiting.”19 The firemen of Caughť have to endure this sort of nerve-jangling suspense, as did the entire British public in the months leading up to Hitler’s assault on France. In his dedicatory note to Put Out More Flags, Evelyn Waugh pointed out that even at the time people referred to this “odd dead period” as the “Bore War”.20 Green’s equivalent expression was “the lull”; he used it as a title for a story

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about firemen that was first published in 1943.  In *Caught*, the Auxiliaries “thought the strain of waiting for raids prodigious” (p. 24). Roe is also exhausted by the physical demands of station life, so much so that he feels “bewildered” (p. 35) and even visually impaired (p. 51). Like Julia Wray walking London’s foggy streets in *Party Going*, he begins to believe that anonymity has somehow erased his personality – “that he was now a labourer, … one of the thousand million that now toiled and spun” (p. 51). But this is a fantasy; Roe has not really assimilated the manners of working-class life. After an exhausting night of sentry duty, for instance, he returns to his quarters “longing for as much sleep as he could get in the stench of Piper’s feet” (p. 44). This proves impossible, however, thanks to the larking of some of the other firemen, who decide to stage a late night tournament of cockroach racing. For Roe, all this is like living in a foreign country. The next morning, he suffers a further indignity during an early practice drill:

Richard [i.e. Roe] could wait no longer. He had to. So he went up to Wal [a Regular]. He asked permission, as he might have done in class at school. This man looked at him expressionless, said no word, unbuttoned his own trousers and, for answer, sprang a leak on to the pavement. More modest, Richard moved to the wall. (p. 45)

Class differences prove a formidable barrier to Roe’s attempts at settling into the brigade. This can be seen in his awkward interchanges with “Shiner” Wright, one of his fellow Auxiliaries. At times, it seems like the two men are speaking different languages. Shiner uses the word “conga” to describe almost every situation; this is apparently a result of his enthusiasm for the film, “King Kong”, which is said to have “had a lasting effect on his adjectives” (p. 43). Keen to exploit the sexual freedoms of wartime, Shiner is always on the look-out for available women – “eel-chasing”, as he calls it (p. 65). Through a misunderstanding, he comes to believe that Roe is homosexual: “It drifted into Shiner’s bullet head that this what’s his name, Roe, was a pansy” (p. 66). As with *Party Going*, the characters in *Caught* seem to have a special talent for conversational blunders.

English writers of World War Two – the likes of Elizabeth Bowen, Nigel Balchin and Patrick Hamilton – extensively chronicled the moral permissiveness that accompanied the trauma of the Blitz. Much of *Caught* also concerns this heightened

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21 “The Lull”, *Surviving*, pp. 98–110. The story first appeared in a little magazine, *New Writing and Daylight* and concerns London in the months before the Blitz. Several incidents in the story were later re-used in *Caught*. 
awareness of sexuality and its discontents. Early in the novel, Pye becomes involved with a young woman called Prudence who lives near the station and “has a soft spot for firemen” (p. 73). Pye’s general attitude towards women is, to say the least, cynical. His vocabulary, for instance, is peppered with derogatory synonyms for females: “a real cow” (p. 49), a “bit of fancy lump of grub” (p. 142), a “crafty whore” (p. 144) and so on. The basis of his relationship with Prudence seems to be a mutual hedonism. Contrary to the caution suggested by her name, “it was danger Prudence sought in this lull of living” (p. 122). There is only limited pleasure to be found in Pye’s company; in fact, she is said to be “tolerably miserable for another man” (p. 119). Nevertheless, she allows Pye to squire her around the nightclubs of Soho, although such gin-fuelled escapism is too expensive for a man of his means. Even in the twenty-first century, readers might still find themselves shocked by the sheer ruthlessness that characterises Caught’s relationships. Certainly, Prudence is not beyond exploiting Pye’s desperate need for the consolations of the flesh: “War, she thought, was sex” (p. 119).

Roe also begins an affair. During the first few months of the war, he had experienced “a fresh tide of longing” for his dead wife (p. 63); at one point, his morbidity is such that he starts to believe he will soon “rejoin” her (p. 28). But he soon becomes attracted to Hilly, a young WAFS (that is, a member of the Women’s Auxiliary Fire Service) assigned to his station. Like Pye’s entanglement with Prudence, this affair is only skin-deep. For her part, Hilly admits to feeling “quite sick” at the prospect of Roe as a lover (p. 100); when they go out, she feigns interest in his stories. Things change, however, under the influence of jazz and liquor. After a visit to a nightclub, the pair become lovers – though, perversely, this seems to doom their relationship. Roe soon begins to feel “irritated” by Hilly, “mainly because she had gone to bed with him”; in his warped thinking, this “made her of no account” (p. 130).

In a memoir of his wartime experiences, Green made it clear that the unflattering descriptions of the fire service in Caught were based on fact.22 One of the novel’s many examples of the brigade’s maladministration concerns the employment of a cook called Mary Howells. This woman, an elderly char who had never worked in a kitchen before, is an old friend of Piper’s (it is his influence that wangles her the job at the station). As

well as being unskilled, Mary is distracted by her own family problems, especially the unhappy circumstances of her daughter Brid. Married to a soldier (referred to only as “Ted”), Brid lives somewhere up north and has recently given birth to her first child. “The ’usband’s a rotter, a real rotter,” according to Mary (p. 58), who alleges he is abusive in some unspecified way. Without warning, Brid returns home to her mother in London. This is one of the most memorable scenes in the novel, deeply affecting and palpably realistic – right down to the puddles of melting snow at Brid’s feet that threaten to ruin her mother’s carpet (p. 79). Overwhelmed with anxiety, Mary becomes virtually incapable of any work in the station-house kitchen. Soon after, she decides to visit the military camp where “the rotten, good-for-nothing, lying ’ound her son-in-law hung out” (p. 84). Of course, such unauthorised absences were not permissible under the brigade’s regulations: Mary is “adrift”, as Pye puts it (p. 89). In a ham-fisted way, Pye attempts to cover for her; this subterfuge, however, only adds to the difficulties he is already having with his own supervisors.

As it happened, Pye had recently been “adrift” himself. The asylum that houses his sister had sent “a summons he could not ignore” (p. 84); like Mary Howells, he decides to take a period of unapproved leave to go there. This visit proves upsetting for him: his sister begins to rave, “asking when he was going to bring her child” (p. 87). Pye’s absence, though only brief, further increases the suspicions of his immediate superior, District Officer Trant. Pye had taken steps to cover his tracks but he knew he had “already got the wrong side of Trant” (p. 90). Nor has the station itself thrived under Pye’s leadership; indeed, it has become riven with mistrust and back-stabbing. Partly as a result of Pye’s ill-judged talk, a rumour develops that Roe has been Trant’s informant – that he “put the squeak in” (p. 88), to use the firemen’s jargon. This leads to Roe’s ostracism by the other Auxiliaries. Before long he is being ridiculed with the nickname “Savoury” - ostensibly, a reference to Savile Row, where “expensive tailors used to measure the well-breeched for their suits” (p. 88). All Roe can do to get back into favour is to shout beers at the pub; class resentment does not deter the other firemen from sponging off him.

In fact, it is the treacherous Piper who has been the source of Trant’s information. The old man had volunteered to paint the District Officer’s house in the hope of some
vague reward; this gives him regular access to Trant and he is not slow to reveal the station’s administrative malaise. In any case, Trant’s suspicions had already been aroused. This extra scrutiny from his superiors is too much for Pye, who gradually begins to unravel. What little confidence his men had in him evaporates – behind his back, they blame his incompetence on his nightly “excursions” to Prudence’s flat (p. 124). Pye also makes the mistake of neglecting his paperwork “which, day by day, seemed to breed, [so] that he got to be more and ever behind” (p. 132). Eventually, Trant gives him an official warning. This rebuke is delivered with a “deceptive softness … in dangerous, gentle language” (p. 137) – Green is always good at evoking the subtle brutalities of power. Philip Toynbee, one of the novel’s first reviewers, summed up Pye as a man in over his head: “a type not hitherto described [in English fiction]: the benevolent, bewildered and suspicious proletarian, for whom authority proves tragically too sudden and indigestible”.23

Things get even worse for Pye when he is summoned to the asylum for a second time. There a psychiatrist informs him that his sister’s condition has worsened (which immediately makes him worry that more expensive forms of treatment will be required). The unnamed psychiatrist then begins to question him about his sister’s childhood, but the fireman refuses to discuss anything of his family history. This “rotten-gutted bastard of a doctor” (p. 141), to use Pye’s term for him, stands out as one of the few cartoonish characters in Green’s fiction. The interview with Pye is virtually a parody of Freudian analysis and might be read as a warning against any such interpretation of the novel. In the course of the interview, the psychiatrist fiddles with an ivory paper-knife that is “carved at one end like the figure head beneath a bowsprit” (p. 138). This is perhaps a further sign that Green is presenting a caricature here – like the carved figure, the psychiatrist is only a simulacrum of a real person.

The interview does, however, prompt Pye to recall his first sexual experience. This episode, it seems, had always troubled him, not least because of its violent overtones. On a moonlit night some decades in the past, the young Pye had encountered a girl in a village lane (like Roe, his adolescence had been spent in the country):

He remembered how she panted through her nose and the feel of her true, roughened hands as they came to repel him and then, at the warmth of his skin, had stayed irresolute at the surface while, all lost, she murmured, “Will it hurt?” (p. 41)

No other words are exchanged during this encounter, though the girl weeps afterwards. On his way home, Pye notices his sister skulking around in the darkness, “out whoring maybe as he had been, up now from off her back no doubt” (p. 42). The very thought of this revolts him: “He called to mind how disgusted it had made him, the sight of his sister, like a white wood shaving, when she darted, huddled, across the last still stretch of moonlight” (p. 42). Pye had first reflected on this episode early in the novel when, shortly after the declaration of war, he is unable to sleep because of his excitement about the impending conflict (p. 40). But his memory of the event alters at the prodding of the psychiatrist. As a consequence, he begins to suspect that a case of mistaken identity might have led him to break the most powerful of taboos:

Without any warning, and with a shock that took all his breath, Pye saw the dry wood shaving creep, bent in the moonlight, the back way to their cottage. He saw it again as though it was before his eyes, which he now tried to draw away from the doctor’s. He had never before thought of his sister’s creeping separate from his own … In a surge of blood, it was made clear, false, that it might have been his own sister he was with that night. So it might have been her voice, thick with excitement and fright and disgust that said “Will it hurt?” So in the blind moonlight, eyes warped by his need, he must have forced his own sister. (p. 140)

Visual failure is one of Green’s enduring fantasies and Pye’s night-time sexual encounter is another variation on this theme. Contraposed rhetoric emphasises his uncertain memory of the event (“it was made clear, false”). Details are seldom gratuitous in Caught, so the strange simile, twice used, of Pye’s sister as a “white wood shaving” might be linked with the psychiatrist’s paper-knife, itself said to be carved like a wooden figure. This points to the artifice of memory – how it is possible to fabricate the past, just as shapes may be carved from wood. Pye suspects as much himself. The day after his visit to the asylum, he “of course was no longer sure that he had forced his sister that
night long ago” (p. 143). To allay his doubts, he resolves to conduct experiments in the black-out, testing his night-time vision (p. 144). But the question continues to haunt him. In the course of a drinking session, he mentions the matter to Roe, who assures him that psychiatrists are of dubious value: “I know a man who went to one,” Roe tells him, “and he came out crackers” (p. 158). This gives Pye little comfort, so he asks Roe whether a man could be mistaken about the identity of his lover on a dark night; Roe concedes it is possible to make such an error, “unless she had a mastoid, or something similar” (p. 160). But Pye is obviously still on edge and Roe begins to doubt the man’s sanity (p. 162).

Sex becomes an even greater problem for Pye after Prudence suddenly terminates their relationship - she simply “went off” him, as the narrator starkly puts it (p. 143). Paranoid as ever, Pye wonders if the asylum doctor had spoken to her, divulging the circumstances of his sister’s confinement. “You’ve become a different girlie altogether,” Pye tells her – once again suggesting an anxiety about the true identity of his lovers. At the station, the secret of his sister’s mental illness has now become common knowledge: the devious Piper has told all and sundry about the unfortunate circumstances of Christopher Roe’s abduction. This story is soon garbled. In one version, it is Pye himself – not his sister – who was the kidnapper. In any case, the dynamics of station life quickly change as a result of the story. Much to his surprise, Roe becomes popular with the other men: “the whole story made him someone in their eyes” (p. 154). His refusal to comment on the abduction, though explained by some as a fear of provoking Pye’s wrath, further elevates his reputation. For the first time, Roe “became real” to the other Auxiliaries (p. 154).

By now, Pye is clearly unhinged. At night, he continues his peregrinations through the darkened streets “to try once more to find how much he could recognise by this light” (p. 162). On one such occasion, he encounters a small boy – a street urchin “with snot pulsating at his nostrils” (p. 167). Pye takes this scruffy child back to the station-house, giving him food and a bed for the night (p. 170). Though motivated by sympathy for the homeless boy’s plight, Pye’s actions bear a strange similarity to his

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24 Not all of Green’s readers share Pye’s doubt. In her explicitly Freudian reading of the novel, Lyndsey Stonebridge seems to assume that Pye does have incestuous relations with his sister: “Bombs and Roses: The Writing of Anxiety in Henry Green’s Caught”, Diacritics (1998) vol. 28, no. 4, p. 32. By contrast, Michael North recognises that “the interjection of the word false makes it clear that Pye is deluded” (North, p. 113).
sister’s abduction of Christopher Roe. Not surprisingly, bringing a child to the station-house contravenes brigade regulations. District Officer Trant soon discovers that Pye has been “adrift” at nights and, thanks to Piper’s treachery, also learns about the boy. Pye’s fate is sealed. Trant notifies him by telephone that he will be charged with official misconduct. In response, Pye can only bury his “burning face” in his hands – an image of shame that surely cannot be accidental in a novel about fire-fighting. This is Pye’s final appearance in the book. It is subsequently revealed that he gassed himself to death soon afterwards. This is how Roe describes the event to his sister-in-law Dy some months later:

[What finally ruined him was the authority he got. He didn’t do anything to get it. It came with the war, because he was an experienced fireman. He wasn’t in the least ready to have men under him. Hardly any of them were .... But it was sex finished him off, and sex arising out of his authority. (p. 195)

Pye does not live to see the Blitz. The novel has two extended descriptions of the fires caused by the attacks on London in 1940. The first is given analeptically, interleaved in a conversation between Roe and Hilly that takes place some months before the raids begin. Hilly is often given to pronouncements about the courage and expertise of the Regulars – declaring, for instance, that “the London Fire Brigade is right up ahead of any other” (p. 95). This view is contradicted by the raid that is said to occur “almost twelve months to a day after this conversation” (p. 95). In the description of this raid, the Regulars are exposed as craven and disorganised. Here Green reveals the chaos of the Blitz in all its lurid detail: the civilian casualties (a “twisted creature” on a stretcher “coughed a last, gushing gout of blood”); the social disorder (a looter is carted off by the police, “heels dragging, drooling blood at the mouth, out on his feet from the bashing he had been given”); and the rampant sexuality (a soldier and a prostitute copulate in a bomb shelter). When the narration returns from the near future to the diegetic present, Hilly remains insistent that the Regulars will “be wonderful, honestly wonderful, you’ll see” (p. 98).

The second and longer account of a raid occurs in the final pages of the novel. After having endured many weeks of fire-fighting, Roe is given some leave. A bomb had fallen very close to him during one recent attack and, though not physically injured, he
has suffered some form of shell-shock: “They called it nervous debility” (p. 172). Roe returns to his Gloucestershire home so he can spend a few days with Christopher and Dy (by this stage their romance appears to be well under way). On a walk through the wintry estate, Roe begins to tell Dy about his experience of the first night of the Blitz. The urge to recount these events proves irresistible: “he opened the floodgates, really getting down to it” (p. 176). But Dy can barely muster up any interest: “there was nothing in what he had spoken to catch her imagination” (p. 179). It is a struggle for Roe to put his experience into words: “I suppose it was not like that at all really,” he admits, “one changes everything after by going over it” (p. 179). Dy is dubious about whether the past can be fabricated in this way; she states the case for the primacy of visual memory: “the real thing is the picture you carry in your eye afterwards, surely?” (p. 179). Language, Roe concedes, is inadequate to convey experience: “there’s always something you can’t describe, and it’s not the Blitz alone that’s true of” (p. 180). When Dy attributes this inadequacy to Roe having been “blown up”, he rebukes her sharply for what he says is her tendency to oversimplify matters: “you’re always trying to explain difficult things prosaically,” he tells her (p. 180).

This is not the only time during their lengthy conversation when the couple get on each other’s nerves. Their talk is also periodically interrupted by the brattish Christopher who is tearing around the garden, knocking snow off the tree branches in order to frighten away any birds. But Roe manages to “plough on” with his story: “I do so want you to get the whole thing,” he tells Dy (p. 180). His rambling account reveals the great dangers faced by the firemen – both Piper and Shiner were killed during the first night of action. At various stages, however, the narrator interrupts Roe’s remembrance: long parenthetical paragraphs are inserted, giving a fuller version of the events that the fireman is trying his best to describe. Indeed, sometimes these insertions explicitly contradict Roe’s account – “it had not been like that at all,” the narrator bluntly announces on two occasions (pp. 176, 180). Dy also remains somewhat sceptical of the melodramatic aspects of Roe’s story: “she was not going to take him tragically,” the reader is advised (p. 181). But eventually Roe exhausts his narrative urge and starts “to tail off, as though the impulse which had driven him to tell, like a clockwork spring, was beginning to run down” (p. 192).
The novel ends with the couple bickering. For some reason, Roe becomes enraged when Dy asks him that most philosophical of questions: “I wonder what’s the meaning of it all?” (p. 194). Dy’s inquiry seems to be a comment (albeit a facile one) on the futility of war. Roe reacts angrily - in a disproportionate fashion. He abruptly changes the subject by accusing Dy of having been “most unfair” to Pye. The gravamen of this charge is unclear – Green’s characters are seldom coherent in their arguments. Somehow Roe seems to believe that Dy blames Pye for his sister’s abduction of Christopher. “[W]hen I was posted to his station it was much worse for him than it was for me,” Roe observes (p. 195). In attempting to justify his former superior’s actions, Roe lets slip that Pye once “brought a boy back late” to the station-house; he then hastily adds that this was not a sexual act, nor did it in any way mimic Christopher’s kidnapping. Then, like Lily Gates at the end of Living, Roe performs a very odd gesture: he declares that Pye’s behaviour in taking the boy into custody was “unpremeditated, just like this” and thereupon pushes his walking-stick some six inches into the ground. This is seemingly intended as an act of defiance – a rejection of authority and convention, in the spirit of Pye’s own rule-breaking conduct. It only irritates Dy: “Don’t be a fool,” she scolds (p. 196). When Roe reminds her that Pye committed suicide, she vehemently proclaims that she will “always hate him and his beastly sister” for Christopher’s abduction (p. 196). Roe is incensed: “‘God damn you,’ he shouted, releasing everything, ‘you get on my bloody nerves, all you bloody women with all your talk’ ” (p. 196). Dy storms off. Immediately Roe feels foolish but also “that he had got away at last” (p. 196). When the inquisitive Christopher comes up to see what all the fuss was about, Roe orders him away as well. But he quickly corrects himself: “Well, anyway, leave me alone till after tea, can’t you?” (p. 196). This is the last sentence in the novel; like Living and Party Going before it, Caught ends with a character’s voice.

It is hard to know what to make of Roe’s denunciation of Dy and her “talk”. By her own admission, she feels little sympathy either for Pye or his wretched sister, but there is no suggestion that this lack of charity has any practical consequences. In any case, Dy must surely be entitled to her opinion; after all, she stands in loco parentis to Christopher and was greatly upset by his abduction. Moreover, it is not Dy but Roe who is the character in the novel most given to “talk”. When he launches on his story of the
raid, Dy knows that nothing will stop him “trying to get it out of his system” (p. 174) and that this urge to narrate was, by his standards, completely normal (p. 177). Indeed, in his attempt to reconstruct the past – specifically, to describe the shock and awe of the Blitz – Roe might even be considered something of an artist-figure:

“The extraordinary thing is,” he said [to Dy], “that one’s imagination is so literary: What will go on up there tonight in London, every night, is more like a film, or that’s what it seems like at the time. Then afterwards, when you go over it, everything seems unreal, probably because you were so tired, as you begin building again to describe to yourself some experience you’ve had. It’s so difficult.” (p. 174, emphasis added)

The novel’s representation of fire-fighting is indeed cinematic. The first raid (described proleptically in the conversation between Roe and Hilly) includes a number of striking images that might be considered filmic – the bashed looter, the bloody stretcher-case, the bomb-shelter lovers. In the “livid incandescence” of the fires, Roe seems to develop a heightened sense of vision. The streets become so well illuminated that, even at some distance, he is “able to pick out details of brickwork and stone facings more easily, and in colours more natural, than would have been possible on a spring morning, in early sunlight” (p. 95). The raid featured in the novel’s closing pages, as has already been noted, is described by two competing voices – Roe (in conversation with Dy) and the editorialising narrator. Again, it is the narrator who, in movie parlance, supplies the special effects:

…warehouses, small towers, puny steeples seemed alive with sparks from the mile high pandemonium of flame (pp. 176–77)

What he had seen was a broken, torn-up dark mosaic aglow with rose where square after square of timber had been burned down to embers … (p. 180)

A barge, overloaded with planks, drifted in flames across the black, green, then mushroom-skin river water under an upthrusting mountain of fox-dyed smoke that pushed up towards the green pulsing fringe of heaven. (p. 182)

These descriptions have been quoted at length to show how the narrator strives to reproduce the colour and immensity of London on fire. But Roe’s re-telling of the experience is quite different because it is based on words, not images. As he explains to Dy, his “imagination” – by which he seems to mean his memory – has a literary quality
to it. To his own mind, this makes his account seem unreal, though this does little to 
diminish its intensity. Roe’s need to relate the night of the raid is said to be “urgent” 
(p. 175); even in giving his “inadequate description” of the events, he begins “avidly 
living that moment again” (p. 178). Roe, then, is the character in the novel most closely 
associated with the power of “talk” – not Dy or the “bloody women” of his unreasoned 
accusation. For him, the voice can even liberate personality. When he shouts at Dy, he 
feels as if he is “releasing everything”; though immediately embarrassed at his own 
outburst, he still has a sense of emancipation, “that he had got away at last” (p. 196).

Such brief feelings of freedom are atypical in a novel that emphasises the 
manifold forms of entrapment. This is suggested by the frequency with which the word 
“caught” reverberates throughout the text. The condition of being ensnared, either by 
society or circumstance, is a recurring motif. In an early scene, Roe and Christopher 
come across a trap for rooks while out walking on their Gloucestershire estate; the boy 
remembered “with satisfaction” how the birds used to struggle inside it “until the keeper 
came with his gun” (p. 10). Christopher’s abduction itself involves a form of entrapment, 
when Pye’s sister lures him away from a shop with the gift of a toy sailing boat. The 
poor woman’s mental state might also be considered in these terms – it is likened to 
“entanglement” in a patch of “twining briars” (p. 42). For different reasons, Pye also 
regards himself as having been entrapped by his sister’s madness. Over a beer, he 
explains to Roe that he was compelled by the authorities to agree to her detention – “they 
told me I must sign her away like a bit of furniture or they would prosecute” (p. 38). Pye 
resents his lack of any real say in the matter, which he calls “the force majewer” (p. 38). 
Entrapment, the novel reminds us, always entails impotence of one sort or another.

This notion of being caught is a supple one that Green extends to cover the tricks 
of the eye. In a sense, it is vision that leads to Christopher’s abduction. Wandering by 
himself in a department store, the boy becomes almost mesmerised by the patterns of 
“deep colour” (p. 12) made by the sunlight passing through the store’s stained glass 
windows. This experience is registered by a kaleidoscope of adjectives – “sapphire”, 
“fire brigade scarlet”, “carmine”, “sloe”, “grape” and so on (pp. 12–13). Beguiled by this

25 The use of “caught” and its variants (such as “catch”) is very widespread indeed; for some 
significant uses of the word, see pp. 14, 15, 21, 50, 64, 89, 90, 104, 164, 195.
panorama, Christopher is said to be “lost in feelings” (p. 13) and under a “spell which held his eyes” (p. 14). As a result, it is easy for Pye’s mad sister to kidnap him. When the boy looks up at her, he “became dazzled by the pink neon lights beyond her features” (p. 14). There is no need for her to say anything: “[w]ords were no means of communication now” (p. 14). Christopher is lured away, but outside – “in the dull light of autumn” (p. 15) – he is immediately suspicious. It is voice that saves him. When the boy begins to ask questions, Pye’s sister reveals herself to be an interloper. In terror, he screams. Like his father at the novel’s end, Christopher is liberated by this “astounding screech of hate and fright” (p. 17) – it brings about his rescue.

The optics of stained glass also prove fascinating for Roe. In flashback, it is revealed that he was once invited to inspect the famous stained glass window at Tewkesbury Abbey when aged about sixteen. (The author’s family home at Forthampton was only a short walk from this abbey; Green, in fact, was buried there.) Access to this window was by way of a narrow ledge – “no balustrade, no rail” (p. 11) – located about forty feet above the abbey’s stone floor. As he negotiated his way along this ledge, the young Roe is said to have experienced an almost overwhelming “urge to leap” (p. 11). This vertiginous impulse seems to derive from the patterns of colour made by the sunlight shining through the stained glass. It is not the only occasion in the novel when Roe is enthralled by colour; indeed, it can hardly be coincidental that he develops an affection for a woman called Dy. Colour also plays a part in his fling with Hilly. There are some quite elaborate descriptions of the visual effects in the nightclub where Roe first seduces her: the lamps throw “little coral pools” of light (p. 100), the heads of the other diners gleam like sapphires (p. 107), and the jazz singer’s blue spotlight makes Roe think he is looking through cellophane (p. 111). Appearances can often deceive in the novel. Early on, for instance, Roe conducts a safety inspection of Prudence’s flat (this was at a time before she became Pye’s lover). Upon entering, Roe notices a glass tank filled with what, to his eye, look like cut daffodils; these “flowers”, however, have actually been made out of old sardine tins by Prudence’s flatmate (pp. 50–51). There could be no better demonstration of Roe’s unreliability as a witness. Indeed, he is even deceived by his own appearance. On the basis of his grimy skin and four days’ growth, Roe believes he has been transformed into a labourer – that, because of his dishevelment, he has actually
become a member of the lumpenproletariat (notwithstanding his posh accent and country estate).

Even more than Roe, it is Pye who is caught by the fallibility of vision. In one of his rambling monologues, Pye stresses the importance of “a man’s capability to see rightly for ’isself” (p. 38, emphasis added). Yet this is precisely what he cannot do; the incest that he dreads is predicated on a visual mistake. His recollection of the incident emphasises the imperfections of seeing: the only illumination comes from “blind moonlight” and, in any event, his eyes are said to be “warped by his need” (p. 140). After the psychiatrist sows the seeds of doubt in his mind, Pye begins to test the power of his night-time vision. Surprisingly, his sense of colour becomes heightened during the black-out: the shadows are like “deep gentian cracker paper” (p. 163), a policeman’s torch casts a “primrose” light (p. 163), and the nasal mucus of the street urchin he comes across is “almost Eton blue” (p. 168). Michael North argues that Pye is undone by his obsession with the past – that he becomes “subject to memories he can no longer control”.26 This approach, however, downplays the role of vision in Pye’s predicament. It is not so much the burden of memory that leads him to take in the street urchin, but the power of human sympathy: Pye is moved to tears by seeing this lost boy wandering the dark streets (p. 169). It is an act of charity, but one that seals Pye’s fate.

Caught is the story of one man’s demise and another’s survival. Where Pye was troubled by his failure to “see rightly”, Roe is much more tolerant of imprecision. Indeed, he seems to have an eye for what Chaucer called “the covered qualitee / Of thynges”.27 On leave in Gloucestershire, Roe admires the picturesque countryside, which is half-hidden by rain clouds “in the way a veil will obscure, yet enhance, the beauty of a well-remembered face” (p. 8). This notion of veiled beauty is then associated with his dead wife, whose memory becomes increasingly clouded in his mind (p. 9). Roe himself is a blurred character – an aristocrat who looks like a labourer, a grieving widower who pursues two other women, a loving father who is supremely awkward with his own son.28

26  North, p. 114.


Even in the novel’s final sentence, Roe is in two minds, ordering Christopher away but only until after tea-time. The blurring also comes from his constant motion. Roe is usually seen on the move – tramping around his estate, travelling on trains between London and Gloucestershire, or scrambling for survival in the novel’s great set-pieces of fire-fighting. Indeed, it is difficult to form any conclusive view about his temperament. In giving an account of the conflagration that devastated London’s timber-yards on the first night of the Blitz, Roe emphasises his own fear and alleged incompetence; but the reader might surmise, on the basis of the narrator’s competing version of these events, that Roe’s actions could equally be regarded as heroic. William Hazlitt once remarked on the mutability of Shakespeare’s characters, as demonstrated by the “continual composition and decomposition” of their personalities; something similar could be said of Roe, a man of change and paradox. This is the other resonance of his name, one not addressed by Rod Mengham or Michael North – “roe” is a term for the patterned alternation of light and dark streaks in the grain of timber.

**Fabulating: Story and History in Caught**

*Caught* is full of echoes. Piper is the novel’s great repeater, often to the point of irritation; as his name suggests, he has a tendency to “pipe up” at inappropriate moments by repeating the words of his interlocutors. Shiner also likes to punctuate his speech with echoes – in his case, fragments of the slang used in Hollywood films. But it is not just these minor characters who practise forms of verbal mimicry. When Pye tells his men to “keep on top line”, he is repeating, word for word, a phrase that Trant had said to him (p. 92). On another occasion, Pye even utters one of the banal expressions (“so there you are”) habitually employed by Piper; in doing so, Pye – conscious of the echo – is able to

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29 Treglown, for instance, suggests that Roe “acted bravely in an uncontrollable situation” (p. 133).
give his listeners a laugh (p. 68). Roe also parrots this same empty phrase in the course of seducing Hilly (p. 109). Even more bizarrely, Roe is inclined to recite his training lectures whenever he is trying to chat up women; he does this to emphasise the dangers of fire-fighting, thereby hoping to cast himself in a more favourable light (p. 70). This catalogue of echoes points to Green’s fascination with what might be considered forms of empty or idle talk. It is a fascination that some notable philosophers have shared. Kierkegaard, for instance, worried that what he called “chatter” (he refrained from defining the term in any precise way) might undermine the authority of philosophical discourse.31 Wittgenstein had a similar concern: in one of his most famous aphorisms, he suggested that “philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday”.32 But banalities and chatter never have such negative connotations for Green. The verbal echoes of his characters are not meaningless in the ways that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein worried about. For a novelist (though perhaps not for all philosophers), an empty phrase still says something about the mental life of the person uttering it. Speech is often all we have to go on in our efforts to know what someone else is thinking and that is the case even when the spoken words seem useless or irrelevant, a psittacism or an echo.

The characters of Caught do not always do their thinking aloud. Like the nanny in Blindness, they have a propensity to tell elaborate stories inside their own heads. Mary Howells, the elderly charwoman, is just this sort of fabulist. After deciding to visit her estranged son-in-law Ted at his barracks, Mary imagines the event beforehand in some detail: “she pictured at the back of her eye the descent she was going to make on this camp” (pp. 83–84). In her fantasy, the searchlight beams become “herald angels” and “great whited monuments, like the tomb in Whitehall, lined the roadway” (p. 84). A sentry challenges her:

She caught the bayonet’s flash. “Who goes there?” he would say. And then she could tell him. “A mother,” was all she would reply. Yes, he must know, that had a mother of his own. “Pass mother.” And the next. “Who goes there?” “A mother, like you have of your own.” “Pass.” “Who goes there?” “A mother,” right until she was at the gates where that

miserable twister would be waiting, froze with his conscience, wiping his white hands, the ponce. (p. 84)

But Mary’s visit is nothing like her fantasy. There is no night-time walk to the camp; instead, Ted meets her at the railway station where, without melodrama, they decide to have a cup of tea. (In a nice touch of verisimilitude, Mary gives Ted a “tanner” – that is, a sixpence – to pay for their refreshments; he pockets the change without comment, much to her annoyance.) No mention is made of Ted’s allegedly abusive behaviour; Mary “did not have the heart” to bring it up and returns to London the next day. Yet, back at the fire station, she gives her friend Arthur Piper a completely different account of what happened:

“But I told ’im, Arthur, you should’ve been there to ’ear. I said to ’im, I says,” she went on, imagining every word, “ ‘You’re no good to no one, and I got a daughter, I ’ave, ’oo you took, an’ when you used what you wanted you sent ’er back,’ I says, ‘more shame to yer, call yerself a man,’ I said. ’E went white, Arthur, even if ’e didn’t say nothink. But I wouldn’t spare ’im. ‘Yus,’ I said, ‘yus, you ’as your pleasure of a gel, and then what,’ I says, ‘why, you want another dish. The best won’t do for yer but you’ve got to ape them as can afford it, the rich with their filthy cases every day in the paper.’ ”

“Every day in the paper,” Piper echoed. (p. 117)

There are moments in Caught when the reader is stimulated to consider its greatness and this is one of them. It would not be unjustified to call this scene Chekhovian in its fidelity to life, drawing attention to the behavioural fact that our untruths are just as likely to be extemporaneous as premeditated. Mary is simply making things up as she goes along. Like Piper’s echo, her story has neither motive nor teleology. Nor do any consequences appear to attach to it: Piper is not even listening and Mary herself seems in no way affected by her own fantasy. Social comment is included when she passes judgement on the adulterous rich “with their filthy cases”; but social comment is not the purpose of her story, any more than it can be considered an exercise in self-justification. Rather, this is story-telling for its own sake. Here, as elsewhere in Green’s fiction, a character is usurping the role of the narrator, though the story being retailed offers a version of events that the reader knows never happened. But this too is part of the novel’s realism. The urge to narrate, as Fredric Jameson once suggested, is the
fundamental mode of human intelligence and culture. The house of narrative has many mansions, with room enough for something as muddled and silly as an old charwoman’s ramble.

Because her visit to the camp takes place without official leave, Mary is eventually reported for being “adrift”. Disciplinary proceedings loom and she is required to appear before Mr Dodge, the Chief Superintendent of the fire service. As her immediate supervisor, Pye accompanies her to brigade headquarters, full of trepidation for what might be decided and how this might affect his own position. But Mary’s powers of narration save her. Almost at once, she decides that she “liked the look” of Dodge and “recognised him as a man she could talk to” (p. 131). As she intuits, the Chief Superintendent relishes stories: “she had smelled the gossip in Mr Dodge” (p. 131). Mary regales him with the saga of her daughter’s troubles and, much to Pye’s surprise, is let off without even a reprimand.

Pye also fantasises about his own period “adrift”, but in quite different terms from Mary’s mental melodrama. When he first imagines the excursion to see his sister, “as usual he pictured himself involved in argument” (p. 84) – in this case, a bad-tempered exchange with a bus conductor about the best way to get to the asylum. Pye then dreams up conversations with his sister’s doctor but even these are permeated with his own workplace anxieties; ultimately, this imaginary doctor is transformed into a “Fire Brigade Superintendent, wet through, in full rig” (p. 86). This is the kernel of Pye’s problem – an inability to escape the burdens of his newfound authority, even in the stories he tells himself. Throughout the novel, Pye’s verbal powers are also shown to be weak. His training lectures to the Auxiliaries are said to be “muddled” (p. 19); his discussions with the station cook about rations and staffing issues become so strained that the cook resigns (pp. 135–36). The official language that he uses at the station is mangled beyond all comprehension, such as his inquiry about Mary Howells’s whereabouts:

“[W]hen I ask a thing, I mean a question of that nature, what I’m getting at is, is there any way I, the individual responsible for the efficiency, and that means the happiness, of this station, is there any reasonable means by which I can alluviate [sic] the little things that count such a lot to everyone, not only men, at times such as the present.” (p. 61)

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Pye is shown to be inarticulate in other ways. Unlike Mary Howells, he is unable to talk his way out of trouble when his superiors put him “on the mat” (as he calls it). When the psychiatrist tries to discuss his sister’s past, Pye insists that reticence is a family trait (p. 138). But this leaves him vulnerable to the version of events suggested by the cartoonishly Freudian doctor – that is, the possibility of incest. Michael North is right to argue that Pye’s identity crisis is exacerbated by his failure to clear up “his doubts about the past”.34 But that process of self-definition could only have occurred, one suspects, if Pye had been able to construct some sort of explanatory narrative about his early sexual encounter.

Like Pye, Roe also has bouts of forgetting. It bothers him, for instance, that “at the height of the first Blitz” he is unable to recall the circumstances in which he had given his son a Christmas present (pp. 25–26); the implication is that such failures of memory are part of the mental dislocation of war. Yet some of Roe’s other amnesiac episodes disturb him far less. In particular, his memory of his wife changes over the course of the novel. Initially, his grief for her is so prodigious that it provokes a kind of general death-wish (p. 28); at another point, it borders on being an erotic obsession (p. 33). But Roe’s recollections of married life become increasingly selective: he forgets “that he used to take office worries home at night” and remembers “only the beatitude” of their time together (p. 93). The war continues to transform his inner life. After weeks of prolonged fire-fighting, his grief seems to dissipate: “he had forgotten his wife,” the narrator announces starkly (p. 178). Indeed, for one moment during the final section of the novel, he addresses Dy “as though she was her dead sister” (p. 174). Roe’s fluctuating powers of recall suggest a linguistic model of memory, one that can be traced back to Augustine’s *Confessions*. Memory, according to Augustine, “produces not the actual events which have passed away but *words conceived* from images of them.”35 Roe recognises this element of invention in his own rambling account of the Blitz; this sort of recollection, as he explains to Dy, is “so literary” (p. 174).

It is too simple to say that Pye is visual where Roe is vocal. Yet such a distinction would not be entirely without explanatory value: Pye has a mania for “seeing rightly”,

34 North, p. 114.
Roe wants to talk everything “out of his system”; Pye mangles his words, Roe finds a voice that could almost be literary; Pye yearns for clarity and perishes, Roe tolerates vagueness and endures. This last notion of Roe’s survival might not be accepted by all of *Caught’s* readers. Michael North, for instance, has argued that the final section of the novel presents Roe as a man trapped by his own delusions.\(^{36}\) Certainly, Roe’s mental state is precarious after nine weeks of continuous fire-fighting. But, in North’s judgement, Roe has become a slightly less extreme version of the hapless Pye – that is, a character whose sense of identity has been irremediably disturbed.\(^{37}\) The novel’s ending, however, might not be as bleak as North suggests. It is true that Roe has lost his grip on the past – confusing Dy with his dead wife is evidence of that. Yet there is no reason to suppose that his “nervous debility” (p. 172) will be permanent. North also goes too far in claiming that Roe has effectively been “destroyed” by his own fictions.\(^{38}\) On the contrary, by recognising the constructedness of memory, Roe might well have found a way of dealing with the traumas of the Blitz. Perhaps it is too early to tell, because the novel ends so abruptly. But, if anything, the final paragraphs suggest that Roe has been liberated, not “destroyed”: after his outburst towards Dy, he feels “that he had got away at last” (p. 196). Like Green’s other novels, *Caught* closes on a problem of closure. Even the concluding sentence is uncertain. North argues that it shows “Roe’s last action is to send others away, to demand solitude even from his own family”; but this overlooks how equivocal his conduct is, since he orders Christopher to leave him alone only “till after tea” (p. 196). In short, it is difficult to form a definitive view about Roe’s fate. Ambiguity is inscribed in his name, with its connotations of the variegated pattern in timber; perhaps, then, it should not surprise that his last moments in the novel are also enigmatic.

Stories do not always have neat endings; sometimes they just peter out, rather than round off. The fabulations of Mary Howells and Roe are like this; on a larger scale, so is the novel that contains them. *Caught’s* ending gives the impression that narration has simply ground to a halt, but it is difficult to say exactly why this is so. One reason

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\(^{36}\) North, p. 123.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., pp. 115, 120.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 122.
may be the allocation of the book’s final words to its baffled protagonist (rather than to its obtrusive narrator, for instance). Roe doesn’t seem to know what he wants when he yells at Christopher; by ending with his hesitant admonition, there is a sense that things remain up in the air. Immediately beforehand, there is also his strange behaviour with the walking-stick, which he violently pushes into the muddy ground; he likens this gesture to Pye’s suicide on the basis that both are unpremeditated actions. Not unjustifiably, Dy is angered by this fly-off-the-handle manner and even Roe himself seems embarrassed by his own conduct. In short, there is an atmosphere of unresolved confusion about this final scene; it has what Michael Wood has recently called the “residue of unfinished business” that characterises open-ended fictions. In this respect, Caught’s ending can be aligned with some of the short stories that Green had earlier written about his fire-fighting experiences. In “A Rescue”, the first-person narrator is a fireman who helps winch an old man from a bombed-out house. It ends on a note of puzzlement:

The injured man was taken away in an ambulance. We have not heard anything from him. He may have died.

There is a similar sense of unresolvedness to “Mr Jonas”, another story that pre-dates Caught. This also concerns the successful rescue of a trapped man in the Blitz and ends with a confession of ignorance about the fate of “whoever he might be, this Mr Jonas”. Seen in the context of these earlier stories, it would not be wrong to say that Caught’s ending also aims at conveying a sense of continuing crisis. Perhaps here it should be recalled that Green wrote all of these works while the outcome of the war was still very much in the balance. Arguably, the novel’s inconclusive ending is perfectly suited to its historical moment: readers in a time of war might prefer such fictions to those that are “too fully explanatory, too consoling”.

This last phrase is taken from Frank Kermode’s influential study of fictional closure. For Kermode, it is a deeply ingrained habit of Western culture to invest a story’s end with a meaning that transfigures all the events narrated before it. Put another way: we tend to prefer fictions (which Kermode defines widely to encompass

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40 Surviving, p. 82. The story was first published in March 1941.
41 Ibid., p. 89. Again, this story was first published in 1941.
Shakespeare’s tragedies as well as modern novels) that conclude, more or less, neatly. These fictions, Kermode argues, offer us a salvation from the void of timelessness – that is to say, we humanize time “by fictions of orderly succession and end”. This preference for satisfying forms of fictional closure is, of course, a fundamental motivation behind all forms of literary interpretation, whether naïve or sophisticated. It is what Michael North does when he interprets Roe’s shell-shock as a destruction of the self. Though reaching the opposite conclusion, it is also what Michael Gorra does in arguing that Roe’s experiences of the Blitz “prove both purgative and restorative”; for Gorra, the trauma of war enables Roe to overcome his grief and accept his wife’s death.

Kermode is right to draw attention to the generally schematic nature of fictional endings and our preference for the sense of resolution that they might convey. But, as he recognises, this paradigm is not one of universal application. There have always been stories with indeterminate endings; indeed, it might justifiably be claimed that open-endedness is a distinguishing feature of twentieth-century fiction. There is often a widespread resistance to such openness (or what Kermode calls the “false full stop”). In particular, we might choose to read such endings ironically (or even metafictionally) as some sort of allusion to the conventions of fictional closure (as in, say, the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet); that is, we treat the absence of closure as itself a form of closure. What we lose in doing so is a sense of our contingency as human actors living in time. The preference for stories with tidy endings is an endorsement of literature’s great power to console, but sometimes consolation is not what we are seeking.

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43 Ibid., p. 160.
44 Gorra, The English Novel at Mid-Century, p. 47.
46 The Sense of an Ending, pp. 145, 23–24.
CHAPTER FOUR

*Loving* (1945)

Comedy and war, it might be said, go together like champagne and cough medicine. Yet it is this combination – this yoking together of what in some sense must be considered opposites – that Green undertook in *Loving*, the finest of his three wartime novels. Here the comic elements are not incidental, as they were in *Caught*; rather, they are woven into the fabric of the narrative from the first page to the last. The times could not have seemed auspicious for comic fictions of this order. London was still being blitzed when Green began the novel in late 1942; he did not finish it until October 1944. *Loving*’s great theme is the effect of war on social relations. All the novel’s action takes place in neutral Ireland: the setting is a grand country house, Kinalty Castle, owned by an English family and staffed by English servants. Kinalty is obviously at some remove from the theatre of war, but this does not mean that the characters are free from anxiety. In fact, they live in constant fear of a German invasion (which is often melodramatically coupled with a dread of the IRA); they also fret about their loved ones back in England, at the mercy of the Luftwaffe’s bombs. “We’re really in enemy country here,” Mrs Tennant, Kinalty’s owner and materfamilias, declares at one point. The war remains firmly in everyone’s mind, affecting behaviour and infecting language. Mrs Welch, the novel’s colourful cook, even goes so far as to describe her mischievous nine year-old nephew as a “little storm trooper” (p. 47).

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1. *Loving* has elsewhere been ranked as Green’s supreme literary achievement. James Wood says it is “rightly thought to be [Green’s] best novel” (*The Irresponsible Self*, p. 294); Michael Gorra claims that it has “a perfection of form unmatched by any of Green’s other novels” (*The English Novel at Mid-Century*, p. 45). Thomas Jones has recently gone even further, describing *Loving* as “one of the better novels of the twentieth century”: “Short Cuts”, *London Review of Books*, 4 December 2003, vol. 25, no. 23, p. 22. John Updike considered *Loving*, along with *Les liaisons dangereuses* and *Madame Bovary*, to be among the finest treatments of heterosexual relationships in modern fiction: *Due Considerations: Essays and Criticism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), p. 82.

2. In the United Kingdom, the novel appeared in the spring of 1945; publication in the United States did not occur until 1949 (see Treglown, pp. 144, 151, 166).

3. *Loving* (London: Hogarth, 1945), p. 11. All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text of this chapter.
As this last example suggests, war sharpened the nib of Green’s comedy. In *Loving*, jokes are made in the most serious of situations, from the death of an elderly servant to the prospect of German attack. This sort of comedy is not so much subversive (in the way that satire can be) as it is *transgressive* – a comedy that strives to show how the absurd and the mundane can overlap. This transgressive dimension is reflected in an anecdote the author liked to tell about the novel’s origins:

I got the idea of *Loving* from a manservant in the Fire Service during the war. He was serving with me in the ranks and he told me he had once asked the elderly butler who was over him what the old boy most liked in the world. The reply was: “Lying in bed on a summer morning, with the window open, listening to the church bells, eating buttered toast with cunty fingers.” I saw the book in a flash.4

Presumably, Green’s flash of inspiration came from this intersection of the carnal and the domestic. The comedy of *Loving* often depends on crossing boundaries in this way. It has many distinguished antecedents – one thinks, for instance, of the famous passage in *Dead Souls* where Gogol celebrates the admixture of laughter and invisible tears as the novelist’s supreme task.5 Before that, of course, there is the example of Shakespeare, where a similar sort of comedy can sometimes be found in the most unexpected places – the old nurse keening over her mistress’s corpse in *Romeo and Juliet*, for one.6  In Shakespeare’s play, the extravagant spectacle of the nurse’s grief is transgressive because it seems calculated to upset generic expectations.7 *Loving* works along similar lines. In the shambolic world of Kinalty, the reader never quite knows where things stand. Comedy blurs the various genres that Green’s text simultaneously seems to contain: the fairy tale, the detective story, the popular romance, the country-house novel of manners. “I’m bewitched and bewildered,” admits the butler Raunce, the novel’s principal character; he could just as well be speaking for some readers.

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6 Act IV, Scene 5, lines 49–54.

7 This point is discussed by Frank Kermode in *Shakespeare’s Language* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), pp. 57–58.
Loving is often a mysterious text, not least in the various attitudes it manifests to the emotion inscribed in its title. Green’s biographer has suggested that the novel “encodes powerful experiences” from the author’s own hectic erotic life during the 1940s. Should it be regarded, then, as a paean to the manifold forms of human “loving”? Critics have been divided on this point. Some, like Michael North, have read the novel in positive terms, taking the view that its two main characters, Raunce and the housemaid Edith, are successfully matched and (as in a fairy tale) live happily ever after. Other critics, like Rod Mengham, see Loving more bleakly, as exposing the vacuity of human affections. The present chapter will urge something of an intermediate position. Mengham is right to suggest that the novel has its doubts about the sincerity of “loving”; its characters tend to be selfish rather than altruistic, vain rather than virtuous. But its language is so exquisite, its comedy so exuberant, its people so engaging, that any purely negative reading would seem to be off-key.

In some respects, Loving is also perhaps the most Shakespearean of Green’s works. Its below-stairs speech often has a poetic quality, especially in its confection of dialect and colloquialisms: “moithering”, “worriting”, “sarky” and so on. This gives the characters a naturalness that is deeply engrossing, especially in the case of the butler Raunce. By turns his conduct is dishonest, petty, chauvinistic, selfish, despotic and criminal; he is also one of the great comic figures of twentieth-century fiction. Indeed, Raunce could be said to manifest what the American poet John Berryman once called a “definite and irresistible personality”. Berryman was referring to the revolutionary conception of character found in Shakespeare’s early comedies. The clownish servant Launce in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, for instance, seems to possess such a personality, principally because of his eccentric affection for his dog. In two well-known scenes, Launce purports to chastise his beloved pet for the creature’s very doggishness – its refusal to mourn the departure of Launce’s employer for Milan (“all our house in a great perplexity, yet did not this cruel-hearted cur shed one tear”) and its random acts of urination (for which Launce takes the blame). These accusations are, of course, quite

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8 Treglown, p. 157.
9 North, p. 166; Mengham, pp. 136, 155.
10 Act II, scene 3; Act IV, scene 4.
silly: the dog is merely behaving as dogs do. But Berryman points out that, “for the first time in English comedy”, a clown has been endowed with an authentic voice of his own. Loving’s comedy also depends on such a definite sense of personality (and, in passing, the obvious point should be noted that Shakespeare’s clownish valet and Green’s clownish butler have very similar-sounding names). The variegated speech-making of Raunce is one reason why it is difficult to read the novel as grimly as Rod Mengham at times seems to do. In so finely delineating the corrugations of human character, Loving also celebrates the poetry of the human voice.

Pilfering: Deception and Genre in Loving

Loving begins with an act of theft. It is as if the opening words had been stolen from a fairy tale: “Once upon a day an old butler called Eldon lay dying in his room.” Thefts of a different order soon follow. Hovering outside Eldon’s room is Charley Raunce, at that stage still the house footman, accompanied by his “yellow pantry boy”, Albert. Raunce announces that what they need is a “spot of john barley corn”: that is, some of the dying man’s supply of whisky. But Eldon is being “attended by the head housemaid Miss Agatha Burch”; her last name suggests something of her stern, rod-like personality. Raunce is nothing if not ingenious; he contrives a way into Eldon’s room by persuading Miss Burch to take a break: “I’ll sit by him for a while you go get a breath of air,” he tells her (p. 6). With this Cerberus-like woman out of sight, Raunce grabs the dying man’s decanter and sneaks behind the door for a quick nip. In a sense, this is a double theft: the whisky, as Raunce knows, had been stolen by Eldon in the first place – stolen, that is, from their employer, the tight-fisted châtelaine Mrs Tennant.

Raunce’s covert imbibing is soon interrupted. From his hiding-place behind the door, he “eyed Edith, one of the two under housemaids” (p. 6), a beautiful young woman

now jauntily wearing a peacock’s feather in her hair. (Throughout the novel, there is an obsession with spying and surveillance.) Edith is carrying a glove that contains a number of peacock eggs; like many country-houses, Kinalty has a flock of these birds to ornament its gardens. Edith, it transpires, has stolen the eggs with the intention of using them as a beauty product; the glove in which she carries them belongs to Mrs Tennant and has also been pilfered. Raunce startles the girl, who immediately worries about being reported for her thievery and pleads with him not to tell; before he can give his answer, a bell rings (p. 7). For the servants, life at Kinalty is regulated by such bells; Loving, like all of Green’s fiction, precisely registers the hierarchies of English social relations. As Raunce leaves to answer this summons, Edith addresses him (much to his delight) as “Mister Raunce” – such a title is usually reserved for the butler (and Eldon is not dead yet). As with all of Green’s novels, a great deal of importance is attached to naming and titles. Out of sheer perversity, the Tennants and their gentry friends always refer to Raunce as “Arthur”: “he was called by that name as every footman from the first had been called, whose name had really been Arthur, all the Toms, Harrys, Percys, Victors, one after the other all called Arthur” (p. 8). The bell to which Raunce responds had been rung by Mrs Tennant. The purpose of her summons had merely been to ask about the missing glove – the same one being used as a holder for the pilfered eggs. Not for the last time in the novel, Raunce covers up Edith’s deception.

Loving is a claustrophobic text. Castle Kinalty is virtually a hortus conclusus – an enclosed garden, both physically and psychologically. Apart from a brief excursion to a nearby beach, all the action takes place either inside the house or in its grounds and outbuildings; there is none of the toing and froing (nor any of the anxious train trips) that characterised Living and Caught. As a result, the characters often feel isolated. Mrs Tennant attributes this to the exigencies of war with her repeated claim about being stuck in “enemy country” (pp. 11, 186), but it is also sometimes a matter of choice. Raunce, it emerges, has not left Kinalty at all during the last three years (p. 24). The cook Mrs Welch enforces something of a cultural cordon sanitaire by forbidding her scullery maids from having any contact with the local Irish tradesmen and produce suppliers who regularly make deliveries to the kitchen (pp. 65–66, 168, 214). With a single exception, all the household servants are English; in general, they have little regard for the locals
and this chauvinism only serves to accentuate their sense of isolation. (The non-English exception is Paddy O’Connor, the uncouth Irish lampman whose brogue is almost incomprehensible to the rest of the staff.) Confinement is not, of course, the same as belonging. For all their isolation, few of the characters seem to think of Kinalty as home. Even the Tennants are little more than foreign occupiers, as their name suggests. At one point Mrs Tennant explains that her late husband had never really cared for the place at all – after he bought it, he seldom lived there (p. 187). Her own attitude to Kinalty is just as equivocal. In her opinion, maintaining the castle should be regarded as a form of “war work”: “I do consider it so important from the morale point of view to keep up appearances,” she tells her daughter-in-law Violet (p. 186). This, then, is hardly an attitude of deep emotional attachment to the place. The general sense of unbelonging is obliquely reinforced by the narrator’s proleptic asides that, at some future point in time and for some unknown reason, the castle will be destroyed by fire (pp. 61, 203).

These tenuous attachments to the land are matched by a general lack of respect for property rights. Theft is Loving’s principal leitmotiv; one early (and hostile) reviewer suggested that the novel might have been more accurately called Fiddling.  

Eldon, as Raunce knows, has long been doctoring the household accounts. As soon as the old butler is dead, Raunce sets about finding the “red and black notebooks” (p. 12) that this man had used; it was here that Eldon recorded the details of his various schemes of petty larceny. As well as fiddling the accounts, Eldon had been able to extract some very large tips from one of the Tennants’ neighbours, Captain Dermot Davenport, whenever this man paid a visit to Kinalty (p. 30). Raunce suspects blackmail, though at first he is unable to say what its basis might be. (It soon emerges that Captain Davenport would be an easy target for extortion – he is having an affair with Mrs Tennant’s daughter-in-law, Violet.)  

After his promotion to butler, Raunce is keen to adopt Eldon’s money-making methods. It could even be said that his promotion was itself secured by a kind of blackmail. Soon after Eldon’s death, Raunce purports to hand in his notice to Mrs Tennant; by doing so, he makes it clear that he expects to be appointed the next butler and will leave if he does not get his way. Knowing that she will be unable to find a

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12 The reviewer was the novelist Rayner Heppenstall: see Treglown, pp. 168–69.
13 Raunce later implies that this was the basis upon which Eldon extorted the Captain: see p. 129.
replacement in this time of war, Mrs Tennant reluctantly accedes: “‘Very well then,’ she announced, ‘I suppose we shall have to call you Raunce’” (p. 10). In saying this, Mrs Tennant clearly means that, as butler, Raunce will no longer have to endure the condescending sobriquet, “Arthur”. Once he is in possession of Eldon’s secret notebooks, Raunce begins to school himself in the dark art of embezzlement. He soon learns it is an art worth practising – the proceeds of this fiddling, he calculates, might yield as much as “two or three hundred [pounds] a year one way or another” (p. 129). 

Embezzlement is not, however, limited to Kinalty’s butlers. The cook Mrs Welch fiddles the kitchen accounts in order to finance her surreptitious gin-drinking. When Raunce learns of her little rort from the gossip of the scullery maids, he hypocritically denounces the woman’s dishonesty: “‘The artful old cow,’ [he] exclaimed” (p. 214).

Sometimes it seems that anything not nailed down at Kinalty is liable to be pinched. The servants steal from the Tennants and then from each other; even the household’s trio of “storm trooper” children get in on the act. The list of purloined objects is considerable: the whisky, the peacock eggs, the glove, the cook’s supply of waterglass (a chemical used for preserving), framed photographs (p. 105), a silk scarf (p. 95) and, above all, a valuable sapphire ring belonging to Mrs Tennant. Not surprisingly, theft becomes one of the main topics of conversation among the servants; accusations fly about who is stealing what from whom. Mrs Tennant at first fails to notice the light-fingered habits of her staff. This is explicable, at least in part, by her tendency to mislay things herself (p.64). “She’s always losin’ valuables,” Raunce observes, “the wonder is she gets them back so often” (p. 127). When her sapphire ring first goes missing, she does not seem overly perturbed, fully expecting that it will soon turn up (p. 72). How phlegmatic Mrs Tennant can be! Perhaps for this reason she doesn’t even notice that her servants are fiddling the books – she confides to her daughter-in-law that she rarely even bothers to check the household accounts (p. 72). This blasé attitude is in stark contrast to that of her neighbour, Captain Davenport. The Captain is an amateur archaeologist and has commenced a dig in a nearby marsh called Clancarty, supposedly a burial ground of Irish kings; it is rumoured that, at the end of a

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14 Subsequently, Raunce suggests to Edith that he may have exaggerated this estimate: p. 189.
hard day’s digging, Davenport makes his workmen strip naked to ensure that they haven’t taken anything (p. 138).

As in all Green’s fiction, the characters of Loving are shown engaging in elaborate forms of deception, sometimes going to great lengths to hide whatever the true state of affairs might be. This seems a predictable, if not prudent, course of action for anyone engaged in petty criminality. Raunces, for instance, keeps Eldon’s notebooks under lock and key; he likes to check on them periodically, just to make sure they are still there (p. 117). This is also why the cook Mrs Welch is so paranoid about her scullery maids talking to the Irish deliverymen – they drop off her regular supply of gin with the groceries (p. 214). Violet, Mrs Tennant’s daughter-in-law, does her best to cover up the adulterous interludes she enjoys with Captain Davenport. (This woman, like several of the other characters, goes by more than one name: she is called “Mrs Jack” by the servants. This is because her husband’s first name is “Jack”; he is the only son of the senior Mrs Tennant.) But sometimes deceptions are perpetrated as much for reasons of malicious amusement as for self-interest. A case in point concerns the arrival at Kinalty of Mrs Welch’s young nephew, Albert (who, in another coincidence, has the same name as the pantry boy). Mrs Tennant has arranged for this boy to visit the castle for a while, primarily as a favour to his family (the boy’s father had once been employed as a chauffeur by some of Mrs Tennant’s aristocratic friends). There are already two other children living at Kinalty – Mrs Tennant’s grand-daughters, Evelyn and Moira (these are the children of Jack and Violet Tennant). An old nanny, Miss Swift, cares for them; she has long been a family servant and in fact was once Mrs Jack’s nanny. But this woman is now in poor health; she is also very highly strung and seems certain to object to the extra duties involved in looking after young Albert. So Mrs Tennant and her daughter-in-law hatch a plan: they decide to tell Nanny Swift that the boy is Mrs Welch’s illegitimate son. Their reasoning is devious: the whiff of scandal, they assume, will persuade the nanny to care for the boy: “[S]he’ll be so thrilled she’ll look after him like one of her own,” Mrs Jack mischievously suggests (p. 26). Her mother-in-law shares in her glee: “Mrs Tennant tee hee’d. ‘Oh Violet you are naughty,’ she said” (p. 27).
Green once observed that fiction was analogous to lying.\textsuperscript{15} Dissimulation comes naturally to the characters in \textit{Loving}, as it does elsewhere in his work. Raunce, above all, is liable to say anything he pleases. His stories are legion: that the Germans will invade at any minute and, when they do, that he is prepared to shoot the housemaids if they wish to be spared the enemy’s depredations (pp. 96–97); that any servant who abandons Kinalty and returns to England would immediately be press-ganged into some form of national service (pp. 60, 80, 102); that he once had a sexual relationship with the French maid who used to work at the castle (“there was many an occasion I went up to Mamselle’s boudoir to give her a long bong jour,” he tells his pantry boy Albert: p. 70); and so on. These fictions tend to have an extemporaneous quality. There seems no way to assess their veracity – whether, for instance, he really does fear an invasion or whether he even has access to any fire-arms.\textsuperscript{16} In a text like this where dishonesty flourishes widely and wildly, the reader’s attention is inevitably drawn to the ambiguities of knowledge. Raunce himself emphasises this. “It’s not the truth that matters,” he says at one point, “it’s what’s believed” (p. 142).

In his pioneering study of Green’s work, Edward Stokes suggested that part of Raunce’s fascination as a character is his constant changeability.\textsuperscript{17} Though well-practised at bluff and deception, Raunce is at times surprisingly vulnerable. This is especially so when it comes to questions of status. Just as the Tennants might be regarded as English trespassers who have effectively stolen their Irish castle, the newly elevated Raunce also seems like something of an interloper, even to himself. Shortly after his promotion to butler, he goes in to lunch with the other household servants (Kinalty’s domestic staff dine communally). He is determined to assert his newfound authority, repeating to himself that “this time I’ll take his old chair” (p. 14). Raunce is referring to the empty place at the head of the table, “the large chair from which Mr Eldon had been accustomed to preside” (p. 14). Agatha Burch, generally aggrieved at the prospect of Raunce taking over as butler, is shocked to see him sit in Eldon’s former place. Raunce thereupon informs the assembled gathering that he does not propose

\textsuperscript{15} This was in the short essay he wrote for \textit{The Times} in 1961: see \textit{Surviving}, pp. 280–81.

\textsuperscript{16} As further evidence of the uncertainty of anything he says, Raunce later denies ever having had any sexual contact with the French maid: p. 199.

\textsuperscript{17} Stokes, p. 56.
attending his predecessor’s funeral (p. 15). This merely stokes Miss Burch’s resentment: “‘And the wicked shall flourish even as a green bay tree,’ [she] announced in a loud voice as though something had her by the throat” (p. 16). Quoting the Psalms at Raunce is not the only way Miss Burch intends to show her contempt. She then immediately declares that she will not address Raunce with the honorific title usually given to Kinalty’s butlers: “[Y]ou’ll never get a Mr out of me not ever, even if there is a war on” (p. 17). Raunce appears to take this barb in his stride:

“What’s the war got to do with it?” he asked, and he winked at Kate [the other under housemaid]. “Never mind let it go. Anyway I know now, don’t I?”
“No,” she [Miss Burch] said, having the last word, “men like you never will appreciate or realize.” (p. 17)

Miss Burch is close to the mark with her accusation of ignorance – Raunce often admits to feeling bewildered by the world and its inhabitants. Nevertheless, he is sufficiently able to “appreciate or realize” the subtleties of human behaviour to win Edith’s heart. This is despite the meagreness of his own physical charms: he is nearing forty years of age, has different coloured eyes (“one dark one light which was arresting”: p. 15), and is inclined to be sickly (though the aetiology of his ailments remains obscure). The affair between the two servants takes some time to blossom. Raunce’s initial overtures to Edith are nothing less than boorish:

“Come to father beautiful,” he said.
“Not me,” she replied amused.
“Well if you don’t want to I’m not one to insist. But did nobody never tell you about yourself?”
“Aren’t you just awful,” she said apparently delighted.
“That’s as may be,” he answered, “but it’s you we’re speaking of. With those eyes you ought to be in pictures.”
“Oh yeah?” (p. 13)

On another occasion when Edith spurns his clumsy advances, Raunce immediately turns his attention elsewhere. Kate, the other housemaid, happens to be walking past; she gives in to his lecherous request and permits him to kiss her mouth “heartily”, though she winks at Edith while this takes place (pp. 45–46). The reason for her wink is that, like Edith, she has tended to regard Raunce as a figure of fun. The two young housemaids share a room in the attic and regularly joke about the sexual unattractiveness of the male
servants. During one of their giggling sessions, Kate asks Edith what she would do if she found herself alone in her bedroom with Raunce: “Why I daresn’t even look at the man with his queer eyes,” Edith answers (p. 39). But in the same breath she admits to only recently noticing Raunce’s ocular peculiarity: “And the strange thing is I didn’t even properly take it in that they was a different colour till the other day” (p. 39). Kate tells Edith that in itself this is significant, hinting that it shows a growing emotional attraction: “You watch out Edie that’s a sign,” she tells her friend (p. 39).

Kate’s prediction proves accurate: before long, Edith literally falls into Raunce’s arms. This occurs in unusual circumstances. One of Kinalty’s towers is fitted with a weathervane that is mechanically connected to an elaborate map “painted over the mantelpiece” in one of the castle’s many rooms (p. 43). This map shows the topography and historical sites of the surrounding countryside, all done in a stylised manner: “the castle, which was set right in the centre [of this map], was a fair-sized caricature in exaggerated Gothic” (p. 43). A pointer on the map is aligned with the weathervane, thereby showing the direction of the wind. One morning, Raunce notices that this device is stuck:

… the pointer was fixed unwavering ESE with the arrow tip exactly on Clancarty, Clancarty which was indicated by two nude figures male and female recumbent in gold crowns. For the artist had been told the place was a home of old kings. (p. 43)

As it happens, Mrs Jack comes into the room at the very moment Raunce is staring hard at the map; she is “looking for a letter from Dermot” (her lover, Captain Davenport), but Raunce doesn’t hear her footfalls on the plushly-piled carpet. The scene greatly alarms Mrs Jack. For no sensible reason, she assumes that the map is in some way indicating her adultery: the pointer is stuck on the naked couple at Clancarty where Captain Davenport has his dig and where Mrs Jack, it seems, once met him for a tryst. At this stage, Raunce knows nothing of Mrs Jack’s dalliance. But she is incensed:

She strode up to that arrow and gave it a wild tug presumably to drag the pointer away from those now disgusting people lying there in a position which, only before she had known Dermot, she had once or twice laughed at to her husband. The arrow snapped off in her hand. The vane up top might have been held in a stiff breeze or something could have jammed it.
Charley knew nothing as yet about Clancarty. “It’s the spring Madam,” he said cheerful as he took that broken piece from her. “You noticed the arm did not have any give Madam?” “Oh get on with your work,” she said appearing to lose control and half ran out. (p. 44)

Raunce begins searching for the mechanism that connects the weathervane to the map. He enlists the help of Kate and Edith, though the search is momentarily interrupted while he gives Kate that aforementioned kiss on the mouth. Eventually he finds what he is looking for. The mechanism consists of a series of gear wheels, somewhat like a clock, built into the internal walls of the castle and hidden by a panel. The gears, as Raunce suspected, are jammed – by the leg of a still living mouse. The scene then descends into farce. At the sight of the poor creature, Edith shrieks “with the full force of her lungs”; a moment or so later, she faints into Raunce’s arms (p. 46). Miss Burch arrives and immediately blames the butler for the situation: “[W]hat trick have you played on that poor girl now?” she asks (p. 46). Yet it is hard to know whether Edith’s swoon is genuine. She had seemed slightly miffed when Raunce “heartily” kissed Kate – as he did so, she had intimated that someone was coming along the corridor, thereby cutting short the amorous shenanigans. There is also that moment of short delay between the point when Edith sees the mouse and when she falls into Raunce’s arms. Taken together, these circumstances raise the possibility that Edith’s fainting was little more than a ruse. Such readerly scepticism seems inevitable in a text where the characters are almost universally untrustworthy.

After the fainting incident, the relationship between Raunce and Edith intensifies, though it is not without its further antagonisms and false starts. This is how “loving” is often represented in Green’s fiction – as haphazard and uncertain, like the fumbling affair between John Haye and Joan Entwhistle in Blindness or the duet of misunderstanding between Lily Gates and Bert Jones in Living. Raunce begins to spy on Edith, especially during her escapades around the castle with Kate. On one occasion, he catches the young housemaids misbehaving in Kinalty’s dust-sheeted ballroom. The girls had set up a gramophone and, for sheer fun, were waltzing together. Demonstrating the perverse pleasure of breaking up someone else’s party, Raunce switches off the music and tells the girls they are “daft” (p. 62). In spite of his abrupt manner, he is by now smitten. This is
confirmed when he later cautions the pantry boy Albert against making certain amorous advances: “You lay off Edith, understand. You can muck about with Kate all you please but Edith’s close season, get me?” (p. 70). In giving this warning, Raunce reveals his own insecurity. In previous conversations with Albert, he had laid claim to a veritable storehouse of sexual experience – boasting of his “long bong jour” with the French maid and repeatedly counselling the boy to “clean your teeth before you have anything to do with a woman” (pp. 5, 23, 69). But the reader soon suspects that Raunce’s adventures in “loving” are far less extensive than his braggadocio implies.

By this stage, one of the running battles among the household staff concerns some missing waterglass. This preservative is kept by the cook Mrs Welch; when she notices that her supply of the stuff has unaccountably diminished, a flurry of accusation ensues. At first she blames her young nephew Albert (p. 49); the boy (truthfully, in this case) denies ever having set eyes on it. Mrs Welch then complains to all and sundry. Raunce jumps to the conclusion that the servant Albert is the thief, thinking to preserve some eggs that might later be sent to his family back in England. (The duplication of names in Loving – like these two Alberts – can be just as testing for the reader as the tourbillion of characters in Party Going.) Raunce badgers the poor boy mercilessly: “It won’t wash your acting the innocent my lad” (p. 59). Albert steadfastly insists that he “couldn’t even name what the glass is for” (p. 60). Raunce is unpersuaded; he even tells Kate and Edith that Albert was the culprit (p. 63). But these suspicions are misplaced. It was in fact Edith who had stolen the waterglass – she wanted to preserve the peacock eggs she had pilfered for her beauty treatment (p. 22). Raunce does, however, finally manage to work out who the real thief was. One morning while all the servants are having “elevenses” – Green’s fiction is like a glossary of slang terms for tea-drinking – the truth suddenly dawns on him. When he begins to stare hard at Edith, she blushes guiltily, “melting as though at his mercy” (p. 65).

Loving’s petty criminals are occasionally pricked by their consciences. When she is next alone with Kate, Edith wonders out loud whether “she ought to have told Mr Raunce about the waterglass” (p. 73). Kate notices that, even in private conversation, her friend is at pains to give the butler his honorific title of “Mr”; she then accuses Edith of trying to “play the innocent” (p. 74), which was much the same allegation that Raunce
had earlier levelled at poor Albert. The housemaids begin to bicker and Edith eventually confesses her true feelings:

“All right then I’ll learn you something,” Edith said and she panted and panted. “I love Charley Raunce I love ’im I love ’im so there. I could open the veins of my right arm for that man,” she said, turned her back on Kate, walked out and left her.

“You needn’t have told me. I knew, don’t worry,” Kate said to the now empty room, but with a sort of satisfaction as it seemed in pain. (p. 75)

Edith’s growing affection for Raunce is overshadowed by the sheer boldness of Mrs Jack’s entanglement with Captain Davenport. In the closed world of Kinalty, Mrs Jack has had little scope for meeting her lover. This is why one of their previous trysts had taken place at the Clancarty excavation site – from which, it seems, Mrs Jack had returned without her knickers (p. 33). Any further opportunity for a liaison with the Captain seems unlikely because of Mrs Jack’s imminent departure for England – her husband is soon to be given leave and she plans to visit him in London, accompanied by her mother-in-law. The senior Mrs Tennant, however, decides to leave for England a few days early. When she tells her daughter-in-law of her revised plans, Mrs Jack is delighted, to say the least: “Every part of the young woman’s body except her Adam’s apple was crying out the one word Dermot” (p. 71). As soon as Mrs Tennant leaves Kinalty, Mrs Jack invites her lover over for dinner, instructing Raunce that “he need not wait up to see the Captain out” (p. 71). The next morning Edith attends on Mrs Jack and discovers the woman and Davenport in bed together. This is one of Green’s greatest comic scenes. Edith is virtually apoplectic at the sight of the naked Mrs Jack, as is Agatha Burch when she arrives and sees the Captain putting on his shirt. Edith rushes off to tell Kate, who finds the situation hilarious: “‘Oh goody,’ she shouted, at which both began to giggle helpless” (p. 77). Raunce’s response, however, is strangely muted. He claims to be anxious that the matter be kept secret from the naïf pantry boy Albert: “That lad ain’t of an age yet” (p. 79). He also counsels Edith that servants should not concern themselves with their employers’ affairs: “I shouldn’t pay attention to this mess up if I was you” (p. 80). Edith is furious, accusing Raunce of somehow trying to take the story away from her – she reminds him of his own repeated boasting about the goings-on he had supposedly seen in houses where he previously served. *Loving’s* characters take
fiction-making very seriously. Edith worries that Raunce, in refusing to admit the funny side of the situation, has decided to deny the power of her story. When he warns her to be careful about whom she tells (“you don’t want to go and talk, see, you’ll likely lose your place”: p. 80), she storms off.

Mortified at having been discovered *in flagrante delicto*, Mrs Jack decides to leave for England straight away. The task of caring for the household children now largely falls on Edith, owing to Mrs Jack’s absence and Nanny Swift’s poor health (or hypochondria). Edith is expected to take the children for a walk around the castle demesne of an afternoon. Much to her surprise, Raunce offers to accompany her – the first time he has been out of the castle itself in ages. The walk leads to a cautious rapprochement. Raunce even offers to steal some peacock eggs for her (a sense of the illicit often underlies the amorous attachments in *Loving*). But the outing ends after Raunce suddenly takes ill, which he blames on a combination of the fresh air and his “dyspepsia” (p. 94). When the couple are next alone in the house, the question of pilfering once again comes up. Raunce shows Edith the “pictures” now decorating his new quarters – photographs and etchings purloined from the Tennants’ collection – which prompts her to issue a vague warning about the danger of stealing from their employers. Raunce then confesses to fiddling the household accounts but passes this off as merely one of the perks of being the butler (p. 106). When he tries to kiss her, Edith begins to cry, declaring her frustration at his changeable nature: “First you blow hot then you blow cold,” she tells him (p. 107). Raunce is able to assuage her with some hand-holding and a few choice terms of endearment (“baby”, “ducks”, “love” and so on: pp. 108–10). Finally, he announces that he has “fallen” for her “in a big way” (p. 110). But their intimacy is brought to an end when one of Kinalty’s greyhounds deposits a dead peacock at his feet (p. 111).

In *Loving*, Green is concerned to show that human affection can take many forms. The stop-start romance of Edith and Raunce might seem somewhat timid when contrasted with the naked romps of Mrs Jack and the Captain, but at least in both these relationships the characters have the chance to act upon their desires. Other characters are not so fortunate. There are, for instance, several hints throughout the novel that Agatha Burch
nursed an unrequited love for the old butler Eldon. The young pantry boy Albert is also possessed by an impossible affection – he is besotted with Edith. One afternoon, he offers to accompany her while she takes the Tennant children for their daily outing. To avoid a sudden downpour, the party take shelter in a closed part of the castle where they decide to play a game of blindman’s buff. For a blindfold, they use the scarf Edith happens to be wearing: “a silk scarf Mrs Jack had given her which was red and had for decoration the words ‘I love you I love you’ written all over” (p. 112). Inevitably, the blindfolded Albert “fnds” Edith and, following the rules of their game, is obliged to kiss her, “an experience more brilliant more soft and warm perhaps than his thousand dreams” (p. 115). The game is interrupted by Raunce, who demonstrates his jealousy by chastising Albert for being childish and indolent. Edith, however, manages to smooth things over – her relationship with Raunce is now on such intimate terms that she is able to mollify his outbursts. After the butler departs, the game is resumed, though this time without any further kissing between Edith and Albert. The pantry boy’s infatuation, however, has not been in any way diminished.

There is often a transgressive element to the relationships in Loving. This is certainly the case with the strange affair between the housemaid Kate and the Irish lampman Paddy O’Connor. This unkempt fellow is a Caliban-like figure: he rarely speaks, rarely washes and is devoted to tending the flock of castle peacocks. Kate regularly visits him in his squalid quarters (the so-called “lamp-room”), where she tries to brush his dishevelled hair using “a dog’s comb of tinned iron” (p. 89). In fact, Kate is the only character able to understand Paddy’s thick brogue (“his accent was such you could take a file to it”: p. 89). It is apparent that they are on intimate terms, though Kate has tried to keep their affair secret. But Edith certainly knows about it (p. 139); so, it seems, does the cook Mrs Welch (p. 195). Kate is even prepared to consider marriage to the Irishman, as she eventually admits to Edith:

“Once I get Paddy smartened up you’d never recognize him for one [i.e. for an Irishman].”
“But what about his speech, Kate?”
“Yes I know that’s a problem. It’ll be the hardest thing to alter.”

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18 This seems to be the explanation for her extravagant bout of grief early in the book (pp. 28–29).
“So you are considering him?” Edith asked.  
“There’s nobody else. A girls gets lonely.” (p. 195)

Romantic love is not, of course, always conducive to good order. With Mrs Tennant and Mrs Jack away in England, the household increasingly seems on the verge of falling apart, despite the romantic attachments blossoming between some of its members. Agatha Burch certainly begins to see things in such dire terms. Dropping in on the now bedridden Nanny Swift, Miss Burch relates how she recently saw Raunce and Edith lounging around the library “as if they owned the castle” (p. 122). This sort of behaviour is, for Miss Burch, the height of impudence (or, as she calls it, “cheek”). Her view is not unjustified: Raunce is becoming more audacious every day in his conduct towards other members of the household. This is especially so in relation to the dead peacock that had been dumped at his feet. The bird had originally been strangled, for no particular reason, by Mrs Welch’s wayward nephew Albert. In an effort to conceal the boy’s misfeasance, Mrs Welch had buried the bird. But secrets are virtually impossible to keep at Kinalty. Edith soon found out what happened – the Tennant grandchildren reported the cook’s conduct to her; then, inevitably, the dog dug up the carcass. When Raunce learns the circumstances of the bird’s death and burial, he immediately tries to exploit the situation, telling Edith that Mrs Welch has “got it in for you about that waterglass an’ now we’ve something on her” (p. 111). He then proceeds to hang the dead bird in the kitchen larder as a warning to the cook not to complain about Edith’s theft of the waterglass. The carcass is, by now, quite disgusting. Miss Burch is right to be shocked about this sort of behaviour. She tells the nanny that the dead bird was “crawling with maggots” and thus posed a health risk: “Can you imagine the like, Miss Swift? Infecting all our food” (p. 122).

Edith is also becoming much bolder. Alone with Raunce in the library, she tells him that she had recently found Mrs Tennant’s missing sapphire ring. Instead of returning it (which would mean handing it over to Agatha Burch), Edith has decided to keep it – using one of the library armchairs as a temporary hiding place. Raunce strongly advises returning the ring but Edith indignantly insists that they should try to profit from it: “‘I’d sell it an’ save the money for a rainy day,’ and she gave him a look as if to say the sky always rained at weddings” (p. 128). However, Edith’s plan soon goes awry,
mainly because she had foolishly revealed the ring’s whereabouts to other members of
the household, including Moira, Mrs Tennant’s grand-daughter (p. 137). Several days
later, Edith is again in the library with Raunce. Putting his feet up on the furniture, he
ventures a proposal: “[W]hat about you an’ me getting married?” (p. 142). Edith seems
thrilled at the prospect, though replying she will need time to think matters over. (Her
cautions are understandable: Raunce also seems to be suggesting that his mother should
come over from England to live with them after their marriage.) The couple’s romantic
planning is brought to a sudden end, however, when Edith discovers that the ring she had
hidden in the armchair is now missing. Raunce is also shocked by this, though he is at
pains to assure her that he was not the one to have taken it from its hiding place (p. 144).

Their panic is almost immediately exacerbated by the arrival of an unexpected
visitor. This is a man called Michael Mathewson who is an investigation officer from
Mrs Tennant’s insurer, a firm called (significantly, as it turns out) Irish Regina
Assurance. Mathewson has come to make inquiries about the ring; he speaks with a
pronounced lisp which he explains is the result of some recent dental work but in fact
seems to be an affectation. The situation quickly becomes farcical. Raunce attempts to
stonewall all inquiries about the ring’s disappearance, which infuriates Mathewson.
Then, without warning, the pantry boy Albert blurts out, “I got it” (p. 151), which the
investigator assumes to be some sort of confession. When Mathewson tries to ask more
questions, Raunce evicts him – though his parting shot is to declare that the insurance
company will not be honouring Mrs Tennant’s claim. As soon as Mathewson has driven
away, Raunce begins to berate Albert; this makes him cry “in the painful way boys do
when they are too old for tears” (p. 152). Once again, Edith steps in. She explains to
Raunce that Albert had never at any stage taken the ring and had only “confessed” in a
misguided effort to protect her: “He thought that inspector was makin’ out I’d had it”
(p. 155). By this stage, Edith has surmised who the real culprit is – the other Albert, Mrs
Welch’s horrid nephew, who had obviously learned about the ring from Moira. Edith
goes off in search of the children, hoping to convince them to give this most valuable
item back. Raunce, in the meantime, has looked at Mathewson’s business card, noting
that Irish Regina Assurance shares the same initials as the Irish Republican Army.
Bizarrely, he concludes that Mathewson was a “scout” for the rebel forces – simply on
the basis of this alphabetic coincidence (p. 156). Once more, Raunce is thrown into a funk.

The members of the household are, to say the least, now in a highly agitated state. “We’re living under a shadow these days,” Raunce observes, not unreasonably (p. 160). Over lunch one day, the pantry boy Albert suddenly announces his intention to enlist as an air gunner. This leads to further chaos, with Miss Burch weeping uncontrollably and then taking to her bed; like the nanny, she remains confined for the rest of the novel. The sapphire ring is still missing. Edith continues to work on Moira, trying to persuade her to reveal its location, though Raunce says he would prefer the more direct approach of “just five minutes alone with young Albert” (p. 164). It is to this house of misrule that Mrs Tennant returns. Raunce immediately tells her the news of Mathewson’s visit and the false confession made by the pantry boy; craftily, he tries to put this down to the insurance man’s “third degree” interrogation (p. 171). Mrs Tennant is both disbelieving and furious: “Oh how aggravating all of you are,” she declares (p. 172). Albert is then called in for questioning but he clams up; when Mrs Tennant presses him, he peremptorily resigns his place. Scoffing at his plans to enlist, Mrs Tennant refuses to accept his resignation, declares the hapless boy to be a thief and orders him from the room. Albert is so enraged by this false accusation that he becomes even more determined to join up.

Mrs Tennant then repairs to the kitchen, intending to inform Mrs Welch that her son and daughter-in-law will soon be returning to Kinalty. Their ensuing conversation, however, quickly becomes a garbled debate about the missing ring. When Mrs Tennant mentions Albert’s bizarre confession, the cook (who is more than a little tipsy) mistakenly assumes this to be a reference to her nephew and not the pantry boy. She thereupon launches into a savage attack on Raunce and Edith, calling them “fornicators” and accusing them of thievery:

They’re like a pair of squirrels before the winter layin’ in a store with property mum against their marriage if they ever find a parson to be joined in matrimony which I take leave to doubt. And it’s not your ring alone. Did you ever look to the cellar mum? (p. 179)

Mrs Welch then rattles off a catalogue of complaints: the stolen peacock’s eggs, the missing waterglass and the dead bird stuffed in her larder. For her part, Mrs Tennant
does not seem to take any of this seriously, especially since the cook is noticeably inebriated. The scene ends with a further demonstration of the malevolent streak in Mrs Tennant’s character. Raunce is waiting for her outside the kitchen. As soon as she emerges, he presents her with the sapphire ring – recovered, after Edith’s tearful pleas, from the brattish children. Mrs Tennant, though, is not one for gratitude. She accepts the ring but her suspicions remain undiminished. Knowing that the cook is both quite drunk and quite rattled, she tells Raunce with a malicious laugh that his lunch is likely to be burnt that day.

Mrs Tennant may have returned to the castle but normality has not. In the final sections of the novel, there is a distinct sense of irreversible change – of lives never being the same again. Raunce’s position now seems much more precarious, owing to Mrs Tennant’s heightened suspicions. Mrs Jack, along with her husband, has also returned from England and it is to her that Mrs Tennant confides her deep distrust of the servants. Kinalty is, of course, a class-riven world, so it should hardly surprise that Mrs Tennant regards her household staff as largely incompetent, though she professes to be uncertain about the cause of their failings: “Whether it’s never having been educated or whether it’s just plain downright stupidity I don’t know” (p. 183). Mrs Jack, understandably apprehensive about her own secrets, counsels her mother-in-law not to bother trying to get to the bottom of things: “Let sleeping dogs lie,” the younger woman advises (p. 184). Yet it seems unlikely that Mrs Tennant will abandon her investigation of what she calls “[that] most detestable muddle” (p. 183) – the fiasco of the missing sapphire ring.

Edith and Raunce are by now well and truly committed to each other. They are very much on kissing terms, though Edith makes it clear that their relationship will not be consummated until after their marriage (p. 191). Raunce, paranoid as ever, dwells on the question of whether Mr Jack (that is, Mrs Tennant’s son) once took “liberties” with Edith, as she herself had earlier implied. Whenever Raunce broaches this touchy subject, Edith deflects his inquiries: “‘If you can bring your imagination to such a level you’re to be pitied,’ she answered tart” (p. 191). This sort of response fails to calm Raunce; indeed, he becomes so over-protective that he takes steps to ensure that Edith will not be left alone with Mr Jack (pp. 198–99). Marriage between the pair now seems inevitable. But when Edith tells Kate of their wedding plans, her friend is reduced to tears. This
momentarily leads Edith to speculate that Kate might be pregnant; the cause of her tears, however, seems to be nothing more than a general sadness about things at Kinalty changing irrevocably. Edith recognises this feeling and tries to console Kate by uttering what must be the most pessimistic words in the entire novel: “It’s a hard bloody world” (p. 194).

Kate’s sudden fit of weeping is not the only time in Loving when a female character unexpectedly bursts into tears. Another example occurs a few days later when Mrs Jack enters the so-called Blue Drawing Room to find her mother-in-law crying to herself. This is unusual behaviour for the normally indomitable Mrs Tennant. At first she puts it down to anxiety about her son (Mr Jack has by this stage returned to active service). But in the next breath she blames the servants, once again railing against their ineptitude and perfidy. Mrs Jack is outwardly sympathetic, though she seems to wonder if it is some sort of ploy. This is because she has her own “agenbite of inwit”: there are intimations that her mother-in-law has begun to suspect the affair with Captain Davenport. The falsity of the two women is underscored by the extravagant setting of the drawing room, which is done in an imitation of a pastoral scene: “milking stools, pails, clogs, the cow byre furniture all in gilded wood which was disposed around to create the most celebrated eighteenth-century folly in Eire” (p. 203). Like the fake books in Max Adey’s apartment in Party Going, this furniture signifies the cultural vacuity of the rich. It also points to the exploitative nature of the foreign presence in Ireland – none of the furniture was even made in the country (snobbish Mrs Tennant is at pains to emphasise that it is French in origin, or at least is said to be so: p. 206). Other objects in this drawing room seem to possess a different symbolic importance. At one point in her somewhat menacing conversation with her daughter-in-law, Mrs Tennant goes over to the mantelpiece, which is decorated with “sculptured reliefs depicting on small plaques various unlikely animals”. Here she makes a curious gesture. (Green’s novels often have such moments – witness Lily Gates flapping her arms at the pigeons in the final pages of Living, or Richard Roe driving his walking-stick into the ground at the end of Caught.) Through “pursed lips”, Mrs Tennant “delicately” blows at one of these plaques – one that depicts “a snake, sucking milk out of full udders” (p. 205). This gesture is surely meant to imply that Kinalty, like the enclosed garden in a much older story, has its serpent.
Loving ends with a lengthy dialogue between its principal couple, just as Caught did. One afternoon Edith coaxes Raunce outside for a walk. This in itself is a sign of how things have changed: the agoraphobic Raunce no longer feels secure within the confines of the castle and so is prepared to venture out of doors. But once outside he complains of illness and Edith is forced to take his arm “as though he was an old man” (p. 216). In fact, Raunce’s distress seems to be more a case of anxiety, or what he calls “the worry of it all” (p. 215). There is certainly no shortage of matters for concern. Mrs Tennant has continued to make inquiries about the mystery surrounding the sapphire ring; the pantry boy Albert has left Kinalty for good in order to enlist; Miss Burch and the nanny remain indisposed. Raunce now seems determined to make some changes of his own. He tells Edith he has received a letter from his mother, implying that it is cowardly to be “‘iding ourselves away in this neutral country” (p. 221). Previously Raunce had suggested to Edith that, after their marriage, they might live in one of the disused cottages on the castle grounds. Now he says his plans have changed (p. 218). Indeed, he has begun to attribute his ill health to Ireland itself: “it’s this country gets me down,” he tells Edith (p. 219).

For a dozen or so pages, the couple deliberate about what to do. Their talk is overlaid with the hackneyed discourse of romantic love; one might even say, adapting a phrase of Martin Amis’s, that a herd of clichés was now roaming free. Edith seems attached to the idea of remaining at Kinalty but Raunce insists otherwise: “‘We got to get out of here,’ he said” (p. 223). At this prospect Edith becomes tearful; she reminds Raunce that he used to say wartime authorities would round up any civilians returning to Britain. Not for the first time, Raunce confesses to exaggeration: “‘Why it was only a tale,’ he pleaded” (p. 224). Eventually Edith is beguiled by his proposal to abscond:

“Elope?” she cried delighted all of a sudden.

“Elope,” he agreed grave.

She gave him a big kiss. “Why Charley,” she said, seemingly more and more delighted, “that’s romantic.”

“It’s what we’re going to do whatever the name you give it,” he replied. (p. 225)

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They decide to leave surreptitiously – to “flit”, as Raunce calls it – without formally giving notice to Mrs Tennant. Edith vows to keep their plans secret, even from Kate. Out of the blue, Raunce suggests Kate might wish to go with them but Edith explains that her friend would never leave Kinalty “on account of her Paddy” (p. 225). The thought of the relationship between the housemaid and the Irish lampman excites Raunce’s xenophobia – he denounces Kate’s affair with “that ape out of a zoo” as “downright disgusting” and “unnatural” (p. 226). But he soon calms down when he realises that Edith has actually agreed to his plan of elopement. Indeed, he is overwhelmed at the thought of it: “‘I feared you’d never consent,’ he explained in a weak voice” (p. 228). High-mindedly, the couple agree to keep separate beds until they are married. Yet their plans are as nebulous as those of Lily Gates and Bert Jones in Living; like the young couple in that earlier novel, they even contemplate staying with a parent (in this case, Raunce’s mother) once they reach England. Their conversation peters out when Raunce begins to drop off to sleep: “‘Well this is a fine elopement,’ [Edith] remarked amused” (p. 228). Again like Lily Gates, Edith begins consorting with the castle’s birds, feeding scraps to the various peacocks and doves; the sight of her doing so moves the drowsy Raunce to chant Edith’s name to himself. The novel then ends abruptly with the bald statement that the couple left Kinalty the next day: “Over in England they were married and lived happily ever after” (p. 229).

On the face of it, Loving might seem to be a eucatastrophic text – that is, one with a predictably happy ending. This is certainly how Michael North reads the narrator’s closing declaration of connubial contentment. For North, Raunce and Edith are sustained by their own romantic fiction, however “fraught with cliché” it might be.20 On this view, their love results in a favourable re-alignment of circumstances – a move away from the insecurity of Ireland to the safety of England. North rightly points out that desires are authentic even when they are based on cliché or on some fiction of a character’s own making. But this view downplays the irony of the novel’s final words. In one of his lectures on fiction, E.M. Forster once commented that “if it was not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude”.21 It is precisely this

20 North, p. 166.
21 Aspects of the Novel, p. 66.
convention that Green is toying with here – the idea that marriage is little more than a device for solving problems of narrative structure. A reader of Loving would be justified in imagining a less than ideal future for Raunce and Edith; after all, there is a significant age gap between them, they have a propensity to bicker and Raunce’s health now seems precarious. Complex fictions tend to be messy, as life is; Loving’s conclusion is more arbitrary than North’s account suggests, not least because it pilfers a formula of words from the genre of fairy-tales. “Really, universally,” Henry James wrote in his preface to Roderick Hudson, “relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.”

Watching: Surveillance and Ambivalence in Loving

“It’s wicked the way they spy on you,” Edith says of Kinalty’s peacocks. “They’ve been raised in a good school,” Raunce tells her in reply (p. 223). Peacocks have long been associated with the power of vision. In the Metamorphoses, for example, Ovid records how Hera implanted the hundred eyes of Argus, her bodyguard giant, into the bird’s tail feathers. Peacocks are also emblematic of Loving’s preoccupation with surveillance. Barely a page into the book, Raunce is shown in the act of spying – while hiding behind the door of Eldon’s sick-room with the pilfered whisky, he is able to watch Edith as she treads stealthily through the house (she is wearing, it will be recalled, a peacock’s feather in her hair). Surveillance in Loving has a tendency to uncover guilt: in this instance, Edith is carrying the stolen peacocks’ eggs, which are hidden inside the glove belonging to Mrs Tennant. Raunce is adept at spying – presumably this was how he discovered the existence of the red and black notebooks in which Eldon used to record his various

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swindles. Mrs Welch is similarly expert. Indeed, she seems to enjoy thinking of herself in these terms: “On guard I am,” she tells her nephew Albert (p. 167). Through a hole in the wall of the larder, she watches the castle’s court-yard; it is from here that she often sees Kate surreptitiously visiting Paddy in his quarters (p. 50). But at Kinalty the observed also do their share of observing. On one occasion, Kate takes Edith with her out to the lamp-room where together they spy on the sleeping Paddy (pp. 51–52). Surveillance is much easier to carry out at Castle Kinalty than it ever was in Caught, where the covering-up of private life was mandated by wartime regulation. This transparency is emphasised right from Loving’s first page:

The pointed windows of Mr Eldon’s room were naked glass with no blinds or curtains. For this was in Eire where there is no blackout. (p. 5)

As a consequence, secrets are hard to keep at Kinalty. The young Tennant girls, for instance, know that Edith has stashed “hundreds” of peacock eggs in her room: “put away in waterglass against the time she might want them for her skin” (pp. 147–48). This traffic in secrets can sometimes lead to paranoia. Mrs Jack, in particular, worries that her adultery has become common knowledge even before Edith discovers her in bed with Captain Davenport. Early in the novel she fretfully asks the Captain if Raunce “suspects anything” (p. 41); not long after that, she is shown angrily snapping off the arm on the weather-vane map in her mistaken belief that it had somehow been manipulated by Raunce to show her clandestine tryst at Clancarty (p. 44). By the end of the novel, she has begun to wonder whether her mother-in-law has also come to learn of the affair (p. 205). In this house of spies, Mrs Jack’s fears are not unjustified. As Kate tells Edith at one point, “there’s not much kept mum” at Kinalty (p. 197).

Yet the vision of the characters also has its limits. Failing to see things properly happens quite a lot in the novel. Raunce, in an early scene, unintentionally blocks Mrs Tennant’s view of her shifty daughter-in-law (p. 10), while on another occasion it is Mrs Jack herself who contrives to obscure her face by standing in the blinding glare of a sunlit window (p. 185). When Kate visits Paddy in the lamp-room, she somehow manages to hover out of his line of sight so that “one pupil swivelled almost back of the nose he had on him whilst the other was nearly behind a temple” (p. 89); the Irishman is hardly perturbed by Kate’s elusiveness and, in fact, appears to regard it as some sort of erotic
game. Raunce, on the other hand, seems disconcerted when he is unable to make out Edith’s face immediately after his proposal of marriage: “Seated as she was back to the light he could see only a blinding space for her head framed in dark hair” (p. 142). In any case, Edith’s looks are said to be quite dazzling, as the infatuated Albert discovers during the game of blindman’s buff (p. 115); even Mathewson, the inquiry agent, “goggled a trifle” at her beauty (p. 145). In a different way, Mrs Tennant also possesses the power to “goggle” – her terrible countenance is enough to leave Raunce “hypnotized” on one occasion (p. 170). But these failures of vision never alter the ocularcentric philosophy of the characters, who persist in their belief that the world is best understood by looking at it – or, more precisely, by keeping it under surveillance. It is surely no coincidence that several of the characters are described in terms of their eyes. According to Raunce, Edith’s are so lovely that she might be a film star (p. 13); Kate’s “gimlet eyes” are twice mentioned as her most distinguishing feature (pp. 83, 137); while Raunce himself is memorable for having differently coloured irises. However deceptive visual appearances might be, seeing is what matters most to Kinalty’s characters.

This primacy of vision does not, of course, lead to mental clarity. “Loving”, in particular, has the capacity to disrupt both clear-sightedness and clear-headedness. The great scene of blindman’s buff is the chief metaphor for this sort of occlusion. The scarf used for the blindfold in the game is printed with the words “I love you I love you”, emphasising that romance is one of the novel’s impediments to clarity. Raunce, in particular, seems to suffer from love’s metaphorical blindness. “I can’t properly see myself these days,” he tells Edith, revealing the extent to which their relationship has muddled his mind (p. 163). “I’m bewitched and bewildered,” he admits to her when discussing their plans for the future (p. 165). Indeed, Raunce appears to accuse Edith of deliberately exacerbating his confusion. “Women are a mystery,” he declares at one point (p. 190); later he comments that he “can’t make out why you want all this mystification” (p. 200). But Edith herself is not immune from feelings of perplexity. During her long conversation with Raunce in the novel’s final pages, she confesses to being all at sea: “I’m that bewildered,” she twice announces (pp. 222, 224). Kinalty is a world obsessed with visual appearances, but this does little to alleviate the muddle-headedness of its characters.
Surveillance is one of the structural principles upon which the novel is organised. The narrator is perhaps the leading spy of all, with a capacity for vision “like the many-faceted eyes of a fly” (to borrow Edmund Wilson’s famous description of Proust). This capacity even includes seeing into the future, as shown by the rather off-handed prediction that Kinalty will eventually be destroyed by fire. It is not surprising, then, that the novel makes much use of what could be called cinematic shifts – sudden jumps or cuts between different scenes or different characters. Sometimes these shifts are introduced by an adverbial marker like the words “at this moment” or “meantime” (pp. 65, 71, 89, 148), giving the impression of a narrator who has an eye on everyone and everything in Kinalty’s closed world. On other occasions, the shift is indicated by repetition – one character might say “I’m fed up” and these words will then be immediately repeated in a different context by a different character, thereby conveying a sense of simultaneity. The perspective, however, is still an overwhelmingly visual one – the narrator comes across as all-seeing, rather than all-knowing. A character’s conduct, for instance, might be closely observed without ever really being explained. This is the case, for instance, with the actions of the pantry boy Albert during the game of blindman’s buff. Edith had provided the silk scarf used as the blindfold for the game. When it is tied over Albert’s eyes, he breathes in deeply, “perhaps to find out if Edith had left anything on this piece of stuff” (p. 114, emphasis added). He then repeats this deep inhalation, “as if he might be after a deep draught of her” (p. 114, emphasis added). The language used here is provisional: it is as if the narrator can only watch Albert’s behaviour from the outside, without any access to his mind or motivation, and thus without any certainty as to why he is breathing in so deeply. Something similar might even be said of the premonitory aside that Kinalty will one day burn down – it is as if the narrator can only see the castle’s destruction without knowing how or why it happens.

_Loving_ marks something of an austere turn in Green’s fiction. For the most part, the novel’s events are related from a detached perspective and there are few extended representations of consciousness. Only occasionally is the reader given any access to a

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25 See p. 91 for this example, which involves Kate and Mrs Welch.
character’s inner life (and it is very limited access at that). Mrs Jack, for instance, is shown thinking her private thoughts of love: “My darling my darling my darling, [she] prayed in her heart to the Captain” (p. 204). In general, the novel’s characters are seen from the outside – there is little attempt to describe what Virginia Woolf once called “the quick of the mind”. Instead, a good deal of the narration is taken up with questions of visual appearance, such as the elaborate description of the castle’s opulent furniture and ornate finishings – this is presumably what John Unterecker means when he credits Green with having a “camera eye”. Nevertheless, Loving’s characters have hidden depths. Kinalty’s women, for instance, have that mysterious tendency to burst into tears without warning – as happens to Miss Burch (pp. 28–29), to Kate (p. 193) and even to the formidable Mrs Tennant (p. 202). This is an aspect of the novel’s ambivalence: the narrative seeks to describe the outward signs and effects of consciousness, rather than its nature or content. The characters might be obsessed with sight and surveillance, and their states of mind might go largely unnarrated, yet they harbour emotions so powerful that at any moment they might be reduced to tears. Loving, in short, is a novel where the invisible always threaten to impinge on the visible world.

Not for the first time, this raises questions about Green’s treatment of reality. “In the great works of realism,” Michael Wood has recently noted, “surfaces always speak, they communicate with the depths the way a trap-door communicates with a cellar.” Nevertheless, Loving often works in this way. At one point in the novel, Raunce goes in search of Edith who is wandering through the closed-up sections of the castle:

He started on his way, then almost at once stopped by a large bowl which sat naked on a window ledge and which had a sheet of cardboard laid over. He picked this up, set it aside, then dipped his fingers in the rustle of potpourri which lay within. Walking on again he sniffed once at his fingers he had dabbled in the dry bones of roses and to do this was a habit with him the few times he was over in this part. (p. 61)

26 Another example occurs on pp. 71–73.
There is a doubleness of focus here. The scene includes precise visual detail (the removal of the cardboard cover on the bowl, for instance), but at the same time suggests something of Raunce’s inner life (the reader learns that sniffing the potpourri is one of his habits). Yet it is difficult to be certain about the full significance of Raunce’s gesture.\(^{30}\) Habit, as Proust maintained, is one of the great regulators of human affairs. This is perhaps especially so at Kinalty, a closed world controlled by deeply ingrained conventions. Raunce himself is a person who lives by routines. Sniffing the potpourri is just one of them – he also likes to take a daily “siesta” (p. 9) and to have his tea brought first thing in the morning (p. 18). But why does the narrative record this particular instance of potpourri-sniffing? Perhaps it is intended to suggest something of the arid nature of Raunce’s personal life: though he enjoys smelling the “dry bones” of roses, he rarely ventures outdoors where he might sniff living flowers. The scene might also be a reminder of his mendacity. Earlier in the novel, Raunce was shown gleefully kicking a daffodil across the hall-way floor – gleefully, because Mrs Tennant had just promoted him to butler (p. 11). When Miss Burch questions him about this odd behaviour, he tells her that “the stink of flowers always makes my eyes run” (p. 12) – even though daffodils are, as Miss Burch quickly points out, unperfumed. Sniffing the potpourri some fifty pages later confirms (if any confirmation were needed) that he had told a lie to Miss Burch. None of this, however, is made explicit. The narrator endeavours to record Raunce’s gesture with some exactitude – his fingers are said to have “dabbled” in the bowl and it is noted that he sniffed them just once – but the implications of the gesture are not spelt out. Instead, the scene works by implication, inviting the reader to consider a correspondence between personality and environment – that is, to think of Raunce’s depths in terms of Kinalty’s surfaces.

*Loving* is a novel thick with visual detail, so much so that the meticulous descriptions of the castle’s *bric-à-brac* at times begin to sound like an auctioneer’s inventory. Here, for instance, is Raunce at work:

He carried a large tray on which he had arranged three stacks of fresh blotting paper coloured pink, white and yellow, two saucers of Worcester china in which were nibs of bronze and gold plated, two bottles of red and

blue ink, with clean syringes to fill the inkwells, and piles of new stationery which matched these shades of blotting paper. (p. 17)

Much of the detail in this passage seems superfluous, included primarily to demonstrate the scope of the narrator’s observational powers. Yet it soon becomes apparent that those powers have their limits. The blotting paper on the tray is not to Mrs Tennant’s liking – she would prefer a different shade of pink and begins to interrogate Raunce about the matter. “This is all Mr Eldon could get,” Raunce explains, though not entirely convincingly. In a text where pilfering is rampant, the reader cannot help wondering whether there is more here than meets the eye – that Eldon might somehow have been robing the purchase of the blotting paper. Raunce certainly seems defensive when Mrs Tennant starts asking questions; it is almost as if he is trying to cover up one of his predecessor’s crooked schemes in order that he might now profit from it himself. The point here is that the narrator, though able to record precisely what objects are cluttered on Raunce’s tray, is not able to illuminate murkier questions of behaviour and morality. Once again, narratorial vision is not co-extensive with narratorial knowledge.

It seems important to emphasise this point for what might be considered theoretical reasons. Over the last two decades, there has been a tendency for some theorists of the novel to equate modes of “panoptic” fictional narration with the various forms of surveillance that operate in modern political society, especially those that purport to regulate and suppress the conduct of individual citizens.31 This approach – one clearly inspired by Michel Foucault’s Surveiller et punir and its metaphor of the panopticon – seeks to offer an explicitly ideological explanation of narrative technique. In particular, it suggests an analogy between a narrator’s control of fictional discourse and a society’s control of individual behaviour (where both kinds of control depend on surveillance for their efficacy). This analogy is, however, a false one.32 There is no reason to suppose that power structures within a novel replicate the power structures that


allegedly exist outside it. This is especially so in the case of *Loving*, where the narrator’s techniques of surveillance can hardly be said to result in any tight regulation of narrative events. Indeed, *Loving*’s characters are just as enigmatic and unruly as those found elsewhere in Green’s work – that is, they are just as likely to behave in a mysterious or unpredictable fashion as, say, the Bright Young Things stuck at Victoria Station in *Party Going*. The gap between narratorial vision and narratorial knowledge serves as yet another reminder that there is no end to uncertainty in complex works of fiction. However closely Kinalty’s characters are watched, there will always be some mystery that remains unexplained. *Loving* presents a version of reality that is highly ambivalent; in this respect, it is a novel that shows both more and less than it tells.

Moithering: Voice and Imagination in *Loving*

“What do we know about the servants?” Mrs Tennant asks her daughter-in-law at one point (p. 187). They are discussing the muddled affair of the sapphire ring and whether the love-struck Edith will ever “land” Raunce. Mrs Tennant’s question is a rhetorical one. Imperious as ever, she has no interest in the personal lives of her staff and is merely concerned that they stay on at Kinalty: “Let them marry, let them live in sin if they like, so long as we keep them” (p. 187). But, in another sense, her question raises what philosophers call the problem of other minds. This is the difficulty we have in knowing anything about the inner life of another sentient being – even, as Wittgenstein famously pointed out, whether that being is in pain.33 Green, it seems, was also exercised by this problem:

> And do we know, in life, what other people are really like? I very much doubt it. We certainly do not know what other people are thinking and feeling. How then can the novelist be so sure?34

34 These comments were made in “A Novelist to His Readers”, the radio talk that Green delivered in 1950 (*Surviving*, p. 139).
In *Loving*, speech is usually the best evidence of what is meant to be going on in a character’s mind. The novel’s opening scene emphasises this power of the voice to instantiate the inner life, even *in extremis*. The old butler Eldon is not about to go gentle into that good night, constantly calling out the mysterious name “Ellen” from his deathbed. For Raunce, this means it is safe to take a nip from the dying man’s whisky, assuring the pantry boy Albert that Eldon was “on with his Ellen, ’e won’t take notice” (p. 5). Given the novel’s title, it is hard not to wonder whether this repeated name signifies some form of erotic attachment that the old butler once enjoyed (though, of course, “Ellen” could equally have been an adored sister or a cherished cat, or perhaps a fantasy rather than a memory). The reader can only speculate – the origin of the name is never explained. Its constant iteration in these opening pages, however, sets the scene for a narrative where voice, in all its myriad permutations, is the surest guide to consciousness.

In Green’s work, the potency of voice is sometimes suggested by its contrast with the poverty of writing. As has been noted earlier, there are numerous occasions throughout his fiction where writing is slyly deprecated – the shelf of fake books in *PartyGoing*, for instance. *Loving*, too, implies that the act of writing has a dubious value. For the Tennants and their ilk, putting pen to paper has an element of frippery; this is made clear by the extravagant paraphernalia laid out on Raunce’s tray, the assortment of nibs and inks and stationery that Mrs Tennant is so fastidious about. The only character in the novel actually shown writing is, in fact, Raunce. But the emphasis here is also on the contrived quality of the written word: Raunce writes letters to his mother back in England by first drafting them in pencil and afterwards tracing them in ink, a practice that seems to suggest a lack of spontaneity. The text of two of these letters is interposed into the narrative (pp. 34–35, 117–18). The first purports to express a measure of sympathy for Eldon’s death, before quickly descending into banality (“We are all in God’s hands Mother dear”). The second letter makes a vague allusion to the possibility of Raunce’s marriage:

> Who knows but there might be a change in my situation one of these days. You’ve often said it was time I settled down. But not a word to anyone dear, there’s nothing said yet. But I’ve my eye on a nice little place in the park what the married butler before Mr Eldon had. (p. 118)
Raunce’s letter does not once refer to Edith by name. Its lack of candour is later traversed in the lengthy dialogue he has with Edith at the end of the novel. Raunce, it will be recalled, seems to be unravelling by this stage. One of the matters weighing heavily on his mind is a letter from his mother chastising him for “hiding out” in a neutral country. Under Edith’s questioning, Raunce admits that his mother’s letter makes no mention of his engagement – though he falsely claims that his own correspondence had “said as clear as clear we were thinkin’ of getting married” (p. 220). The wilful obscurity of Raunce’s letters provides a stark contrast to the characters’ highly nuanced speech patterns; this will be a theme later revisited in Back.35

One of the subtlest ways in which the servants of Loving use their voices is by impersonating each other. Raunce, ever the chameleon, assumes a falsetto to mimic Nanny Swift (pp. 33, 82) and on another occasion copies the childish tones of Mrs Welch’s young nephew (p. 64). Kate signals an intention to shirk her chores by impersonating the highly strung Miss Burch: “‘I fancy I’ll lay me down on my bed. I feel faint,’ [she] suggested in Agatha’s voice” (p. 164). Sometimes, however, an assumed voice might give away more than its speaker intended. This happens when Raunce affects an “educated” accent in order to tell Edith about the notebooks he uses to record the details of his swindling – the put-on posh voice conveys a smugness that only seems to irritate Edith (p. 128). On the other hand, prim Agatha Burch drops her aitches after witnessing the scene of adultery in Mrs Jack’s bedroom (p. 76); Raunce later does the same when he is trying to dodge the inquiries of the visiting insurance agent, Mathewson (p. 148). In fact, it is Mathewson’s lisp that leads to some of the most sustained mimicry in the novel. After his visit, the servants take to lisping as a running joke among themselves (pp. 191–92, 209, 211–13, 215); the irony, of course, is that Mathewson was himself affecting the lisp – which he claimed to be the result of recent dental work – merely in order to ingratiate himself with Kinalty’s staff.

As well as mimicry and putting on voices, Loving’s characters also like to steal each other’s expressions. Just as the firemen in Caught parrot the tedious speech patterns of the old veteran Piper, the servants of Loving are in the habit of repeating someone

35 In a 1954 review of Sir Ernest Gowers’ The Complete Plain Words, Green was highly critical of what he called the “verbiage” of the British Civil Service, especially that found in official correspondence: Surviving, pp. 184–87.
else’s phrasing ipsissimis verbis. When Mrs Jack snaps off the arm on the weather-vane map, she immediately orders Raunce to disregard her tantrum: “‘Oh get on with your work,’ she said appearing to lose control” (p. 44); subsequently, the butler vents his own spleen on the pantry boy Albert in exactly the same terms: “‘Oh get on with your work,’ Raunce quoted from another context” (p. 58). This practice of quotation is invariably an attempt to bolster the speaker’s own authority. At times it can have withering effects. When Raunce begins speculating about her sexual history, Edith turns the butler’s own language against him, echoing the distinctive expression he always used for his dalliance with the French maid: “‘There’s many a time I’d give her a long bong jour,’ she quoted” (p. 199). In another case, Raunce borrows Miss Burch’s scriptural allusion – “And the wicked shall flourish even as a green bay tree” (p. 16) – that had been used as a veiled criticism of his own moral character. Towards the end of the novel, Raunce quotes these words himself in condemnation of the cook’s petty swindling (p. 214) – in the process demonstrating his hypocrisy yet again. Together with the widespread vocal mimicry, this practice of quotation suggests something profound about the novel’s attitude to language. Authority rests in the spoken, not the written, word. It matters little that the words uttered are nonsense (like the affected lisping) or commonplace (“Oh get on with your work”). Their force comes from the fact that they have already been said before by someone else.

In Loving, as elsewhere in Green’s work, the use of voice is closely associated with transformations of identity. Characters constantly fictionalise themselves by what they say or how they say it – momentarily assuming another persona, like the multi-accented mystery man of Party Going. This is also why they are so particular about their names and titles. The cook Mrs Welch, for instance, is very fussy about the manner in which she is addressed. The other servants joke about how she hates being called “cook” because, for some unexplained reason, “she don’t like the name” (pp. 16, 102, 116). Yet the woman’s formal title is itself a fiction since it appears she is not even married: “she’s only called Mrs like all cooks,” Edith explains at one point (p. 39). But Mrs Welch indignantly insists on being addressed in this way, presumably as a refusal to be lumped together with all the other “cooks” in Kinalty’s history – in short, as a vindication of her selfhood. The characters of Loving seem to be forever shaping their identities by trying
on different names for size. Raunce, in particular, uses a bewildering array of appellations to describe himself, moulding them to different situations and conversational contexts. When questioning the pantry boy about sex, he chooses one that connotes tolerance: “Broad-minded Charley that’s what I’m known as” (p. 69); when boasting about his various schemes, the epithet suggests deviousness: “Clever Charley’s the name” (p. 189); when bragging that the Tennants will never discover his swindles, the chosen adjective implies an immunity from detection: “Lucky Charley they call me” (p. 107). All of these supposed nicknames ring false; they are nothing more than attempts at self-fashioning. On other occasions, Raunce describes himself in terms that connote intimacy – even where that intimacy does not exist. His effort to grope an unwilling Edith in the opening scene of the novel provides the first example: “‘Come to father, beautiful,’ he said” (p. 13). Bizarrely, this self-description as “father” continues even after his relationship with Edith has blossomed (pp. 108, 164). In a similar vein, it is avuncularity that he claims when cajoling the down-trodden pantry boy to reveal some secret: “Come on, tell uncle” (p. 59). Raunce’s method of elaborate self-description becomes so pervasive that Edith even begins to speak of herself in this way: “Trust little Edith,” she assures Kate at one point (p. 137).

In Green’s fiction, names are crucial to perceptions of status. This is why Raunce is so keen to slough off the sobriquet “Arthur” assigned to all of Kinalty’s footmen. But the Tennants and their friends, of course, can call people whatever they like. When Captain Davenport and another neighbour come over for lunch shortly after Raunce’s promotion to butler, they persist in addressing him as “Arthur” – much to his chagrin (pp. 30–31). Even Mrs Tennant lapses in this regard later in the novel (p. 169). Yet she herself is particular about the manner in which the servants address her. During Raunce’s convoluted explanation of the visit by the insurance agent, she interrupts to complain about the overuse of her title:

“Well this was not exactly a pleasant experience Madam. More like the third degree Madam. And it seemed to throw my boy Albert right off his balance, Madam.”

“Raunce may I say something?”

“Yes Madam.”

36 A further example of this pseudo-avuncularity can be found at p. 70.
“Don’t Madam me quite as much as you do. Put in one now and again for politeness but repeating a thing over and over rather seems to take away from the value,” and she gave him a sweet smile really.
“Very good Madam.” (p. 171)

It has been observed that twentieth-century novels often employ names that are “connotatively rich” – that is, names suggesting a deeper meaning as a consequence of some cultural or aesthetic allusion (Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, for instance, or the eccentrically titled personae of Gertrude Stein’s Three Lives). Naming in Green’s fiction is quite different, as the above-quoted interchange between Raunce and Mrs Tennant demonstrates. In Loving, as elsewhere in Green’s work, the significance of a name is largely determined by the characters themselves; it is (in Gérard Genette’s terms) intradiegetic, rather than an allusion to something outside the text.

For the servants of Kinalty, names are among the most powerful words that anyone might utter. Often they are the repository of private fantasies – the dying Eldon calls out to his “Ellen”, while Kate is found to murmur “Paddy” in her sleep (p. 135). Raunce does something similar at the end of the novel when he is overwhelmed by the sight of Edith feeding the castle birds:

“Edie,” he appealed soft, probably not daring to move or speak too sharp for fear he might disturb it all. Yet he used exactly that tone Mr Eldon had employed at the last when calling his Ellen. “Edie,” he moaned. (p. 229)

The couple, it will be recalled, have just had a long and at times fractious conversation about their future. Things remain rather up in the air between them, yet Raunce’s sotto voce chant of “Edie” has an unmistakable tenderness about it. “Loving” is, of course, sometimes linguistic as much as it is erotic. Raunce’s private recitation of his inamorata’s name exemplifies the affective power of voice in the novel. Paradoxically though, that power does not always depend on being heard or understood.

Speech in Loving often seems to have this personal dimension. Characters employ idiosyncratic turns-of-phrase that mark them out as individuals – Raunce’s “long bong jour”, for instance, or Nanny Swift’s peculiar habit of referring to herself in the third person (pp. 119, 121, 123). They even like to use words that they know will baffle

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their listeners. On one occasion, Edith tells the over-amorous Raunce that he is “puffin’ like a grampus”:

“What’s a grampus honey?” he asked and looked a bit daunted.  
“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she teased him.  
“I can’t make out why you want all this mystification,” he said.  (p. 200)

As Edith’s vocabulary demonstrates, the servants of Kinalty can be highly inventive in their use of language. When recounting her discovery of Mrs Jack in bed with Captain Davenport, Edith describes the scene in especially colourful terms: “she sat up in bed with her fronts bobblin’ at him like a pair of geese” (p. 130). As she regales Raunce with the hilarious spectacle of her employer’s nakedness, Edith appears to usurp the role of narrator:

“There she sits up at me …” Edith ran on, eyes sparkling. And he had to listen to the whole thing again, and with embellishments that he had never heard, that even he must have doubted.  (p. 130; the ellipsis is Green’s)

This imaginative re-creation of events might also be considered a function of character. Edith’s lovely metaphor of bobbling geese seems exactly the sort of thing she would say: the reader can accept that a servant girl in her position would likely have noticed how such birds behave and how they might resemble a woman’s bare breasts. The metaphor, in short, is one entirely consistent with the character’s personality and linguistic resources.

This is also the case with the novel’s extensive use of slang and dialect. *Fash, worriting, mort, sarky*: the servants’ argot gives *Loving* a particular savour, not unlike the English vocabulary in *A la recherche du temps perdu*.38 Green was a great admirer of working-class and rural dialects. In *Pack My Bag*, he recalls the “fantastic” speech of the servants at his boyhood home in Gloucestershire – speech memorable for both its strangeness and its exactitude (he claims the servants had a “Saxon monosyllable” for the quality of dryness in a peach).39 Indeed, it is striking how often the servants in *Loving* use dialect when aiming for a precise description of a particular state of mind. “I lie awake at night moithering about that lass,” Raunce says to the pantry boy on one

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38 For examples of this argot, see pp. 82, 85, 87, 139 and 214; see also Daniel Karlin, *Proust’s English* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).

occasion, admitting to his anxious love for Edith (p. 70). “Moithering” is so apt in this context, delicately registering the intensity of Raunce’s obsession and yet remaining consistent with his working-class background. In a small way, the use of this word reflects the novel’s general attitude to language. Ordinary speech in *Loving* often has a great emotional avoirdupois but without losing what V.S. Pritchett called its “humility”.40

The amorous conversations that take place between Edith and Raunce are also ordinary – so much so that they might even be considered banal. Yet this sentimental quality does not make them any less authentic. The discourse of romantic love is often a hackneyed one, as Roland Barthes once suggested.41 None of this, however, diminishes the definite sense of personality possessed by *Loving*’s characters. Like Shakespeare’s Launce, the servants of Kinalty come to life in their speech, even when their conversations are mawkish or trite. In any case, clichés are sometimes our truest words for all those things that lie beyond words. The novelist Ian McEwan made a very similar point in what must surely be one of the most celebrated essays of this last decade. For McEwan, voice is fundamental to our humanity; the technology of the mobile telephone has recently reminded us of this “ancient, human universal”, especially in those desperate situations when the only words we can find are the most over-used ones:

A San Francisco husband slept through his wife’s call from the World Trade Centre. The tower was burning around her, and she was speaking on her mobile phone. She left her last message to him on the answering machine. A TV station played it to us, while it showed the husband standing there listening. Somehow he was able to bear hearing it again. We heard her tell him through her sobbing that there was no escape for her. The building was on fire and there was no way down the stairs. She was calling to say goodbye. There was really only one thing for her to say, those three words that all the terrible art, the worst pop songs and movies, the most seductive lies, can somehow never cheapen. I love you.

She said it over and over again before the line went dead. And that is what they were all saying down their phones, from the hijacked planes and the burning towers. There is only love, and then oblivion.42

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40 Pritchett’s comment about humility was made in a 1945 radio address; see Treglown, p. 161.


At Henry Green’s memorial service, V.S. Pritchett praised Back for its artful portrayal of “the thwarted, haunted imagination” in a time of war. This was an interpretation with which the author himself would most probably have agreed. “It’s all about a man whose nerves are very bad,” Green once said of the novel in a letter to his publisher. Back was finished in August 1945, though it did not appear in the bookshops until a year later. Its principal character, Charley Summers, is a returned soldier who had lost a leg fighting in France during the early stages of the war; he is now back in England after five years in a German prison camp (the novel no doubt owed something to the maimed and shell-shocked veterans Green had encountered as a boy, so memorably described in his autobiography). Back is an exploration of Charley’s fragile mental state – reviewing the novel for Horizon, Philip Toynbee rightly said that its central concern was hallucination. In that respect, it might be regarded – in the tradition of Elizabeth Bowen’s The Heat of the Day – as a study of war’s effect on individual psychologies.

Charley’s disturbed mind is presented through the prism of a disturbed text. Back is full of gnarled paragraphs and elliptical dialogues, crafty repetitions and false doublings; also striking is how often it reproduces or simulates other forms of writing, ranging from love letters and business correspondence to a lengthy translation from the memoirs of an eighteenth-century French marquise. In addition, it is a highly allusive novel (at least by Green’s standards), with echoes of Keats, T.S. Eliot and even Cyril Connolly. But perhaps the ancillary text that sheds the greatest light on Back is one that postdates it – namely, Green’s unpublished story “The Great I Eye”, written in 1947.

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2 Quoted in Treglown, p. 162.
3 Pack My Bag, pp. 64–74.
4 Untitled review, Horizon (1947) vol. 15, p. 75.
5 On Back’s various literary allusions, see Mengham, pp. 173–74.
6 Surviving, pp. 121–27. Page references for this story will appear parenthetically in the present paragraph.
The sort of sensory derangement suffered by Charley in the novel is also experienced by that story’s main character, a paunchy middle-aged man called Jim who has just woken up after a night of debauchery. Lying “in full dress” on his bed, Jim endures all the usual nasty side-effects of a debilitating hang-over: “misery, anxiety, death death death” (p. 121). Not surprisingly, he does not recall any of the details of his boozy escapade: “because he remembered visually, he could picture almost nothing of last night” (p. 122). As the title suggests, the story is preoccupied with ways of seeing and how they might be distorted in someone who is, or has been, blind drunk. At every turn, the limits of vision are emphasised: Jim’s wife brings him a cup of tea but “seemed to take care not to look at him”, while a stuffed owl is said to have “regarded” the stricken man from inside its glass dome (p. 121). Jim’s paranoia increases when he receives a telephone call from a mysterious woman who seems to know a good deal about his nocturnal revelry. Half-listening to her conversation, he starts to have a series of strange fantasies: “As his custom was he now began a scene in his head, vivid and sharp, the imagination louder than [this woman’s] uninterrupted flow of talk” (p. 125). These fantasies are all high farce: Jim visualises a naked girl next to him “with a camel’s hump of thighs” (p. 123), then imagines himself receiving a parcel delivery which turns out to be a pair of rubber novelty breasts, and finally dreams up a bizarre visit to a pawnbroker. Like Charley Summers, Jim seems governed by what he sees in his mind’s eye; fantasy tends to matter more to him than reality. In the end, he actually does receive a parcel delivery – not false breasts but an alligator-skin wallet, embossed with his initials in gold (as has been noted already, initials often figure prominently in Green’s work), a gift from some unknown admirer. By now utterly confused, he hides the wallet and goes to bed. In his befuddled state, he is simply unable to come up with any explanation for the gift – especially if he were pressed for one by his suspicious wife. Like the characters in Back, Jim is a fabulator; the only way he can make sense of the world, either to himself or to those around him, is by telling stories.
Unknowing: Bewilderment in Back

*Back* begins, unforgettably, with a visit to the dead.\(^7\) Charley Summers hops off a bus somewhere in southern England and enters a country churchyard where he starts searching for the grave of his former lover, Rose. Charley has a “peg leg”, to use the novel’s term for it, replacing the limb he had lost during the first few months of fighting in 1940. While he was being held by the Germans in a prisoner-of-war camp, Rose had died. That is why he has come, to find the grave of this woman “who, above all at night, had been in his feelings when he was behind barbed wire” (pp. 5–6). It is soon apparent that Charley is psychologically disturbed. This much can be gathered from his manner, as he nervously looks around at the churchyard’s profusion of wild flowers: “He might have been watching for a trap, who had lost his leg in France for not noticing the gun beneath a rose” (p. 5). Here the sentence itself seems to have suffered an amputation. The disconcerting absence of a pronoun in the subordinate clause typifies the novel’s oblique style, as well as reproducing Charley’s sense of bewilderment in the reader. It is the first appearance of the word “rose” in the text (significantly, it is associated in this instance with hidden danger). The word occurs again almost straight away, in one of Green’s meandering paragraph-long sentences:

> For, climbing around and up these trees of mourning, was rose after rose after rose, while, here and there, the spray overburdened by the mass of flower, a live wreath lay fallen on a wreath of stone, or on a box in marble colder than this day, or onto frosted paper blooms which, under glass, marked each bed of earth wherein the dear departed encouraged life above in the green grass, the cypresses and in those roses gay and bright which, as still as this dark afternoon, stared at whosoever looked, or hung their heads to droop, to grow stained, to die when their turn came. (p. 5)

Anthony Powell speculated in his memoirs that Green was more of a poet than a novelist; sentences like this lend support to that view.\(^8\) *Rose after rose after rose*: this is a novel where repetition matters and where words often have a surplus of meaning. Many of the scenes even have a rose-coloured tint – here the church tower is said to be made of

\(^7\) *Back* (London: Hogarth, 1946). All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text of this chapter.

\(^8\) *Infants of the Spring*, p. 198.
“blood-coloured brick”, while Charley himself is wearing “pink tweeds”. One of the novel’s other key repetitions is, of course, the ambiguous word of its title. On the opening page, the reader learns of Charley’s eagerness to visit Rose’s old village: “[n]ow at the first opportunity he was back” (p. 5, emphasis added). The word signifies not just Charley’s repatriation but also the power of the past. From the outset, Charley is shown to be vulnerable to the unexpected lurches of mémoire involontaire. A sudden cackling of geese in the churchyard transports him back to the war: “the sound … brought home to him a stack of faggots he had seen blown high by a grenade” (p. 6). Charley is back in England but he is still very much living in the past.

There is a noticeably sinister atmosphere throughout the novel, beginning with this scene in the churchyard. It is not only the noisy geese that startle Charley – he is also unnerved by the prospect of being watched, either by the passengers on the bus that has just dropped him off or by some other unknown presence: “He felt more than ever that he did not wish to be observed” (p. 6). This paranoia about being seen is just one aspect of his odd behaviour. As he makes his way through the churchyard, he resolves not to look at the abundance of roses: “As if to do his best to become unseen, he kept his eyes on the gravel over which he was dragging the peg leg” (p. 6). Various practices of covering or averting the eyes occur elsewhere in Green’s work – perhaps most memorably in Loving, with its game of blindman’s buff. In Back, the characters are also very much in the habit of refusing to see things as they really are; in Charley’s case, this is often one of the techniques he employs to keep his mind on an even keel. In fact, at every turn, making sense of the world proves enormously difficult for him. A boy of about six happens to be riding a tricycle around the churchyard. The text alerts the reader to the boy’s significance:

[Charley] sharply stared but, as he took in the child’s fair head, he saw nothing, nothing was brought back. He did not even feel a pang, as well he might if only he had known. (p. 6)

At this stage, the text seems to know more than the character – it later emerges that Charley might be the boy’s father. But, for the moment, Charley remains unknowing; he soon forgets about the boy, “who spelled nothing to him” (p. 6). The idiom used here – of spelling nothing – hardly seems accidental. Back is obsessed with the elusiveness of meaning, with words and images that signify nothing. After the boy rides away, Charley
remembers that there is a telegram in his pocket, ordering him to attend a rehabilitation
centre for the fitting of a new prosthesis (as he well knows, the day for doing so has
already passed – one way or another, time is always out of joint in Back). The order
comes from some official agency whose name and function is a complete mystery to
Charley: “‘E.N.Y.S.’ it was signed. More letters standing he did not know what for.”
(p. 8). The puzzle of this acronym makes him recall the prisoner-of-war camp where he
had been confined for the last four years – it too had “flowered with initials, each inmate
decorated his bunk with them out there” (p. 8). The whole novel is in fact brimming with
arcane abbreviations. Several of the characters point out that language is one of the
unexpected casualties of war; the baffling acronyms are interpreted as the sign of a vast
bureaucracy that is hell-bent on tying up daily life with red tape. In Green’s work, doubts
about the coherence of written language can often lead to farce, like Raunce’s scatter-
brained reading of the letters “I.R.A.” in Loving. But in Back the bewildering array of
initials is part of a general atmosphere of existential uncertainty – here nothing is as it
seems.

Charley’s visit to the churchyard is part of his search for enlightenment. The first
head-stone he comes across is starkly engraved with the single word, “Sophie” (the text
points out that the stone has no death-date or other details on it). As the Greek origins of
the name suggest, it is wisdom that Charley, in his fashion, is seeking. The immediate
task, he tells himself, is to find where, in “this sort of sad garden”, Rose had been buried
(p. 7). But his unknowingness goes much deeper than that: “he was forever asking
himself things he could seldom answer and which, amassing in his mind, left a great
weight of detail undecided” (p. 7). As he becomes further “lost in this bloody
graveyard”, his thoughts are filled with unanswerable questions, culminating in a
desperate expression of epistemological doubt:

Where could she be? Rose that he’d loved, that he’d come so far for?
Why did she die? Could anyone understand anything? (p. 9)

The basic problem of Back, then, is one of knowledge. The novel is constantly
examining the errors of what we see and what we say, and the concomitant failures of
memory and interpretation; it has a sense of uncertainty that is seemingly universal and
not just a consequence of the war. Blundering around the gravestones, Charley acknowledges this himself:

He thought how Rose would have laughed to see him in his usual state of not knowing, *lost as he always was*, and had been when the sniper got him in the sights. (p. 7, emphasis added)

*Back* is also a novel of coincidences and chance meetings. The first of these occurs in the churchyard when Charley runs into James Phillips – “of all people, of all imaginable men” (pp. 9–10) – who is Rose’s widowed husband. Almost at once, James gives voice to the novel’s ambiguous title: “Why Charley, then they’ve sent you back”, he declares, before quickly adding that “you haven’t come back to much” (p. 10, emphasis added). James is garrulous and friendly, but the conversation is quite one-sided; here, as elsewhere in the novel, Charley finds himself lost for words. Yet on this occasion he does at least manage to utter his stock phrase of grim acceptance, “There it is” (an expression that was, apparently, a favourite with the author himself).9 The phrase marks Charley out as one of the long line of stoics in Green’s work, like John Haye in *Blindness* and old Craigan in *Living*. But, as will be seen, Charley is not the only character in the novel resigned to accepting one’s lot in life.

James prattles on to Charley about the home-front’s various deprivations: “Everything’s initials these days,” he complains (p. 11), bemoaning the interventionism of the wartime bureaucracy. At this stage, James appears unaware of the true extent of Charley’s relationship with Rose. Before she met her husband, Rose had enjoyed a long affair with Charley and this continued after her marriage. James, it seems, never knew of Rose’s adultery (characters in *Back* are often in the dark about things). Accordingly, he is warm in welcoming Charley home, even suggesting that they have lunch together. In the course of their conversation, the widower asks Charley whether “you didn’t happen to run across my nipper on his bike” (p. 11). This seemingly innocent inquiry rocks Charley. It immediately dawns on him that the boy riding the tricycle around the churchyard must have been Rose’s son. His stomach lurches, “for there had been more than a question between Rose and himself, at the time the baby was on the way, as to whether it could be his own” (p. 12). The boy’s name is Ridley – “poor kid,” Charley

thinks to himself, “to be called by such a name” (p. 12). Onomastics are always important to Green and here the boy’s name is meant to suggest the riddle of his paternity (though James seems to have no doubts on this score).\textsuperscript{10} Charley thereupon accepts the invitation to join James for lunch, purely because he hopes to meet Ridley again. This, he thinks, will enable him to examine the child’s face “for an echo of Rose” – even to try to detect a likeness of himself there, “a something, however false, to tell him he was a father, that Rose lived again, by his agency, in their son” (p. 12).

What ultimately transpires at the lunch is never revealed (significant events often go unnarrated in \textit{Back}, thereby contributing to the reader’s sense of vertigo). Before meeting up with James, Charley resumes his search for Rose’s grave. Eventually he finds what he is looking for: “there lay before his eyes more sharp letters, cut in marble … this was where they had laid her, for the letters spelled Rose” (pp. 12–13). The discovery of the grave brings on a strange feeling of guilt in Charley. The reason for this is not entirely clear but it seems to have originated in his failure to recognise Ridley as Rose’s son (he is “appalled” with himself that “the first sight of the boy had meant nothing” to him: p. 12). Such a failure, in Charley’s estimation, amounts to a dishonouring of Rose’s memory: “this was the first time that he had denied her by forgetting, denied one whom, he knew for sure, he was to deny again, then once more yet, yes thrice” (p. 13). This notion of threefold denial originates, as Rod Mengham has shown, in the Gospel episode where Jesus predicts that Peter will deny him three times.\textsuperscript{11} Charley’s momentary “forgetting” of Rose is presented as somehow tantamount to a lapse of spiritual faith.

The scene then shifts to Redham, “one of London’s outer suburbs” (p. 13) and home to Rose’s parents, Mr and Mrs Grant. This elderly couple have known Charley for years: “Mrs Grant, in particular, had a soft spot for him” (p. 13). But on this occasion it is Mr Grant who has asked Charley to visit them – his wife is not up to issuing invitations, since she seems to have lost her mind. “She doesn’t remember so very well nowadays,” Mr Grant tells Charley (p. 13). This is an understatement. Mrs Grant appears entirely stuck in the past, behaving as if the Great War had never ended; she

\textsuperscript{10} This connection between “Ridley” and “riddle” is subsequently noted by another character: see p. 51.

\textsuperscript{11} Mengham, pp. 162–63. In his autobiography, Green admitted to a particular fascination with this biblical story: \textit{Pack My Bag}, pp. 27–28.
mistakes Charley for her younger brother, killed in action in 1917. According to her husband, it was the shock of Rose’s death several years before that had caused this amnesia. “Nature’s cruel, there’s no getting away from her laws,” Mr Grant observes, “she won’t let up on the weak” (p. 14).

Their afternoon tea is a tortured affair. While Mrs Grant rambles on about zeppelin raids that happened over two decades ago, her husband repeats the novel’s standard complaint about government regulation: “‘Everything’s initials these days,’ the old man said” (p. 19). Charley, moreover, is irritated by having been asked to come – Mr Grant had let it slip that the visit had been suggested by his wife’s doctor in an attempt to restore her sanity (p. 21). Charley regarded this as “dead selfish of the old boy” and resents being used “as a guinea pig on Rose’s mother” (p. 15). Just when it seems that the visit could not get any worse, Mrs Grant starts to scream for no apparent reason; this does at least give Charley a chance to escape. Mr Grant then takes the opportunity to give the departing Charley an address of “someone who knew Rose” – a young woman who “wants to meet you”, he says (p. 22).

Charley lives in central London where he works in the office of an engineering firm. One lunch hour he runs into another wounded veteran, the one-armed Arthur Middlewitch, whom he had first met at a centre that distributed prosthetic limbs. Middlewitch invites Charley to join him for lunch at a nearby pub. By chance (as so much is in Back), the waitress’s name is Rose – the very mention of this word gives Charley a “jolt” (p. 23). As usual, he is not much of a conversationalist: “he had something, a sort of block in his stomach which, in the ordinary way, seemed to stand between him and free speech” (p. 24). Only under the influence of whisky does he loosen up, even to the extent of slyly mentioning his great love affair with Rose: “‘Had a child by her as a matter of fact,’ he boasted, denying Rose a second time” (p. 26). Why this should constitute a denial is not made plain – perhaps because Charley chooses to present something as true when it is no more than a possibility; in his own mind at least, this somehow equates to a dishonouring of Rose’s memory. His “denial”, of course, has no external consequences attaching to it – he does not even mention Rose’s name to Middlewitch (who is not interested anyway). Yet this “denial” is also strangely liberating for Charley: “he felt the relief in his stomach” (p. 26).
Middlewitch’s conversation over lunch consists mainly of a lurid catalogue of his sexual encounters. Perhaps it is this that prompts Charley to reveal that Mr Grant had slipped him the address of the young widow who supposedly wants to meet him. The lecherous Middlewitch is titillated by this and asks whether the woman is “dark or fair” (p. 26):

Mr Summers had never considered this.
“Red,” he replied from habit.
“Oh boy, a redhead.”
“At least I don’t know. Haven’t seen her,” Charley mumbled.

This brief exchange demonstrates Charley’s capacity for self-delusion. On this occasion, it is virtually a reflex: without a moment’s thought, he declares the widow to be a redhead (earlier he had even followed a woman “the best part of three miles” for this very reason: p. 22). But his obsession ebbs and flows. When Middlewitch calls the waitress over, this time Charley is not the least disturbed by the word that had previously given him a jolt: “Rose was no more than a name to him” (p. 30). Before they part company, Middlewitch advises him to visit the young widow: “Drop in unexpected, that’s my advice, drop in” (p. 30).

The variable nature of Charley’s obsession with Rose also emerges in a conversation with his landlady. This niggardly woman, Mrs Frazier, owns the boarding-house where Charley has his digs (it turns out, much to his surprise, that she is on familiar terms with both Mr Grant and Middlewitch). In the course of regaling Charley with some tedious account of home-front life, Mrs Frazier makes the banal comment that prices “rose”. At the mere sound of this word, Charley braces himself for the expected anguish: he “held his breath for the pain to which he had grown accustomed” (p. 35). Yet, amazingly, this doesn’t happen – he “felt nothing at her mention of Rose” (p. 35). Mrs Frazier continues with her palaver; she next rattles off a list of flowers available on the black market – “tulips, daffodils, chrysanthemums, even violets of the field” (p. 36). Predictably, Charley waits for her to utter that one word he dreads so much but this time she fails to oblige. Eventually though, she says it in a different context, when she complains about some instance of petty overcharging: “when I saw the prices they charge round the corner my gall rose” (p. 36). Immediately, Charley “fastened on this word”. But once again there are no emotional consequences: “he felt nothing, nothing at all”
This leads him to conclude that his obsession has now ended: “Rose was gone” (p. 36). Of course, he is wrong. In Back, desires are not always consistent.

Part of Green’s achievement as a novelist is his superb evocations of working life – the rigours and routines of those employed in railway stations and fire stations, foundries and country houses. In this regard, Back is no exception; one of its great strengths is the treatment of Charley’s time at the office. The firm where he works has for years endured a chronic staff shortage but the relevant government agency has at last approved the employment of a new “typist” (the term, like the job it described, is now probably outmoded). This young woman, a Miss Dot Pitter, is assigned to be Charley’s assistant. By this stage, Charley believes himself to be “losing Rose” (p. 37), as he puts it: whenever “he said her name he noted he felt nothing any more” (p. 41). Now untrammelled by his memories of Rose, he begins to find this Miss Pitter attractive. Her breasts, in particular, catch his eye – they were “like two soft nests of white mice” (p. 43). Yet his newfound desires are tempered by a sense of irrational shame: “he dreaded getting into this condition” (p. 43). For her part, Dot also seems to find Charley attractive. But she is daunted by the work – especially the complicated filing system Charley has implemented in the office, a vast card index designed to keep track of company orders and correspondence. Inevitably, this system trips her up. Even though she had been working with the index for several weeks, Dot fails on an important occasion to locate some crucial item of business correspondence. Mortified by her mistake, she bursts into tears; Charley tries to console her by planting a clumsy kiss on her temple.

The last time Charley had kissed a woman “had been such a long while back” (p. 46). Now he is greatly upset by his own innocent gesture – kissing Dot releases a flood of troubling memories. After work, he begins to wander the streets (like Pye in Caught, Green’s characters tend to become peripatetic whenever their equilibrium is disturbed). “By chance” (or so the novel has it), Charley finds himself at the address that Mr Grant had given him. The name card on the door reads “Miss Nancy Whitmore in Gothic lettering, as cut on tombstones” (p. 46) – an obvious link with the dead Rose. There are other links: the door is painted pink, the card is held in place by pink sticking
tape, and the wallpaper surrounding the door has a pattern of “wreathed roses”. When the door opens, it is as if Charley is seeing a ghost:

He pitched forward, in a dead faint, because there she stood alive, so close that he could touch, and breathing, the dead spit, the living image, herself, Rose in person. (p. 47)

As first meetings go, this must rank among the strangest in modern fiction. The woman is indeed Nancy Whitmore but Charley believes her to be his lost Rose. When he regains consciousness after his “dead faint”, he notices she is a brunette, not a redhead. But his mind easily finds an explanation for this: “Darling,” he tells her, “you’ve dyed your hair” (p. 47). Nor is he put off that “her voice sounded rather changed” (p. 48). His disquiet, however, begins to grow when she insists that he leave her flat as soon as he recovers from his fainting spell. Quickly, he invents a reason for her unwelcoming attitude – that she must not have heard of his repatriation and had assumed “he had given her up” (p. 49). Of course, Nancy fails to acknowledge her name as Rose. Charley’s deluded mind then comes up with an even more bizarre explanation: “she’d lost her memory, same as her mother” (p. 49).

In an attempt to revive this strange man who swooned on her doorstep, Nancy makes some tea. It doesn’t help: Charley drops the cup and breaks it. She curtly refuses his offer of a replacement: “I wouldn’t want you in here a second time,” she tells him and then confesses that she would not have opened the door at all “only I happened to know Mr Middlewitch was in across the landing” (p. 50). Charley is horrified at the prospect that his Rose might be acquainted with this old lecher; he is even further bewildered when Nancy seems not to understand his reference to the child Ridley. Realising that Charley has mistaken her for someone else, Nancy admits that this sort of thing has happened to her before: “I suppose I’ve a double somewhere in this town” (p. 51). She becomes incensed, however, when Charley suggests that she must have lost her memory (in his mind, he begins to equate her with the amnesiac Mrs Grant). Yet Nancy’s attitude softens after Charley explains that he lost a leg in the war. To smooth things over, she assures him not to worry about a simple case of mistaken identity: “others have come up to me in the street, respectable people mind, and have fallen into the same error” (p. 54). What she chooses not to say is that these people also called her Rose, just like the pitiable man who has stumbled into her flat. But things take a turn for the worse when Charley
reveals that Mr Grant had provided her address: “It was your father sent me, Rose.” (p. 54). At this, she bursts into tears and even Charley can see that for some reason she feels ashamed, “something he had never seen in Rose” (p. 54). This is the final straw:

“Rose darling,” he said, “you’re not yourself.”
“I’m not your Rose,” she wailed, crying noisily once more, “and I never was, nor ever could be. Oh I rue the day that man had me, was my father,” she mumbled. (p. 55)

Charley does not grasp what the woman is saying - that she is acknowledging Grant as her father, while denying that she is Rose (questions of paternity occur throughout the novel). Nancy eventually manages to hustle Charley out the door where, once again, he wanders the streets for hours.

Doubling crops up often in Green’s work – Alex Alexander and Embassy Richard in *Party Going*, the two lost boys in *Caught*, the multiplicity of Arthurs and Alberts in *Loving*. But here it animates the entire narrative: everything that happens in the novel hinges on Charley’s delusion that Nancy is his Rose come to life. Taking a Freudian view of things, Rod Mengham argues that this is evidence of the subconscious at work. Charley’s dead lover is essentially disembodied – this is why she can be resurrected in even the most commonplace usage of the word “rose”. For Mengham, it is a sign of Charley’s mind spinning out of control, with Nancy as the final stage in a process of paranoid reincarnation.\(^{12}\) There is much force in this view. Charley is without doubt deranged by his grief – he had been seeking to instantiate Rose in another woman even before he met Nancy (recall how he followed a redheaded woman through the streets because of a mere superficial resemblance of hair colouring). But Mengham’s psychoanalytic approach does not really address the novel’s more general use of doubling. Even at this early stage, it is emphasised that other people besides Charley have mistaken Nancy for Rose; and, as will be seen, the doubling motif goes beyond the resemblance between these two women, exemplifying the problem of knowledge that dogs many of the characters. In that respect, *Back* might be regarded as part of a long tradition of fictional works that explore questions of duality (it has, for instance, several similarities to *Bruges-la-Morte*, the great French *symboliste* novel by Georges

\(^{12}\) Mengham, pp. 167–68.
Rodenbach, where a grieving man falls in love with a woman who looks exactly like his
dead wife). According to the leading commentator on the subject, the doubling motif is
directly concerned with epistemological doubt and might even be regarded as part of
“that cultivation of uncertainty by which the literature of the modern world has come to
be distinguished”.

Charley becomes even more unhinged after this first encounter with Nancy,
realising that “he loved Rose desperately and despairingly now” (p. 56). Work the next
day is skipped in favour of another bout of *flânerie* through London’s streets. But this
brings him little comfort: “he fled Rose yet every place he went she rose up before him”
(p. 56). It is agony for him to walk past florists; even a novel seen in a shop window adds
to his misery (the book was Rhoda Broughton’s Victorian romance, *Cometh up as a
Flower*). Once again, the question of recognition is uppermost in Charley’s mind, as he
begins to accuse Nancy/Rose in the same way he had earlier accused himself: “For she
had denied him and it was doing him in” (p. 58, emphasis added). Charley’s distress
during these perambulations is palpable. Not knowing where to turn, he decides to
contact Mr Grant – perversely, Charley blames this man for having supplied him with
Nancy’s address in the first place. Grant refuses to discuss the matter over the telephone,
so Charley switches his attention to the landlady, Mrs Frazier, whom he now believes to
be part of some conspiracy against him. But when he tracks this woman down to the
local shopping market, all he can do is stammer. (Predictably, Mrs Frazier thinks he is
talking about flowers.) Again, Charley is given the brush-off. His attempts to contact
Middlewitch prove just as fruitless and he ends up collapsing, exhausted, in a park.

In his taxonomy of what he calls “the first postmodern generation of English
novelists”, David Lodge includes Green as one of those writers whose work “to a greater
or lesser extent, is a retreat from the modernist effort to represent subjective
consciousness as faithfully as possible”. For the most part, this is true. Green’s fiction
tends to concentrate on “an objective reporting of the world” (to use Lodge’s terms),

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novel was first published in 1892. It was popular throughout Europe for many decades; Erich
Korngold even based an opera on it in 1920.


15 *Consciousness and the Novel*, p. 64.
emphasising what people say and do rather than what they think and feel. But Back is the exception proving this general rule. Here Green is at pains to convey the state of his main character’s mind – its bewilderment and its fury, its desires and its tenderness. (As Edward Stokes has pointed out, Charley is present on almost every page of the novel.)

This represents a marked change from Loving, where the reader can often only guess at what that other Charley, the butler Raunce, is thinking.

The day spent roaming around London does little to alleviate Charley’s distress. He returns to work but his fragility is so obvious that his boss, Corker Mead, advises him to take some leave. Dwelling constantly on matters, Charley concludes that “somehow or other, Rose had, in fact, become a tart, gone on the streets” (p. 67). He resolves to rescue her. Before doing so, he buys a replacement cup and saucer – a purchase made “with what he considered to be extraordinary cunning” (p. 67). Armed with this gift, he turns up at Nancy’s flat. Initially, she is reluctant to let him in but her attitude soon softens, and she begins to speak “as though she did not mean to deny him” (p. 68). What she says is startling – that she is not Rose but is, in fact, Rose’s half-sister: “It’s not very nice having a double, practically a half twin if you like,” she tells him (p. 70). Not surprisingly, Charley refuses to believe this: “she was a tart and her father had sent him to redeem her … It was Rose right enough” (p. 70). Nancy insists that she is telling the truth and sympathises with Charley’s plight:

“Although it’s none of my fault, I’ve got to be fair. If a man really mistakes me for another I have to let him down in a decent fashion. I can’t laugh right in his face, not straight off, any old how.” (p. 72)

Nancy also makes clear her antipathy for Mr Grant, whom she claims has done nothing for her (it later emerges that she is the product of an extra-marital affair he had shortly after Rose had been born). Through Grant, Nancy is on familiar terms with the circumstances of Rose’s married life; this leads her to describe Charley’s suggestion of a meeting with the child Ridley as “cruel” (p. 73). None of this, of course, persuades Charley, who begins to torture himself with the idea of “men having her, night after night having the old Rose” (p. 75). Unable to stand any more of his own dark imaginings, he takes flight.

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16 Stokes, p. 119.
Throughout this exchange, Nancy emphasises that she is conscious of her responsibility to the suffering wretch on her doorstep – she repeatedly says she hopes to let Charley down “in a decent fashion” out of some sense of duty to the half-sister she had never met. Pity is, in large part, the operative moral code in Back. The novel is especially concerned to show the complexity of this emotion. Like so much else, Green may well have derived this from Proust; in Sodom and Gomorrah, for instance, the narrator Marcel recognises that any expression of pity may have unpredictable consequences.\(^\text{17}\) Here Nancy’s pity is complicated by her need to preserve a certain self-image – she insists that she is “a respectable girl” (p. 71) who does not normally let strangers into her flat. She is also prepared to rebuke Charley if necessary: “Just because you’re crazy, and a bit knocked off balance when you’re with me, you’re not entitled to pass remarks,” she admonishes him (p. 75). This emotional complexity is one of the reasons why Green’s characters seem so alive. Nancy’s reprimands, however, do not diminish the considerable kindness with which she instinctively treats Charley on this and other occasions. Most of Back’s characters behave in a similar way (even the self-interested Middlewitch is capable of doing Charley a good turn). It is as if pity had become the guiding principle by which everyone, in this time of war, must live. Indeed, it seems to circulate like currency: Charley pities the dead Rose; he is pitied by Nancy for doing so; then, in turn, he pities her for not recognising herself as Rose. For, as well as anger and revulsion at what he supposes to be her whoring, Charley feels “terribly sad” for the woman he has besieged: “she must be out of her mind,” he decides at one point (p. 73), the pot calling the kettle black.

The next day Charley visits Redham again to confront Rose’s father. But another shock awaits him there – it is Mr Grant who expects an apology from him. Nancy had earlier been in touch with Grant, complaining of Charley’s visit. As Grant sees it, Charley has breached a confidence by revealing to Nancy that it had been Grant who had provided her address. Charley is dumbstruck by Grant’s accusation: “the injustice of all this absolutely silenced Summers” (p. 78). In the course of delivering a tedious homily on the need to maintain confidences, Grant mentions that Nancy’s husband had been an

airman, shot down and killed in 1943; Charley, in his deranged way, jumps to the ridiculous conclusion that Nancy/Rose is some sort of bigamist, having married this pilot after her marriage to James Phillips. Such mad flights of fancy seem almost a warning to Back’s readers – Charley’s readiness to fit any scrap of information into his wild conspiracy theory cocks a snook at the notion of rational interpretability. Then it is Grant’s turn to be appalled when Charley lets it be known that Middlewitch lives across the landing from Nancy. Aware of this man’s reputation for rakishness, Grant asks Charley to intercede: “Someone should tell her the sort of dirty hound the man [Middlewitch] is,” he implores (p. 80). But Charley makes no promises: “he did not wish to see the girl he still took to be Rose ever again” (p. 81). Indeed, his resentment of her had not diminished – he still considered her to be a “painted tart” (p. 82). Not for the last time, Charley storms off.

In the following days, Charley does give some further thought as to whether he should warn Nancy/Rose about Middlewitch. The problem of how best to approach her is solved when he receives a letter from the widower James, who is coming to London for a brief stay. Charley hatches a plan to take this man to visit Nancy/Rose; by bringing the two of them together, he believed “she would be saved from the life he was sure she led” (p. 84). But this visit proves to be another unmitigated disaster. Nancy only opens the door because she is expecting a call from some government official (“a Ministry snooper”, as she puts it: p. 87). Upon learning James’s identity, she declares that the visit is “not proper” and bursts into tears. For his part, James does not think that there is any resemblance at all between Nancy and his dead wife. But Charley continues to labour under his delusions and starts hurling accusations of bigamy at the poor woman: “Never knew such filth existed,” he mutters (p. 89). James graciously tries to apologise for this boorish behaviour, suggesting the war as its likely cause; he soon departs, however, when Nancy intimates that Charley had once been Rose’s lover. Left alone with her mad pursuer, Nancy recomposes herself. Again she is sympathetic, doing her best to explain that she is not Rose and that she found it especially upsetting to be confronted with her half-sister’s husband. Charley will have none of it: “he thought of her as a dirty double crosser” (p. 90). Before going, he makes the lunatic’s standard accusation of conspiracy: “‘You’re in this together,’ he shouted” (p. 91).
Having returned home to his village, James tries to put this unpleasant episode out of mind. In an idle moment, he “picked up one of the literary reviews his wife had liked, and to which he had kept up the subscriptions while hardly ever reading” (p. 91). In its pages, he comes across a translation that, to his mind, “seemed so close to Charley’s situation that he thought he would forward it” (p. 91); accordingly, he marks it with a cross and puts it in the post. When Charley receives it, he recognises the review “as one that used to lie about in the old days” (p. 92). Given his deluded state, it is hardly surprising that he also assumes Rose has sent it to him. Ignoring the postmark, he then misinterprets the cross James had made on the relevant page as “an old kiss from Rose” (p. 92). The novel then proceeds to reproduce this translation – in all its disorienting detail – for about a dozen pages. Green had in fact done the translation himself – it was an extract from the memoirs of an eighteenth-century French noblewoman, Les Souvenirs de la Marquise de Créquy. According to Green’s nephew, a copy of these memoirs was held in the Yorke family library at Forthampton.18 In 1944, the review Horizon had published a translation done by Green of another passage from the Marquise’s Souvenirs.19 The translation reproduced in Back tells the story of a young French aristocrat, Princess Septimanie, who had fallen in love with a handsome count, the Comte de Gisors. But their romance is doomed – Septimanie’s father arranges for her to be married to a rich old grandee, forbidding any further contact between the young lovers. Some months later, the Comte de Gisors dies. Septimanie is heartbroken and, somewhat like Charley, takes to fainting if the count’s name is mentioned in her presence. Then, through the intervention of a mysterious third party, she meets an obscure young man, a soldier, who looks exactly like de Gisors; there is even a suggestion that he might be the dead count’s half-brother. Inevitably, Septimanie is smitten. Circumstance keeps them apart, however; then the young soldier meets with foul play and is killed. This so devastates Septimanie that she begins to waste away. The memoirist records that, in her last hours, the stricken princess seemed “to fuse the memory of these two men into one, into one true lover” (p. 104). In reading all this, Charley does not see any relevance to his own situation, calling it a “ridiculous story” (p. 104).

18 Surviving, p. 115 (editor’s note).
19 This was published as “The Waters of Nanterre”; see Surviving, pp. 115–20.
Some of Green’s other novels had also used this technique of interposing extraneous texts into the narrative frame. This was the case in *Blindness* with the opening section devoted to John Haye’s pre-accident diary; the technique is used again in *Loving*, which reproduces the old butler Eldon’s notebooks and Raunce’s stilted correspondence with his mother. But here it is different because the interposed text is entirely self-contained. The story of Septimanie and her so-called “twin attachment” (p. 105) does not involve any of *Back*’s other characters; it is only referred to again on one other occasion in the novel, some thirty-odd pages later, when James reminds Charley about having sent him the review. What purpose, then, does this interpolation serve? Reading *Back* shortly after publication, Evelyn Waugh thought the Septimanie episode “irrelevant”. Subsequent critics have taken a different view, however. Edward Stokes has defended the episode as “universalizing the novel’s central situation, of making it seem, not something merely bizarre and unlikely, but an archetype of human experience”. More recently, Jeremy Treglown has pointed out that the interpolated episode underlines the novel’s close parallels with its author’s personal life. Green was engaged in a number of extra-marital liaisons during the early 1940s (one of his mistresses lived in Dedham, a mere consonant away from the fictive Redham that was the home of Rose’s parents); it also seems likely that he once had an affair with his wife’s sister. Taking these biographical matters into account, the Septimanie episode might then be read as suggesting that a “twin attachment” could happen to anyone.

Rod Mengham, on the other hand, argues that the “real meaning” of the Septimanie episode is “a wholly schizophrenic one”. The translation is, in his terms, a kind of “confidence trick” because the *Souvenirs* of Madame de Créquy were quite probably a fabrication in the first place. The fictive status of an obscure French memoir is not, of course, something that *Back*’s readers are likely to know. But, for Mengham, this typifies the novel’s main problem – its meaning is “irrecoverable without special knowledge”. On this view, the probable fabrication of the memoir reduces the Septimanie episode to something like an in joke, undercutting any claims to the

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20 See Treglown, p. 171.
21 Stokes, p. 119.
22 Treglown, pp. 171–72.
The universality of Charley’s experience. The result, as Mengham sees it, is that *Back* “says far too little in a direct sense and far too much in an indirect sense”. There is nothing to suggest, however, that Green knew of the likely fabrication of the Marquise’s memoirs. In any case, his goal was hardly the flat terrain of a linear narrative; Mengham does seem to miss the point when he criticises the interpolation on the ground that it is apt to promote readerly bewilderment. Rather, the Septimanie episode shows the storied nature of all aspects of our social life. In that regard, it is one in a long line of stories folded into Green’s novels – a lineage that includes, for instance, the extended ramble of the nanny in *Blindness* and Richard Roe’s vivid description of the air raid in *Caught*. The Septimanie episode seems tangential to the primary narrative, but so do several of the foundrymen’s tales in *Living*, as well as the account of Embassy Richard’s antics in *Party Going*. Narrative, in all its manifold forms, is how identities are constructed; our conversations and our thoughts often resemble a kaleidoscope of stories, “joined in that autobiography we are all engaged in making and remaking as long as we live” (to use Barbara Hardy’s phrasing from her pioneering study of narration as a social act).

Hot on the heels of the Septimanie translation comes another extraneous text – this time a business letter addressed to Meads, the firm where Charley works. The letter is from a foundry, complaining about the failure by Meads to supply a quantity of metal castings; this is Charley’s area of responsibility. Corker Mead, the firm’s managing director, confronts Charley about this situation which is said, somewhat hyperbolically, to be prejudicing the war effort. Charley, a habitual misinterpreter, is unable even to grasp the full significance of the letter. Mead reprimands him for sloppy work and dispenses some advice that could well serve as a caveat to *Back*’s readers: “Don’t be in too much of a hurry to take things at face value” (p. 108). Furious at this criticism, Charley returns to his own office where he begins to bicker with Dot about the foundry’s letter of complaint. Much to his own surprise, he then tries to tell her about his strange emotional predicament: “‘A girl I used to know says she’s not that girl,’ he brought out, with difficulty” (p. 109). Dot, though sceptical, suggests that examples of the girl’s handwriting might be analysed in order to verify her identity (which immediately strikes

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23 Mengham, pp. 172–74.
Charley as a good idea). But then Dot reveals that she already has some knowledge of the matter. “It’s Rose, Rose she’s called, isn’t it Rose?” she asks, her insistent question coming as a “cruel shock” to Charley, like a “searchlight on a naked man” (p. 112). He leaves the room “in case he should have to vomit” (p. 112).

Once more, Charley becomes utterly paranoid. In desperation, he decides to approach Middlewitch again, even though he believes this man is having some sort of sexual dalliance with Nancy/Rose. So the two disabled veterans have lunch together, whereupon Charley launches into his deranged version of events, alleging that Rose Grant and Nancy Whitmore are the same woman. Middlewitch straight away recognises how unstable his companion has become: “the chap is obviously in dire trouble,” he thinks (p. 113). Though doing his best to calm Charley down, Middlewitch only makes matters worse when he intimates that he and Nancy had once been lovers. This causes Charley even more “nauseating misery” (p. 116), but he manages to get out that he would like a written apology from the woman he insists is Rose. (The reason for this odd request is so that he might have a recent specimen of the woman’s handwriting.) Later that evening, Middlewitch visits Nancy and convinces her to write to Charley. This she does, but all her note says is that “she did not want to leave things tangled” (p. 118). When Charley receives the note, he automatically assumes that “Rose must be disguising her hand” (p. 119). That night, however, he compares it with letters Rose had sent him years before. The novel gives the full text of those letters in all their numbing banality:

Dear Stinker.
I must say I think it’s a bit lop-sided your simply making up your mind you’d forget when I asked you especially to get me those mules we saw in the advert. Don’t be a meanie darling. From Rose. (p. 120)

But to Charley the letters are “sacred” (p. 121). He resolves that no handwriting expert will be permitted to read them in their present form. So he begins to make up a composite of the letters, cutting out words and phrases and gluing these cuttings onto a separate piece of paper. It is this composite he proposes sending to an expert for analysis. The result of this editing process reads like a surrealist poem:

Dear / go down to Redham for me and / tell them how you saw / those mules / coming up to London. / So be a dear / and go down / From Rose. (p. 122)
Charley had also recently received an invitation from James Phillips to visit him over the August holiday. Given the war-time rationing, this offer is an especially generous one because it extends to any companion of Charley’s – “bring a girl”, as James puts it (p. 119). Out of the blue, Charley asks Dot if she would like to accompany him. For some time, Dot has felt herself attracted to Charley; so she accepts and the two of them head down to Essex (that is, to the unnamed village where Rose had lived and was ultimately buried). The visit seems to improve Charley’s emotional state. Over a few late-night drinks with James, he discovers that “he could talk easily of Rose” (p. 126). Once again, Charley tells himself that his obsession had passed: “All of a sudden, or so he thought, she was dead to him at last” (p. 126). James, on the other hand, thanks Charley for helping him to remember the dead woman: “Now she’s gone,” he confides, “you’re my link with her, old man” (p. 128). When it comes to the workings of memory, the characters of *Back* often sound like armchair psychologists: James insists that not even his own son is able to remind him of Rose in the way that Charley can, because “there’s nothing in faces” (p. 128). The conversation between the two men stalls, however, when James ventures to ask about life in the prisoner-of-war camp; Charley is incapable of uttering a word about his wartime experiences.

The events of this Essex sojourn are narrated in a somewhat disjointed fashion, requiring the reader to do quite a bit of interpretive work to piece together what happens. But it does seem that sex was very much on Dot’s mind right from the start. Allocated the only double bedroom in James’s tiny house, she hoped for a night-time visit from Charley – for which she had prepared by donning “a smashing pyjama suit bought specially the day before” (p. 124). In bed, she lies “quaking” with anticipation: “she was all ready, pretending to be asleep, spread out like butter on bread” (p. 124). Her wait was in vain, however: “in the end, she’d gone to sleep alone, unvisited” (p. 124). The blame, she decided, lay with Charley: “these repatriation men came back very queer from those camps” (p. 124). The next night she has no such expectations. But matters take a surprising turn: “she was just dropping off when the door did open a crack, someone came in, into her bed even, the sauce, and, believe it or not, it was that fat James, though everything had been so dark she hadn’t known till after” (p. 125). This beggars belief. It seems highly unlikely that anyone would fail to notice the physical differences between
the two men – one corpulent, the other missing a leg. But the truth-status of the scene is complicated by the strategic use of free indirect discourse at this point – that is, the scene is described in Nancy’s own language (“the sauce”), with some indication that she is aware how preposterous it all sounds (“believe it or not”). Green’s fiction often has moments like this, when the narrator’s voice is displaced by a character’s interior monologue. Here it works to increase the reader’s sense of vertigo in what is already a vertiginous text. Is Dot serious in her claim about mistaken identity (“everything had been so dark”)? As readers, we are in the habit of believing most narrators, but must we also believe a character who has temporarily taken over the job of telling the story? *Back* is the most self-proclaimingly fictive of all Green’s novels, with its embedded texts (the Septimanie translation, Rose’s correspondence) and its various literary allusions. Dot’s account of her sexual entanglement with James is yet another example of this fictiveness – a story told all in the mind that is scarcely credible to the teller.

Dot is unsure whether Charley knows about her liaison with James and, wisely, chooses not to say anything to confirm it. In any case, talking things over in the Essex house is made inordinately difficult by its proximity to a busy main road. Army lorries constantly lumber past, drowning out any attempt at conversation. Green likes to show his characters struggling to make themselves heard; this is what happens in *Loving*, for instance, when a few of the servants go on an excursion to the seaside but have to shout to each other over the sound of the crashing waves.25 For much of the holiday, Charley remains preoccupied with his own thoughts and does not suspect that Dot has already found herself a lover. Taking a stroll in the village, he runs into Middlewitch, coincidentally also down in Essex for a few days. Middlewitch reveals that he had put in a good word for Charley with Nancy Whitmore – “I played the Boy Scout,” as he describes it (p. 136) – convincing her to write her (mildly) conciliatory note. But, for the moment, Charley does not seem all that interested in the past; for instance, “he’d never once thought to visit Rose’s grave” (p. 138), even though he is staying in the village where she was buried. On the last night, however, he does decide to pay a visit to Dot’s bedroom. Much to his surprise, it is empty. Then he hears noises coming from James’s

25 *Loving*, p. 133. Background noise also drowns out the speakers in *Party Going* (p. 48).
“They were in the act,” he realises (p. 139). The train journey back to London the next day is passed “with not a word said” between Charley and Miss Pitter (p. 139).

Waiting for Charley at home is the report from the handwriting expert he had engaged. This expert had compared Nancy’s note with the cut-out collage of Rose’s old letters and concluded, not surprisingly, that the handwriting was done by two different people. Yet, to Charley, “somehow this did not seem important now” (p. 139). With her note still in his pocket, he heads off for another unannounced visit to Nancy. This time their conversation is friendly and even quite intimate. Casting aside his usual reticence, Charley goes so far as to discuss the details of his Essex holiday, including its sexual goings-on: “Jim snitched her from under my nose,” he says of Dot (p. 141). Nancy is her usual kindly self, insisting that she and Charley had merely “started off on the wrong foot” (p. 143). Again, she professes to be under an obligation to be charitable: “as I’ve said, I’ve a responsibility, it’s not everyone who’s in my position, the double of a dead woman with a child” (p. 143). While she talks, Charley gives her the once over – this time comparing her with Dot, rather than with Rose. His obsession waxes and wanes throughout the novel and, on this occasion, he finds that he is able to speak about Rose “painlessly, as of a rib that had been removed” (p. 145). In his eyes, Nancy has become to seem attractive: “Quite a girl,” he thinks to himself (p. 143). Despite a few moments of turbulence, the conversation burbles along. It is clear that Charley will be back for another visit.

Charley now starts to see Dot in a new light. This is partly the result of something Nancy had said – she implied that Dot had deceived him by choosing to sleep with James while they were in Essex. All of this is very much on Charley’s mind when there is another “explosion in the office” (p. 146). A serious mix-up has occurred with the firm’s manufacturing orders and Charley’s elaborate filing system is shown to be at fault. Corker Mead sternly reprimands him, in the process inquiring whether Dot might be to blame. All Charley can think of is their recent holiday together and what he now perceives to be her betrayal; in his mind, he “saw an empty bed, Eton blue in the moonlight” (p. 148). This blue-tinged image should be contrasted, of course, with the pink hues that dominate his rosy memory of Rose and his subsequent encounters with Nancy. As a result, Charley makes little effort to defend Dot when Mead asks about her
competence. Indeed, “because she had not gone to bed with him” (p. 149), he goes so far as to suggest that she is lazy; predictably, Mead gives her the sack. Dot is justifiably furious about getting the blame for the mix-up in the firm’s orders; it is obvious that Charley had not supported her. “Tale telling, that’s all there is in this blue hole of a firm,” she snarls at Charley as she gathers up her things to go (again invoking blue as the colour of unpleasantness). Then she further vents her spleen by accusing him of having “martyr ways, with what you’ve had in the war and your Rose” (p. 151). Charley’s response fulfils the earlier prophecy: “he denied his love for the third and last time” by saying that “Rose was just a tale” (p. 151). This blatant lie caps off his dishonourable behaviour towards Dot. After she leaves, he notices that “he did feel somehow ashamed” (p. 151).

Some weeks later, Nancy telephones Charley at work to report that she has had “bad news from Redham” (p. 152). According to Middlewitch, her father has suddenly taken ill and she asks Charley to visit the Grants on her behalf: “I can’t very well go down there myself as things are between dad and me,” she explains (p. 152). When Charley arrives in Redham, he is flabbergasted to find that Mrs Grant has miraculously recovered from her amnesia. It is now Mr Grant who is the invalid – a severe stroke has left him paralysed and speechless. Even more amazingly, Mrs Grant asks Charley to arrange for Nancy to visit her husband. The situation, she admits, is an awkward one, as Mr Grant had always tried to conceal the fact that Nancy was his daughter. But the request fills Charley with an “exquisite relief” because it served as “the final confirmation that Rose was truly dead, that Nance was a real person” (p. 155). This sense of relief seems a slightly odd feeling for Charley to have but, as has already been seen, his obsession with Rose has a tendency to waver. (One minute he is in agony walking past a florist; the next he does not even spare a thought for the dead woman, let alone visit her grave while he was in Essex.) And so he is relieved when Mrs Grant somehow validates Rose’s death, though it is unclear how long this relief might last. Time and again, Back demonstrates the sheer changeability of our mental states – how even an obsession as extreme as Charley’s can come and go like a fever. Green was well acquainted with the works of Nikolai Gogol, so perhaps he was thinking here of one of that Russian’s greatest
satires, “Diary of a Madman”. In that story, a lowly clerk called Poprishchin experiences a variety of delusional states – at one point he believes himself to be the lost heir to the Spanish throne – yet remains lucid enough to record all these delusions in his diary. Charley resembles Poprishchin in that he, too, sometimes seems able to stand outside himself and recognise his own madness.

There are even more surprises in store for Charley when he reports to Nancy about his visit to the Grants. Upon learning of the seriousness of her father’s condition, Nancy announces that she intends going down to Redham herself to “lend a hand round the house” (p. 160). This is quite extraordinary, given the fractious relationship with her father (not to mention the fact that she seems never to have met Mrs Grant before). Charley tries to talk her out of it but her mind is made up: “I’d have no respect for myself if I didn’t go down,” she tells him (p. 161). This is precisely what she does. When Charley visits the household at Redham a few weeks later, Nancy greets him “as though it was her own house” (p. 164); she has even taken to addressing Mrs Grant as “Mother”. Doubling is the irresistible metaphor running throughout Back and here, at last, Nancy has openly assumed the role of Rose. While denying any physical resemblance, Mrs Grant tells Charley that Nancy is “[m]ore like the darling I lost than I could imagine” (p. 170). The similarity, she maintains, is a moral one – both women possessed a certain “loving kindness”, as she puts it (p. 171). This claim does seem misguided: Rose’s letters to Charley suggest that she was anything but kind (leaving aside the question of her sexual infidelity). In any case, Charley “no longer wanted to hear about Rose” (p. 172); whenever Mrs Grant mentions her name, he tries his hardest to change the subject.

On one of these visits to Redham, Nancy persuades Charley to take her for a walk around the suburb. Dodging bomb sites and blitzed buildings, the couple come to “what had been the rose garden” of a ruined house. By now it is autumn and there is nothing in bloom. But the absent flowers are evoked in the same cascading prose as that used in the novel’s opening scene, with an elaborate description of the briars “that had borne gay rose, after rose, after wild rose” (p. 177). It is here, for the first time, that the couple kiss. Charley is clearly excited by this (which does tend to weigh against Rod Mengham’s

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suggestion the he is suffering from some sort of “sexual nausea”).

Suddenly, Nancy breaks off their embrace and “cruelly” demands whether it had been like this with Rose (pp. 177–78). This direct inquiry on the subject of doubling goes nowhere, however; Charley, in his usual bewildered state, has not even heard the question. For some reason, though, his ardour cools completely: “his arms hung at his sides, and he could not speak, paralysed, for an instant, as Mr Grant” (p. 178). This scene once again highlights the novel’s self-referentiality – not only does its language recall the opening scene in the rose-filled churchyard, it also suggests a link with the walk in the rose garden at the end of *Caught*. In the scene from that earlier novel, Richard Roe’s passion had also dissipated without warning or explanation; moreover, Roe kept confusing Dy with her sister (that is, his dead wife), in a manner not dissimilar to the Nancy/Rose conflation.

When the couple return from their walk, they discover that Mr Grant has taken a turn for the worse. The doctor has been summoned: the end is near. At Mrs Grant’s insistence, Nancy asks Charley to stay the night in Redham on the ground that it is desirable “to have a man in the house” (p. 180). Confused as ever, Charley agrees. This is because he seems to think it is a sexual invitation: “He could not believe she’d ask this if she didn’t mean to visit him later” (p. 180). But the night does not work out as he had hoped. Bunking down on the sofa, he eventually realises that Nancy will not come to him because of the need to attend the dying man. Sure enough, Mr Grant passes away during the night. The ensuing commotion brings back Charley’s wartime experience:

> [T]he culmination of all this was about to remind Summers of something in France which he knew, as he valued his reason, that he must always shut out. He clapped hands down tight over his ears. He concentrated on not ever remembering. On keeping himself dead empty. (p. 186)

Unlike Richard Roe in *Caught*, Charley’s combat trauma must be suppressed for the sake of his own sanity. Memory here is something he struggles to control: though he is unable to forget, he can force himself not to remember. (Interestingly, the memory he suppresses is figured as aural – his hands are clamped over his ears – in contrast to Roe’s highly cinematic mindscape or Jim’s visualisation in the later story, “The Great I Eye”.)

In the end, Nancy does pay Charley a visit on the sofa, but only to bring him a sleep-
inducing whisky. As he drops off, there is one final revelation: “he knew he really loved her” (p. 186).

When Charley is next in the office, Corker Mead calls him in to discuss his work performance and dispense some fatherly advice about his general air of distractedness. “It’s sex is the whole trouble,” Mead opines and then delivers a little sermon on the importance of family life (p. 188). The scene is one of the funniest in the book: Mead’s bland counsel (“Children of one’s own, that’s the thing”) is undercut by a telephone call from his wife that results in a marital spat, while at the same time Charley has some sort of ludicrous coughing fit. But, after Mead’s talk, Charley starts to think about his own future. By this stage, he is visiting Redham every weekend; Nancy is well and truly ensconced there, having even brought her cat down with her. The couple still have their awkward moments: “because he really loved her now, he was much shyer” (p. 195). Nor has romance done anything to alleviate Charley’s perpetual cluelessness: “he knew less than ever what to think” (p. 198). Despite their unpromising beginning, Nancy had now “made up her mind that she would marry him” (p. 199); she still worries, though, about “whether he had really and truly got over Rose” (p. 200). Her plans for marriage are put into action when she arranges for them to go to Essex for the Christmas holiday, making her invitation to Charley “in almost exactly the same words he had used to Dot Pitter on a previous occasion” (p. 201).

Coincidentally, the holiday is in the same village where Charley had taken Dot and where Rose had lived with James. Nancy is not deterred by any of this history; rather, she seems eager to bring matters to a head. Out on a walk, she bluntly asks Charley if he would like to have children. His oblique response implies that he is already a father (he continues to wonder whether he might not have been responsible for Rose’s Ridley). “I want kids,” Nancy announces, “I want to have them so as to love” (p. 205). Amazingly, at that very moment, Ridley comes into view (this is the village where the boy lives, but Back’s chain of coincidence does strain credibility at times):

[A]bsolutely without warning, stepping out of a surface shelter in the roadway, and not three paces from them, was Ridley, his eyes fixed on Nance. Afterwards, when Charley went over it in his mind, he thought he had never seen such pain on any face. For the boy had blushed, blushed a deep scarlet in this snow clear light. He must have thought he was seeing
his mother step, in her true colours, out of his father’s microfilms. And Nance, who did not know him, passed him by.

Charley managed to turn round, without attracting her attention, in order to make the child a sign. All he could think of, and he did not know why, was to put a finger to his lips. At that, Ridley turned, and ran off fast. (p. 207)

Rod Mengham suggests that this is another example of the novel’s fetishisation of secret knowledge. But is Charley a reliable witness as to what happened? After all, not everything in the scene has the narrator’s imprimatur – it is Charley’s recollection that is doing some of the work here, when he subsequently “went over it in his mind”, so there may be some doubt as to whether Ridley sees any resemblance between Nancy and his dead mother. In any case, it is unclear exactly what Charley is trying to keep secret; the text has it that “he did not know why” he put his finger to his lips. Presumably the gesture is some sort of attempt to safeguard the fiction that he has just told Nancy about having fathered a child. But this is one of the novel’s many ambiguities, when even the characters seem at a loss to explain their actions.

Green’s couples have a tendency to ventilate their emotional affairs while taking long walks: this happens with John and Joan in Blindness, with Roe and Dy in Caught, and then with Raunce and Edith in Loving. Like that last example, the wintry stroll undertaken in Back culminates in a marriage proposal. This time it is the woman who does the asking – Nancy declares that they “could make a go of it” (p. 207). At first, Charley pretends not to hear but Nancy persists and, it seems, is accepted. Then the reader is faced with one of those black holes that crop up throughout Green’s fiction, when significant events go unnarrated: Charley, “for the rest of his life, for the life of him, could not remember anything of what passed during the remainder of that afternoon” (p. 208). Michael North has argued that these lapses are often contrived – that Charley’s memory is “conveniently disordered” in a self-serving way. But here he seems to be genuinely struggling to recall what transpired (“for the life of him”). The text at least intimates that the elusive memory was a pleasant one (unlike the combat traumas that he tries so hard to forget), describing the afternoon as “bliss”. Clearly, there

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29 North, pp. 124, 126.
is an experimental impulse at work here; this narrative black hole is one of Green’s many attempts to expose the conventionality of the reader’s desire to know what happened next. The couple’s afternoon bliss, however, does not seem to have been sexual. This is made apparent straight away in what is the novel’s final section. It is later that night when the couple decide to have what Nancy calls “a trial trip”: Charley visits her bedroom “for the first time in what was to be a happy married life” (p. 208). Nancy reclines on the bed, naked in the pinkish glow of the lamp; kneeling to admire her, Charley suddenly begins to weep: “‘Rose,’ he called out, not knowing he did so, ‘Rose’” (p. 208). Nancy attempts to console him, since “she knew what she had taken on”. This is where the novel ends – with Charley’s tears, in spite of the narrator’s prolepsis about their extended marital happiness. The last sentence of the book emphasises Nancy’s acceptance of her lot: “It was no more or less, really, than she had expected” (p. 208).

This final scene says a good deal about the nature of Charley’s obsession. So much of his behaviour is involuntary – the weeping, the fainting, the nausea, even the strange coughing fit he has in front of Corker Mead. This also seems to be the case here; Charley cries out Rose’s name “not knowing he did so”. On Michael North’s reading, however, this bedroom scene is yet another act of evasion by Charley – an attempt to escape the present by retreating into the past. For North, Charley is simply unable to manage daily life, “so he sidesteps his problems, replacing the recalcitrant existence of a living person with the malleable memories of a dead one”.30 But this attributes to Charley a far greater degree of self-control than he seems to possess. Throughout the novel, he is shown to be at the mercy of the past – not so much a manipulator of memory as its victim. True, this is not always the case; at times, he does manage to disentangle himself from his obsession, freeing his thoughts from the thorny remembrance of Rose. Yet these moments of freedom are few and far between; nor are they permanent, as Nancy herself recognises. Before making her proposal, she had worried whether Charley “had really and truly got over Rose” (p. 200); now, alone in her bedroom with this weeping man, “she knew what she had taken on”. Back ends, then, not with an evasion but with an acceptance. Charley’s tears, we are told, “wetted” Nancy: “the salt water ran

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30 North, p. 130.
down between her legs”. This lovely detail is an emblem of her kindness – a final mingling of grief and lust, past and present.

**Chancing: Fiction and Acceptance in *Back***

Charley Summers is anything but eloquent. The novel repeatedly mentions how he finds conversation virtually impossible, believing that “a sort of block in his stomach” (p. 24) obstructed the words from getting out. Even when he does say something, it is often hard to catch – he tends to speak with a disconcerting drawl (p. 10), or mutters (p. 11), or replies indistinctly (p. 18). Nor is he much of a listener. In conversations, he is said to be “several sentences behind” (pp. 77, 130, 204), or altogether loses the drift of what he is being told – as happens with James (p. 11), Mr Grant (p. 19), Middlewitch (p. 29) and even Nancy (p. 203). Despite all this interpersonal ineptitude, Charley is a remarkably successful liar. Early in the novel, he is shown “marvelling at his own falseness” (p. 21) as he tells a lie to Mr Grant. Visiting James in Essex, he lies about having designs on Dot (p. 130); confronted by Corker Mead, he lies about Dot’s competence as a secretary. Other characters are equally adept at peddling untruths. The landlady Mrs Frazier tells an elaborate lie about the amount of coal she has squirrelled away in her cellar (pp. 31–32); Middlewitch bends the truth when discussing the intimacy of his relations with Nancy (p. 115). When Dot gets the sack, she tells Charley that his nickname around the office is “Shoot Me” on account of his “martyr ways”, but the narrator makes it clear that this is “pure invention” on her part (p. 151). Green’s novels are full of liars and *Back* is no exception. Mendacity is, of course, closely allied to the creative processes of fiction. “A lie,” Proust once suggested, “is one of the few things in the world that can open windows for us on what is new and unknown”; such a comment could equally be applied to novels.31

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In one way or another, *Back*’s characters are all inveterate fiction-makers. James likes to prattle on about his experience returning from the Great War (p. 11), Middlewitch brags about his sexual adventures (pp. 25–29), Mrs Frazier carps about prices and rationing (p. 35), while Corker Mead waffles abstractly about the joys of married life (pp. 188–89). Obviously, though, the novel’s principal fabulist is Charley. Like the drink-sodden party-goer of “The Great I Eye”, most of Charley’s fictions circulate within his own mind. First and foremost, he convinces himself that Rose was the great love of his life; not once does he attempt to explain why she had abandoned him all those years ago to marry James. It appears that Charley can only see Rose through rose-coloured glasses. Her old letters, for instance, can still move him to tears, yet their contents show the dead woman to have been utterly selfish, to say the least. On the slightest grounds, he persuades himself that Ridley is his son; the narrator has to intervene to clarify the situation, baldly stating that – unknown to Charley – the boy “was nothing to do with him at all” (p. 84). Charley’s mind, however, is always ready to make astonishing fictive leaps when it comes to Rose. In particular, he improvises an intricate web of Rose-centred fictions about Nancy – that she is a tart with Mr Grant living off her immoral earnings, or a bigamist, or has lost her mind, and so on. These absurd fictions are entirely extemporaneous; Charley makes them up on the spot, adapting the circumstances of Nancy’s life (her illegitimate birth, her marriage) to fit his own elaborate conspiracy theories. Such a capacity for spur-of-the-moment invention could well have been derived from Green’s reading of Chekhov, whose sad-edged stories teem with fabulists – like the hapless romantic, Laptev, in “Three Years” – constantly telling themselves stories in an effort to mitigate the emptiness of their lives.

It is also worth noting how unreliable vision is in *Back*, just as it is elsewhere in Green’s work. The novel’s great optical mystery, of course, is whether Nancy really does resemble Rose in any physical sense (Charley is not alone in thinking so). Aside from questions of mistaken identity, the characters are inclined to express a more general doubt about the reliability of vision. Charley twice describes the elaborate card index he has introduced at work as a “visible system” (pp. 38, 39), but its results are disastrous; Corker Mead rebukes him about this by saying that “you’re squint-eyed with your own system” (p. 147). There is a lot of similar talk in *Back*, drawing on a rhetoric of visual failure –
such as the moment when Nancy upbraids Charley by telling him that “you’re so proud you can’t see out of your own eyes” (p. 90). Mr Grant describes his wife’s amnesia as a kind of blindness: “[O]nce you begin to lose the picture of this or the other in your mind’s eye, it’s hard to determine where things’ll stop,” he explains (p. 14). In Green’s fiction, the eyes simply cannot be trusted, even in the private theatre of memory.

This is also the case when it comes to the reading and writing of texts. Charley, not surprisingly, is a hopeless reader. “I can’t believe my eyes, sir,” he tells Corker Mead when confronted with a disputatious business letter (p. 106); he does not recognise that the correspondence has a subtext about the way in which business needs to be conducted in a time of war. The true import of Rose’s old letters is also beyond him – he fails to see that they are egocentric and querulous – yet re-reading them “puts him in agony, they made him love her so” (p. 120). Nor can he discern the relevance of the Septimanie translation to his own experience of mistaken identity; when James later asks him if he liked the story, he bluntly replies, “I don’t see much in books” (p. 129). This is also why Back makes such a fuss about initials. The countless wartime abbreviations amount to a perversion of language – for Charley, it should be recalled, they were “letters standing he did not know what for” (p. 11). Inscribing one’s initials somewhere is also Green’s image for the transience of writing; the bathroom scene in Party Going suggests as much, when Amabel writes the first letter of her name on the steamed up mirror, only to rub it off straight away in order to admire her own beauty. Dot does something similar when she goes on holiday to Essex: “she traced Dot with a finger on the leaded window” (p. 123). After doing so, she tells James that “when I come on lovely old windows I always wish I had a diamond to cut my name” (p. 123). The diamond would at least make a permanent mark; so often in Green’s novels writing is a futile gesture.

The unreliability of vision, the pitfalls of reading, the impermanence of writing – all of this points to a haphazard world, a world governed entirely by chance. In Back, Charley keeps bumping into people at unexpected times in unlikely places; indeed, the plot seems wholly premised on accidental meetings and improbable acquaintances. The characters themselves recognise this. Charley, for instance, is aghast when Mrs Frazier reveals that Middlewitch and Mr Grant know each other:
“What is there strange in that?” Mrs Frazier enquired, irritable still. “Once you start on coincidences why there’s no end to those things. I could tell you a story you’d never believe but it’s as true as I’m here,” and she at once began a long tale. (p. 33)

Life and lives in Back are frequently described in terms of chance. “What you have to remember, Charley boy,” Mr Grant pontificates, “is that you’re one of the lucky ones” (p. 79). Nancy, on the other hand, sees herself as a victim of circumstance. At first, she bemoans the resemblance to Rose that brought Charley to her door: “‘Was there ever any girl as unlucky as me,’ she wondered” (p. 78). When he later reflects on the strange way in which they had met, Charley sees it as a good example of life’s randomness: “‘It’s luck,’ he explained. ‘Chance, that’s all.’” (p. 162).

In a universe of accident, it is up to the individual to create meaning and this is what the characters of Back do through their fictions. The stories they tell themselves are often askew – how can a man who has visited the grave of his dead lover suddenly believe that she is alive? – but this is their only method for making sense of the world. At no point do the characters look to any supernatural power for guidance; Green’s novels are as agnostic as he was, so even paranoid interpreters like Charley refrain from deciphering apparently accidental events as revelations of divinity. Instead, they are themselves creators, inventing their own fictions and then, even more amazingly, acting them out. Characters play roles of their own devising – most notably Nancy, who goes to Redham and willingly steps into Rose’s shoes, becoming the dutiful daughter of the Grant household (notwithstanding the estranged relationship she had always had with her father). Perversely, fictions come true in Green’s fictional world.

This is one of the reasons why Back seems such a “constructed” novel. Its preoccupation with doubling is itself a sign of this – here Green draws on an old literary tradition for a plot that seems highly improbable, more fantastic than realistic. Works of fiction train their readers to notice how one character can merge into another – in the way, for instance, that Gilberte and Albertine merge in Proust’s great novel. Reading Back, we are able to recognise the artifice of this doubling; not for a moment would we think we are in the middle of a work by, say, Zola or Steinbeck. The many chance meetings of Back have much the same effect: they are accidents carefully staged by the author and to which the characters ascribe a special meaning by calling them
coincidences. In so many ways, Back conveys this sense of being artfully designed. The narratorial intrusions serve this purpose; a voice butts in to tell us that Ridley is not really Charley’s son, or that Nancy and Charley will live happily ever after (just like the fairy tale ending of Loving), and so on. The narrator’s presence is also marked by special uses of language – for instance, by the odd practice of referring to Charley as “Summers” or “Mr Summers” (pp. 23, 26, 29, 34, 127, 154, 159), when the usual form of reference to him in the text is by his first name.

Readers, in short, cannot miss the novel’s careful architecture. Scenes of happiness are usually rose-tinted (that bedroom lamp in the final scene, for example, gives off a pinkish glow); by contrast, scenes of unhappiness tend to be coloured blue (like the empty bed that confronts Charley when he wants to have sex with Dot). The text also foregrounds an obsession with the number three. Early in the novel, Charley follows a red-headed woman for three miles (p. 22); when he takes a cab, it is “only about the third time in his life” he had done so (p. 59); after Nancy goes to Redham, over “the next three weeks he called thrice” at her flat (p. 163); waiting for her to visit him during the night Mr Grant dies, he smokes three cigarettes (p. 185). Presumably, all this is intended to remind the reader of Charley’s threefold denial of Rose – the three occasions when he believes he is dishonouring her memory. These instances of the number three also suggest the triadic nature of the novel’s relationships. “Who is the third who walks always beside you?” asks a voice in The Waste Land, invoking one of that poem’s many ghosts. It is like that for Charley – his love affair with Rose includes the absent James, while his love affair with Nancy includes the absent Rose. Textual scaffolding like this emphasises just how constructed a novel it is. As such, Back provides an oblique defence of fiction itself. It is through our stories that we can give shape to life’s chapter of accidents, irrespective of how cock-eyed those stories might be.

But Back also shows that fiction has its limits. There are some things that our words cannot illuminate or palliate or even describe. Nancy, for instance, can barely speak of her late husband Phil, the pilot shot down at El Alamein. “When Phil was killed, I was finished,” she tells Charley (p. 145). Of course, Charley has his own unnarratable experience – namely, the trauma of incarceration by the Nazis. Whenever anyone asks him about his time in the prison camp, Charley is simply unable to speak of
it. Mr Grant, for instance, tries to broach the subject but this only brings on a bout of his nausea, “which had recently begun to spread in his stomach whenever prison camps were mentioned” (p. 18). Usually he just ignores any questions about camp life, as he does with Dot (p. 42) and then with Nancy (p. 53). Even in his cups, talking openly about Rose with the sweet-natured James, he simply cannot discuss his prison experience (p. 132). Nancy tries again, though, asking him to “open up”, but it is to no avail: “’Can’t talk about that, Nance,’ he brought out at last, obviously distressed” (p. 193). Only later, watching the household cat with its litter of kittens, does he finally release a single scrap of information – that he had kept a pet mouse during his years of confinement. (This, too, is somehow part of the novel’s fictive architecture. When Charley had first found himself attracted to Dot, he had thought of her breasts as resembling “two soft nests of white mice” (p. 43). The implication here is that Charley’s first positive experience since his return to England – a run-of-the-mill moment of sexual attraction – is somehow linked with the only consolation he appeared to have when imprisoned by the Nazis.) Apart from this minor revelation, Charley’s time in the camp remains undescribed, his trauma unexplained and unappeased. Voices fail, in novels and in life; some things are beyond the reach of our stories.

Even half a century after its publication, there is no mistaking the note of plangency in *Back* and its picture of a war-ravaged England. Yet, perhaps more than any of Green’s other novels, it also has a moral dimension. Its characters have a tendency to turn the other cheek; they are paragons of tolerance. Nancy, in particular, is like this, full of what Mrs Grant calls “loving kindness” (the usual translation, incidentally, of the Greek *agape*). At the novel’s end, Nancy accepts Charley for the broken man that he is, “no more or less, really, than she had expected”. Perhaps it is this quality – tolerance, kindness, acceptance – that is most needed in such a godless universe. The characters themselves are certainly under no illusions about the workings of fate. It is worth quoting again Mr Grant’s words when he first told Charley about his wife’s amnesia: “Nature’s cruel, there’s no getting away from her laws,” he says, “she won’t let up on the weak” (p. 14). Yet, with gentleness and humility, *Back*’s characters endure their outrageous fortune. In so doing, they closely resemble the people of Chekhov’s stories – people like the lovers Gurov and Anna in “The Lady with the Little Dog”, who, in a world of cruelty
and hypocrisy, find some way to go on. In one of his celebrated lectures on Russian literature, Vladimir Nabokov singled out for praise this great Chekhovian capacity for acceptance. His words might equally apply to the stoics of *Back*, qualifying the grimness of Mr Grant’s view of the world: “perhaps the most admirable among the admirable laws of Nature,” Nabokov declared, “is the survival of the weakest.”32

32 *Lectures on Russian Literature*, p. 254.
“With novelists,” Green once said in a review, “there is always a fast start and then, alas, before they are dead, very definitely a finish.”¹ It was 1958 when he wrote this; his own last novel was already six years behind him. Yet, when viewed in retrospect, the finishing-line for his career might even have been reached before that, with the publication of Concluding in 1948. This was the last novel in which Green tried to balance the competing demands of voice and vision; in the two books after that, he seemed virtually a different writer. One of Concluding’s strengths is its long lyrical passages – “intensifications”, as Eudora Welty called them – that attempt to describe how the world might be seen; the novel also explores, perhaps even to a greater extent than Back, the mental life of its characters.² By contrast, in Nothing and Doting, there is voice and almost nothing but the voice. These last two novels consist of little else but dialogue; the other components of literature have almost entirely vanished from the page.

There is a sense of finality about Concluding and not simply because of its title. In fact, Green had originally planned to call the book Dying, a working title that was retained until the last stage of revision.³ The novel has a palpable sense of exhaustion about it – the protagonist, for instance, is a septuagenarian, Green’s oldest major character by far. The action is set in a dystopian future England; no dates are given in the text, but the jacket blurb for the first edition suggested that the novel’s events take place some time around the year 2000.⁴ This future is indeed grim and Concluding, though occasionally whimsical, could not really be described as comic. The novel is, however, Green’s most explicitly political work, suggesting a deep concern with the governmental regulation of social life (as his biographer has shown, Green was the sort of man who resented paying his income tax). There are also numerous thematic connections between

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¹ Originally published in The Observer, the review is reproduced in Surviving, pp. 231–33.
² Welty, p. 254.
³ Mengham, p. 187; Treglown, p. 183.
⁴ Treglown, p. 297, n. 76.
Concluding and Green’s earlier fiction, but these only contribute to a readerly feeling of déjà vu.

Beginning in 1950, Green made a series of theoretical statements effectively renouncing the method of all his previous novels. It seems fitting that most of these statements were originally broadcast on the radio (and only later republished as essays), since they unanimously declared that “novels should be written as far as possible in dialogue only”.\(^5\) Green certainly began to practise what he preached: the double cast of his work, its weaving together of voice and vision, was abandoned in favour of a method that sought to do little more than transcribe the spoken word. There were other changes, too: both Nothing and Doting were confined to urban settings, thereby forfeiting the opportunity to celebrate the visual beauties of landscape, as the earlier novels had done. The characters of these last two novels were also uniformly upper middle-class – another disastrous self-imposed restriction, since it ignored the lives of the servants and foundrymen and office girls that Green had previously evoked so well. The price for this change of direction was high. Edward Stokes, Green’s first major critic, found Nothing and Doting to be disappointing books, significantly inferior to their predecessors. Writing in 1959, Stokes expressed a hope “that Green will not continue to deny himself most of the varied technical resources of the novel”.\(^6\) But this was not to be.

Departing: Voice and Repetition in Concluding

Like Party Going a decade before it, Concluding opens in a fog. The central character Mr Rock – we never learn his first name – has just woken up. From his bedroom window, he can see the thick fog enveloping his cottage, yet this does not dint his optimism: “It will be a fine day, a fine day in the end, he decided” (p. 5). These words will be repeated by several other characters in the opening pages – Concluding is very

\(^{5}\) “For John Lehmann’s Programme”, Surviving, p. 163.

\(^{6}\) Stokes, pp. 20, 22.
much a novel of echoes. Every morning Rock has to locate and then feed his beloved pets – Daisy (a pig), Ted (a goose) and Alice (a Persian cat) – no mean feat for a man who is old, deaf and half-blind, as he describes himself. Indeed, there is a general air of decrepitude about the whole novel. Rock’s bedroom is an early example of this – it “smelled stale, packed with books not one of which he had read in years” (p. 5). In this respect, the old man might be counted as one of the long list of Green’s non-readers, like the empty-headed Max and Amabel in *Party Going* or the benighted Charley Summers in *Back*. Rock eclipses them all, however, in his refusal to read anything – not even personal correspondence, which is piled, unopened, into a trunk and used for kindling. His extreme attitude resembles that of the eccentric parson in “Bees”, Green’s first published story, a man who was said to be interested only in his apiary and disdained all printed manner.7 One of the remarkable qualities of *Concluding* is this sense of continuity, where an idea or motif found even in the author’s juvenilia will suddenly resurface.

Decrepit though he may be, Rock is also famous. It emerges that he was once a scientist, responsible for an important discovery many years before (like so much else in *Concluding*, the nature of Rock’s “Great Theory” is never explained). Though the old man’s success was in the distant past, he is still treated as a hero by the state authorities (and by the narrator: he is often referred to as “the sage”). Rock knows that the Academy of Sciences is presently considering whether to elect him as one of its members. This would entitle him to spend the rest of his days in a state-run care facility – “a scientific poor law sanatorium”, as he puts it (p. 9); he does not look upon this prospect with any relish because to move there would mean abandoning his animals. As to the official honour itself, Rock seems largely indifferent. Fame notwithstanding, his immediate task that morning is to fetch Daisy’s swill.

Rock’s home is a small cottage located on the grounds of a state institute that trains girls to become civil servants. The institute is quartered in a large and once glorious mansion (there are obvious parallels here with Barwood in *Blindness* and Castle Kinalty in *Loving*). Rock does not live alone; the other occupant of the cottage is his grand-daughter Elizabeth, a highly strung woman of thirty-five who is convalescing after

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7 *Surviving*, pp. 3–5; the story was published in the Eton school magazine in 1923.
a nervous breakdown. This morning Rock decides not to take her breakfast in bed – he worries that she will still be asleep with her lover, a young economics tutor from the Institute called Sebastian Birt. Accordingly, the old scientist heads off to fetch his pig’s swill from the mansion. On the way he runs into George Adams, an elderly forester employed by the Institute who also lives in a cottage on the estate. Adams is going up to the mansion to receive his orders for the day, so the two men begin walking together, “like slow suiciding moles in the half light” (p. 8). Suddenly, Adams hears someone calling out, the sound echoing in the fog: “‘Ma–ree,’ a girl’s voice shrilled, then a moment later the house volleyed back, ‘Ma–ree, ma–ree,’ but in so far deeper a note that it might have been a man calling” (pp. 10–11). It is not clear whose voice it is or whether it might even be some sort of aural illusion; as in Party Going, events in Concluding seem shrouded in mystery.

Owing to his deafness, Rock does not appear to have heard the voice. In any case, he is much more interested in asking Adams how he manages to hold on to his cottage. Housing is a distinct problem in this dystopian future, so questions about property rights are never far from Rock’s mind. As he well knows, the Institute’s co-directors are scheming to evict him from his own cottage (they hope to install some other employees there). “Houses are that short there’s noone safe,” Adams observes (p. 10). This bizarre spelling “noone” – unhyphenated, unspaced, unrecorded in any modern dictionary – occurs throughout the novel. As with the use of cardinal numbers in Living, there is a concerted effort here to make the text look strange. Something similar is done with negative contractions – “was’nt” for “wasn’t”, “did’nt” for “didn’t”, “have’nt” for “haven’t”, and so on, with examples on almost every page. Concluding’s oddness can be found even at the level of orthography.

The next scene introduces the Institute’s directors, Miss Mabel Edge and Miss Hermione Baker, “those two Babylonian harlots”, as Rock calls them (p. 34). One sure sign of their malice is the fact that they both dislike animals. Edge is first seen opening the curtains in their grand office (usually referred to by the other staff as “the Sanctum”, with all the mysterious power that the capital letter implies). Much to Edge’s horror, a bat had somehow got into this room; she captures it using a wicker waste-paper basket.

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8 For other examples, see pp. 34, 43, 46, 51, 92, 113, 191, 211.
As a result, the basket’s contents spill out, including an anonymous note that Edge had torn into little pieces the night before (it is many pages later when the note’s contents are fully revealed). Baker manages to shepherd the creature outside, which leads Edge to comment wistfully, “If we could as easily rid ourselves of Rock” (p. 13). The two spinster directors are eagerly awaiting news of the old man’s election to the Academy in the hope that this might lead to his removal. Brooding on this possibility at the window, Edge seems to hear a faint echo of the voice that was heard by the forester Adams. This does not alarm her so much as Baker’s report that there is no legal basis for Rock’s eviction – he is lawfully entitled to live in his cottage as long as he wants because “the State recognises a right in view of the past services”, as Baker puts it (p. 17). Much to her annoyance, Edge at that moment happens to see the old man in the distance, carrying his buckets on a yoke to fetch Daisy’s swill. “Rock flaunts himself,” she declares, adding that the very look of him spoils the beauty of her vista. Edge is fanatical about the Institute’s park-like surrounds, so the prospect of Rock toting his pig food across the lawn is anathema to her sensibility. Since both directors are required to attend a meeting in London that morning, they hastily finish their breakfast. Just before departing, however, they are shocked to learn that two of the Institute’s students, Mary and Merode, are missing, apparently having disappeared some time during the night.

At this early hour, the absence of the two girls is not yet common knowledge throughout the Institute. Rock visits the kitchen to fetch grain for Daisy’s swill from the cook Mrs Blain – and, he hopes, to scrounge some breakfast for himself. Mrs Blain has not been told of the disappearances but some of the other girls are already whispering excitedly about the mystery (dialogues between unnamed students feature often in Concluding). The kitchen is especially busy because it is an important occasion in the Institute’s calendar – it is Founder’s Day, the yearly commemoration of the Institute’s establishment. (Much is made of the Institute’s “traditions”, even though it is barely a decade old.) The anniversary festivities include a ball later that evening, when the mansion will be hung with decorations and the girls will be permitted to dance with each other and, it seems, with the staff. “Will you ask me for a dance, Mr Rock?” one student says to the old man as he greedily devours his breakfast. Rock often has trouble hearing anything, but this time he does work out he is being teased. With more than a little self-
pity, he declares in response, “I’m only on sufferance here, you know” (p. 29). Like everyone else in this grim future society, Rock is constantly worried about his status; even in conversing with a naughty schoolgirl, he reveals his anxiety about the dark forces mobilising against him.

Elsewhere in the mansion, the Institute’s staff are also sitting down to their breakfast. Sebastian Birt is one of them, but he takes only a cup of tea, having previously advised the kitchen staff that he would be absent (presumably because he expected to be tucked up in bed with Elizabeth Rock). Birt is joined by Miss Winstanley, another of the teachers, a kindly woman who happens to be infatuated with him. Green’s fiction has an extensive gallery of lovesick characters – Jim Dale in *Living*, Robin Adams in *Party Going*, the pantry boy Albert in *Loving* – and Winstanley’s thwarted affection is another of *Concluding*’s many thematic connections with these earlier novels. Birt seems difficult to like; his style of conversation is especially irritating because he constantly puts on falsetto voices and fake accents, or speaks “in part” as if he were a business executive or a parson. The last to arrive at breakfast is Dakers, the law tutor; just as Winstanley had done, he prophesies that it will be a fine day. As he begins to eat his porridge, Dakers reveals that Edge had recently asked him for a legal opinion about the Institute’s prospects of evicting Rock. The legal position, according to Dakers, is clear – “our fabulous pensioner”, as he calls the old scientist (p. 32), was entitled to reside in the cottage for life, if he so chose. As he wipes away some milk that had dribbled from his mouth (a curious gesture that other characters will repeat over the course of the novel), Dakers warns Birt that Edge will almost certainly try some other way to force out Rock and his grand-daughter, rather than relying on any legal process.

By this time, the old man has returned home. There he discovers the postman has been and, disregarding his normal practice, begins to flick through the mail, looking for any official envelope that might convey news of his election to the Academy. When nothing comes to light, he uses a handful of these letters to start the fire needed to boil up Daisy’s swill. Having just woken up, Elizabeth joins him; she too predicts “a lovely day” (p. 35). As she is his only living relative, Rock dotes on this woman (though he has a low opinion of her affair with Birt). In his own mind, he blames Edge and Baker for Elizabeth’s breakdown, believing that “with truly Byzantine malice” they had despatched
Birt to seduce her. When she raises the question of that evening’s ball, Rock suggests that it would be best for them to “put in an appearance” in order to avoid aggravating relations with the Institute’s directors any further. “We’re only on sufferance here,” he reminds Elizabeth, echoing his earlier comment (p. 37).

There are all sorts of verbal repetitions in *Concluding*. Rock is given to saying the same things over, as in the last example; other characters unwittingly repeat what someone else has said (notably, the sundry predictions that it will be a fine day). As readers, what are we to make of this? It does not seem that the novel’s various repetitions are organised according to any hierarchical principle, where one might have priority over another, but instead they must be taken together as part of the textual fabric. These repetitions are perhaps best considered as a kind of interlocking system, each of which makes sense in relation to the others. Also, like any form of linguistic rhythm, they are a marker of human sociability. In this respect, they are qualitatively different from the vocal mimicry of Sebastian Birt. The philosopher Jonathan Rée has explained the nature of this difference:

The repetition of people’s words signifies something very different from the imitation of their voices. Imitating what people say conveys either mockery or incomprehension; repeating it, in contrast, is a way of opening a dialogue and participating in their language: it is the beginning of a conversation.

There is, you might say, no repetition without abstraction … [I]t is only when the voice has become a faculty of repetition as distinct from imitation that it is capable of language or speech. Repetition is the element in which language lives: a speaking voice is always intrinsically an infinitely redoubled echo.9

In *Concluding*’s bleak totalitarian world, the survival of an ordinary human sociability can be detected in this practice of verbal repetition. Some birds, of course, can mimic us, replicating more or less exactly the sound of a human voice; but this sort of repetition usually has no element of abstraction and cannot be thought of as enabling social relations. (Here it seems worth noting that Rock contemptuously refers to Edge and Baker as “those two State parrots” (p. 39), as if they were devoid of authentic speech.) Vocal mimicry is mere sound, whereas repetition entails saying something. This is what

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Jonathan Rée means when he describes repetition as an invitation to dialogue – but dialogue, the speech of free people, is precisely what a totalitarian state most wants to avoid.

The characters of Concluding are under no illusions about the Institute or the State it represents. Rock, for one, is prepared to denounce “the system we live under each one of us nowadays”, which he equates with, of all things, swine fever (p. 39). His particular loathing is reserved for the system’s local embodiments, Edge and Baker, “who, with a tireless industry, neglected their duties to machinate against him” (p. 34). Less justifiably, Rock also despises Birt – in his eyes, a “prating idler” and “worthless fellow”, who covets his cottage as well as his fragile grand-daughter (p. 38). Totalitarianism, of course, inevitably leads to distrust between individuals. But the young economics tutor is himself no favourite of the Institute’s directors. In any case, his motivation is simpler (and nobler) than Rock anticipates – namely, “the love he had for the grand-daughter, the love, he thought, of his life” (p. 38). Alone with Elizabeth, Birt admits that he does not like Rock, yet he is also well aware that the directors are scheming to evict the sage. “Any man as old [as Rock] stretches back to the bad times,” Birt tells his lover, pointing out that this is what makes Rock “suspect” to the State – he is perceived as a danger “just because of the years he’s lived” (p. 46).

In this atmosphere of mutual suspicion, it is not surprising that the absence of the two girls, Mary and Merode, is the cause of considerable consternation. With Edge and Baker temporarily in London, it falls to their deputy, Miss Marchbanks, to handle the matter. Her first tactic is to make inquiries of one of the senior students, Moira (for some reason – or for none – all the girls at the Institute have names beginning with “M”). This sheds no light on the disappearances; Moira only seems interested in nursing Rock’s Persian cat, a regular visitor to the mansion. Marchbanks then turns her attention to Adams but the old forester is of no help either, principally because he is preoccupied with the fearful prospect of his own eviction. While these inquiries are going on, Merode is found by Sebastian Birt and Elizabeth Rock. The couple had been out walking – and canoodling – in a heavily wooded part of the Institute grounds; it was there they had come across the missing girl, tearful and dishevelled, still dressed in her regulation pyjamas. Birt escorts the girl back to the mansion where Marchbanks orders her isolation.
from the other students until her absence can be thoroughly investigated. Merode is then sent to take a bath, which she does almost as languorously as Amabel in *Party Going* until she hears a voice coming out of the ventilation shaft – it is Moira on the floor above, asking what had happened. Merode answers none of her questions, however; in *Concluding*, behaviour is seldom explained.

It is not long before Merode is brought before Marchbanks (a good deal of Kafkaesque interrogation takes place throughout the novel), but once again the girl divulges nothing. The Institute’s administrators intend, of course, to concoct their own version of events: “What’s the use? Merode asked herself. Let them tell it” (p. 71). In this totalitarian state, individuals do not always have the freedom to invent their own stories. A convenient explanation for Merode’s absence is quickly devised:

“Listen dear,” Marchbanks said, as a trace of the child’s panic passed over her. “You were only sleep walking, weren’t you? That’s all, isn’t that it? So simple, you understand. It must be.” (p. 71)

Marchbanks is right to feel a little panicked – she knows that ultimately she will have to answer to the baleful Edge. As soon as the two directors return from London, the investigation begins in earnest. Marchbanks finds herself being cross-examined, along with some of the other staff and students. But all this is to no avail: nothing is revealed about Merode’s absence and Mary remains missing.

By this stage, the police have also been notified. As the sergeant from the local station makes his way to the mansion, he comes across Rock who is out looking for his goose. Their ensuing conversation is generally at cross-purposes, especially since the old man has been “made garrulous by his dread for Elizabeth and the cottage” (p. 73). Rock even tries “putting on an idiotic look, as he often did” (p. 72); like Sebastian Birt, he is used to feigning simple-mindedness in the face of authority. Soon after, Edge personally meets with the sergeant up at the mansion. Though not disclosing the fact that Merode and Mary had been out roaming the night before, she suggests to the policeman that the Institute’s students are at risk from the sexual predations of “really old men” (p. 94). In the regulated world of *Concluding*, the authorities frown upon any expression of sexuality: Merode, for instance, had been extensively questioned about whether she had met a boy (or even Sebastian Birt) during her nocturnal escapade. Edge knows that Rock has regular contact with some of the girls; her vague allusions to sexual impropriety – to
“men of an age … who, from what one hears and reads, are more liable to let themselves collapse in that disgraceful way” (p. 94) – are intended to sow the seeds of suspicion in the policeman’s mind.

Like Green’s earlier fiction, Concluding has its share of conundrums. The most troubling of these is Mary’s disappearance, for which several characters offer different explanations. The most plausible suggestion is that the girl absconded after becoming fed up with the grind of her daily chores (made worse by the fact that she had been assigned to be the personal servant to Baker and Edge); Rock tells his grand-daughter that this is the likely reason, particularly because Mary had once confided in him about her frustration:

“They drove that poor child to this,” he went on. “She’s been over to me about them. Only because they liked the colour of her eyes they pushed her unmercifully, set her to fetch and carry all day through, ‘Just bring me my pince nez from the Sanctum’,” he quavered in a horrible mimicry of Miss Edge. (p. 173)

But there are also dark hints that Mary may have met with foul play. Birt implies to Elizabeth that Rock might have been in some way responsible (p. 119), though a more likely culprit is the economics tutor himself. Certainly, Marchbanks seems to have entertained this idea – when she first questioned Merode, she asked if the girls were in the habit of consorting with Birt at night (p. 77). There are several suspicious aspects to Birt’s conduct: he is vague in explaining his whereabouts the night the girls absconded; when first reporting this event to Rock, he tells the sage that “they’ve mislaid one of their girls” (p. 39, emphasis added), rather than referring to both the missing students; and Elizabeth worries that he might easily be tempted by the flirtatious girls who are said to “fling themselves all the time at his head” (p. 169). The forester Adams has a quite different theory. Having seen Rock talking with the police sergeant, Adams believes that there is a conspiracy afoot to put the blame on him for Mary’s disappearance and, in that way, to appropriate his cottage. The forester encounters Rock when the old man is out looking for his pig (the three animals in the novel are always in the habit of wandering off). By now completely paranoid about the prospect of losing his cottage, Adams accuses the sage of masterminding a dastardly plot: “[I]t was clear as day you saw how you might get me shunted, shift it over on to me … Likely enough you or your girl done
away with ‘er yourselves for a dark purpose” (p. 160). There do not seem any grounds for this bizarre allegation but it typifies one of the difficulties of *Concluding*. The characters, much less the reader, are never really in a position to form definitive judgements about things – to be as conclusive as the title, in one sense, suggests. Right from the swirling mist of the opening pages, this is a novel of perplexity and wild surmise.

Perhaps the character most troubled by Mary’s disappearance is Miss Edge. After seeing off the police sergeant, the director decides to go in to lunch – a daily ritual held in the mansion’s vast banqueting hall, akin to a boarding-school’s communal meal-time. It is there that Edge has a queer turn: she suddenly leaves her place at the table and begins to examine a large floral arrangement wherein she suspects Mary’s body has somehow been hidden (p. 104). This is, of course, absurd and Edge quickly recovers her senses, explaining her aberrant behaviour as a consequence of the hot weather. But shortly afterwards she has an even nastier experience. While preparing the decorations for that evening’s dance, some of the girls had discovered Mary’s favourite toy, “a rabbity Rag Doll dressed gaily in miniature Institute pyjamas, painted with a grotesque caricature of Mary’s features” (p. 140). When Edge sees the doll, she faints. Upon recovery, she seems quite unhinged: initially, she wonders if the doll is evidence of voodoo and then, for some reason, jumps to the conclusion that Mary’s corpse is in the lake located near Rock’s cottage. (Coincidentally, this echoes what had earlier been said by Moira, perhaps the most devious of all the students, when she briefly discussed Mary’s disappearance with Rock: p. 83). Just as she had done with the police sergeant, Edge casts aspersions on the old man’s morality by insinuating to Baker that he had been using his pig to search the lake for Mary’s body (pointing out that pigs are used for tracking in some countries). There is little basis for adjudicating between these different interpretations of Mary’s vanishing act. As in Green’s other fiction, no attempt is made in *Concluding* to legislate rules for narrative closure. Instead, the novel’s principal form of mediation is through individual character (rather than, say, through a proscriptive narrator), which means that different viewpoints are played off against one another without any definite conclusion.
Edge’s distress about Mary also shows the complexity of the novel’s characterisation. Ruthless one minute, compassionate the next, Edge is a reminder that even the agents of tyranny can have their sensitivities. *Concluding* appeared only three years after *Animal Farm*, but the political dimension of Green’s novel is more nuanced, less direct, than Orwell’s satire. Indeed, Edge is surprisingly vulnerable – terrified by the bat in her office, terrified by the sight of dead rabbits (Mary’s doll was said to have “rabbity” features), and overwhelmingly sentimental about the Institute and its verdant estate (“this Great Place”, as she is wont to call it). The same could be said for Sebastian Birt. There are grounds for suspecting the economics tutor of having dalliances with the students; Rock is also convinced that the young man is a schemer who “would move heaven and earth to have him sent to the Sanatorium” (p. 175). Yet, in other respects, Birt also seems vulnerable. Thanks to a rare narratorial intervention, the reader knows that Birt is genuine in his love for Rock’s difficult grand-daughter. (They make a slightly odd couple: Elizabeth is “head and shoulders” taller than her lover (p. 41), as well as being eight years older than him.) Moreover, his elaborate and irritating vocal mimicry is often used as a form of self-protection; in a totalitarian society, this may well be a reasonable *modus operandi* for dealing with those in charge. The quiddity of characters like Birt and Edge is their contradiction – their capacity to embody darkness and light at the same time.

Edge’s fears about the lake are enough to persuade Baker to take a walk in that part of the estate, where she comes upon Rock. The old man pretends to be looking for his goose; this is because he is embarrassed about what he was really doing, which was exercising his pig Daisy. Rock makes a great show of calling out to the goose using his “swill man’s yell” – that is, a rustic voice he affects in order to make himself seem harmless. In this novel of echoes, his calls are “volleyed back” to him, reverberating off the distant walls of the mansion (p. 150). The director tries to strike up a conversation but her attempt to do so is frustrated by the old man’s deafness and what seems to be a deliberate obtuseness; their brief exchange convinces Baker that “the man must be malevolently hostile” (p. 153). On her way back to the mansion, she passes a fallen beech tree which at that moment was hiding Birt and Elizabeth, “lying stark naked in one another’s arms” (p. 153). Baker does not see the lovers but, while the director is still
within earshot, Elizabeth lets out “a loud, gurgling laugh of cruel delighted ridicule”. The laugh is said to be the result of Elizabeth imagining the look on the old spinster’s face if she had discovered Birt naked. Baker does not know the source of the laugh but it greatly upsets her: “Oh, she thought, our beautiful Park seems suddenly full of vile cross currents” (p. 154).

It is noise that sometimes disturbs the Institute’s sense of order, as exemplified by Elizabeth’s mocking laugh or the anonymous voice calling out “Ma–ree” at the start of the novel. The susurrus of girlish voices even seems to play a part in Edge’s queer turn at lunch – the director “particularly detested” the sound of whispering because it had such “an air of complicity” about it (p. 102). These vocalisations have, of course, a potential to undermine the illusion of central control. In any case, the Institute’s directors, like Mrs Tennant in Loving, have something of an ocularcentric approach to household management. When Edge surveys the estate from her Sanctum and notices the bucket-bearing Rock, it is the very sight of the man that enrages her. Throughout the novel, she emphasises how much she values the estate for its appearance, telling the police sergeant that “at the present glorious season, down here, to see is to feel” (p. 92, emphasis added). At lunch, she scans the hall of hungry students “with an imperious slow swing of her eyes” (p. 101). She also likes to describe her official function in visual terms. “We have eyes in our grey heads,” she declares at one point, boldly asserting her managerial competence (p. 238). Elsewhere, she likens her role to that of a guardian, rather than an educator, explaining that her primary responsibility is “to watch that there are no departures” (p. 210), though her vigilance might well be in question after Mary’s disappearance.

Vision, though, is no more reliable here than in any of Green’s earlier novels. There are often obstacles to clear seeing, not least of which is light itself. When Rock visits the mansion for breakfast, the morning sun “shone so loud” that its glare obscured much of Mrs Blain’s kitchen, hiding a line of girls waiting for their porridge (p. 21). After her fainting spell, the woozy Edge finds herself dazzled by the sunlight that is being reflected off ice cubes in a bowl (p. 140). Baker is also “blinded by sun” during an intense discussion with her co-director about how to explain Merode’s misconduct: “She screwed her face up into a pathetic maze of bewilderment before a hot dazzle of evening”
Such moments of dazzlement occur elsewhere in Green’s fiction – in Loving, for instance, when Edith’s face is lost in the full glare of the sun after Raunce first suggests marriage.\textsuperscript{10} Visual difficulties in Concluding are not, however, limited to tricks of the light. The Sanctum itself has wall panelling that is “designed to continue the black and white tiled floor in perspective, as though to lower the ceiling” (p. 11). The effects are disorienting. When Merode is interviewed in this room by Marchbanks, “the girl had come to be mesmerised by the black and white receding pavements” (p. 69). This leads to a nauseous feeling of entrapment, as if she were “hooked on a briar” (a very similar image to the metaphors of abduction in Caught). Overwhelmed by this dizzying trompe l’oeil, Merode faints.

The characters of Concluding are also in the habit of averting their eyes, much like Charley Summers in Back. The extremely short-sighted Marchbanks, for instance, removes her spectacles before she interviews Moira about the disappearance of the other girls. Ostensibly, this is done to assist her concentration, “as though, in the crisis, at a time when she had been left in charge, she wished to look inwards, to draw on hid reserves” (p. 47). In fact, it is more an attempt to blind herself from the truth. Sans spectacles, Marchbanks’s eyes are “dull poached eggs of vision” (p. 48), thereby enabling her to engage in a strange form of self-deception. Unable to distinguish the features of the girl sitting right in front of her, Marchbanks convinces herself that Moira is mature and level-headed (when, in fact, she is capricious and childish). But during the course of the interview, Marchbanks decides to put her glasses back on. This instantly allows her to appreciate Moira’s shiftiness: “You could admire children when you were not in a position properly to focus them,” she thinks to herself (p. 50). Marchbanks later gives a report of the investigation to her two superiors. Listening to this report, Baker disconcertingly closes her eyes, as if not wanting to think about the misbehaviour of the students; in what is described as the director’s “sightless condition”, there seemed “no way of telling how much she understood” (p. 78). These wilful acts of not seeing conform to the Institute’s ocularcentric philosophy – in this closed society, vision is the principal mode of acquiring knowledge.

\textsuperscript{10} Loving, p. 142.
Yet, like its predecessors, _Concluding_ repeatedly suggests that the eyes cannot be trusted. “Half-blind” Rock most obviously exemplifies this – he is forever squinting or struggling to focus, forever losing sight of his truant animals. This unreliability of vision also extends to the act of reading, another familiar trope of Green’s fiction. There are a number of extraneous texts in _Concluding_ – usually letters of one sort or another – that test the hermeneutic skills of the characters who have to read them. Chief among them is the anonymous note mentioned in the novel’s opening pages. (The fragments of the note had spilled out of the waste paper basket during Edge’s _contretemps_ with the bat.) The note’s enigmatic message – a single sentence, with one oddly spelt word – is revealed much later in the course of a discussion between the two directors: “Who is there furnicates besides his goose?” (p. 164). The message is ambiguous; “besides”, for instance, could mean “adjacent to” or “in addition to”, while the word “furnicates” is altogether obscure. Edge resolves to disregard the note altogether: “Whoever stoops to send a thing like it deserves immediate punishment, but above all, to be ignored,” she declares (p. 164). Baker is not so sure; she keeps talking about the note, conceding that she is puzzled by what “furnicates” might mean. Edge, however, remains adamant that the note is best forgotten (though it is clear that she assumes the message reflects poorly on goose-loving Rock). Michael North has suggested that the note (especially its strange word, “furnicates”) plays on the spinster Edge’s sexual fears; in that regard, its possible allusion to fornication might be associated with the bat, itself an invader in the womb-like Sanctum. But perhaps the note should be seen as simply one of the long line of mysterious texts in Green’s work. Reading is fraught with difficulty for characters like Raunce in _Loving_ (who misunderstands the initials “I.R.A.” on a business card) or Charley in _Back_ (who is unnerved by a floral-sounding book title and then bored by the interposed story of Princess Septimanie). Textuality has no higher status in _Concluding_. Elizabeth performs a familiar gesture that intimates the dubious value of the written word: like Dot in _Back_, “she started to write her name on window glass with a forefinger”, giving up when she realises that it “left no trace” (p. 116).

It is not just vision, however, that is liable to error in _Concluding_. Rock’s deafness frustrates many a conversation (there do not seem to be any hearing aids in this

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11 North, p. 181. One of the surviving fragments of the note bore this word.
impoverished dystopia). “Poor dear,” Elizabeth says of him, “he’s got to such a state of
deafness he doesn’t catch what’s said” (p. 43). Problems of hearing are also figured in
other ways. The various echoes “volleyed back” to their original speakers, the
disembodied voice that questions Merode through the ventilation shaft in the bathroom,
the *sotto voce* twittering of the girls at lunch – the cumulative effect here is one of aural
uncertainty. Just as unsettling is the practice of vocal affectation. Again, this has been
encountered before, with the allophonic “mystery man” of *Party Going* and the faux-
 lisping insurance agent of *Loving*. Sebastian Birt puts on many different voices but he is
not the only character to do so. Elizabeth, for instance, often deliberately speaks in a
disconnected manner, seeking “refuge in a vast quagmire of vagueness” during stressful
situations (p. 42). When Merode is discovered, both Birt and Elizabeth engage in this
sort of acting: the tutor first does “a close parody of Edge” (p.56) and then imitates his
colleague Dakers (p. 61), while Elizabeth “at once put on her vagueness for protection”
(p. 56). Rock employs a similar strategy, adopting the rough tones of the “swill man” or
some other form of “the servile courtesy that he could assume at will” (p. 191). The
purpose of these false voices is self-defence – the characters are trying to avoid official
scrutiny or deflect criticism. This is also the reason why Rock sometimes *deliberately*
mishears what is said to him. When Adams accuses the old man of hatching an elaborate
plot, Rock pretends deafness in an attempt to defuse the situation (p. 161). In short,
Rock’s hearing problems can seem willed in the same way that Marchbanks and Baker
might deliberately avert their eyes from unpalatable truths.

It is a genuine sensory mistake, however, that occurs when Rock and his grand-
daughter arrive at the mansion for the dance. Baker opens the door to them and, in the
semi-darkness, momentarily believes Elizabeth to be the missing girl Mary (p. 190). The
director quickly corrects herself, but it is the first of many muddles that will arise during
this rather surreal evening. The visitors are led into the Sanctum where they exchange
their walking boots for dancing shoes. As they do so, Edge slyly asks Rock if he has had
any news (presumably, a reference to his election to the Academy). “At my age, ma’am,”
the old man answers, “one day is much like another” (p. 192). Of all the characters, Rock
is the greatest exponent of routine. But then he surprises everyone with a bold proposal –
he offers to give weekly lectures at the Institute. Edge is taken aback, assuming that he
intends teaching some aspect of the Great Theory by which he made his name (which, in any case, she thinks too advanced for the Institute girls). “We are at cross-purposes, ma’am,” the sage tells her – what he is actually proposing is weekly instruction on the care of pigs! Edge is appalled by the idea. Her particular aversion to pigs had recently been heightened by an official directive ordering the Institute to start keeping the animals (the reasoning behind this was a vague State plan to teach the girls some farming skills). Elizabeth is delighted with her grandfather’s mad offer, which she thinks is a ploy to hold on to the cottage by making himself seem useful. “Not many of our girls enter the Veterinary Service,” Edge coldly says, thereby shutting down any further discussion of the subject. It is time for the festivities to begin.

*Concluding* is the last of Green’s novels to contain extended passages of lyrical description – that “wilful impressionist style”, as John Updike once called it. Several sinuous paragraphs are devoted to the dance:

> Then the valse continued, on and on, and they [the spectators] could see couples circle into view, their short reflections upon the floor continually on the move behind swinging skirts over polished wax, backwards and forwards, in and out again as each pair swung round under chandeliers. And at the sight these others walked on the lighted scene, held white arms up to veined shoulders, in one another’s arms moved off, turning to the beat with half shut eyes, entranced, in a soft ritual beneath azalea and rhododendron; one hundred and fifty pairs in white … (p. 195)

The dance is the supreme interruption to the Institute’s sense of order. In a bizarre reprise of the maids’ waltz in *Loving*, Edge and Baker dance together, swaying “in one another’s bony grip” (p. 195). Rock takes a turn with Elizabeth, Winstanley with Marchbanks, and Mrs Blain with one of the kitchen girls. There is even a carnivalesque reversal of status when the old scientist leaves the dance floor and sits on the stage in seats normally reserved for the two directors. Edge approaches him and begins to chat about the ball, insisting that “our Tamashas are traditional” (p. 210). Indeed, the director goes out of her way to emphasise the importance of routine and the need to avoid any “odious deviation from what is usual”, even claiming that the Institute’s former students “would be distressed to hear of change in any shape” (p. 211). Preserving these traditions, she

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12 *The Poohouse Fair* (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. xv. Updike made this comment in a preface, explaining how *Concluding* was a major influence on his own work.
explains, is an important aspect of her function: “One of the things we should provide here is memories, which is why I strive for the repetitive” (p. 210). Rock remains deeply suspicious, however. The politeness of their conversation is entirely superficial: the sage believes that the director is “blockheaded” (p. 212), while Edge in turn regards him as “intolerable” (p. 214). Rock tries once more to raise the question of his lecturing the girls but the director continues to show little enthusiasm for the idea. Before the dance, Elizabeth had suggested that the old man should use his charm to convince Edge that he should be allowed to keep his cottage; he now feels that he has done all he could in this regard. Satisfied with himself, Rock leaves the director to her own thoughts.

Edge is soon joined on the stage by Baker. Edward Stokes once ventured that Concluding was the most pessimistic of Green’s novels and this view seems most justified when the two directors are together, laying their vicious plans. 13 Almost by chance, they realise that the Rocks had never formally been invited to the evening’s ball, each director having assumed that the other had issued the invitation. For a time they consider whether they should evict these harmless gate-crashers, whose behaviour they denounce as “preposterous”, “brazen” and “wicked” (p. 216). There seems no end to their malice. Edge continues to blacken Rock’s character, insisting that he “is far too close to some of the girls” (p. 217). With no evidence whatsoever, she alleges that over the course of the evening he had been drinking alcohol from a flask brought with him: “I saw the bulge myself, in his pocket” (p. 217); it is impossible to know whether this last claim is a delusion or an outright lie. They then find something else to be appalled about – the overly amorous waltzing of Sebastian Birt and Elizabeth. “A member of the staff has no business whatever dancing with that misguided woman,” Baker asserts (p. 218). With the entire Institute on show in front of them, the two directors give full vent to their malevolence. At one point, they debate whether they should also dismiss lovesick Winstanley for the spurious reason that she might become jealous and commit a crime (p. 220). Ultimately though, they defer making any decisions at all: “Leave sleeping dogs lie,” Baker tells her colleague (p. 219), using almost exactly the same language as Mrs Jack’s advice to Mrs Tennant in Loving. Baker observes that their hands are tied “until we have cleared Mary up and quite got to the bottom of Merode” (p. 221).

13 Stokes, p. 172.
The directors share a bureaucratic dread about an inquiry by their superiors in London about the missing students.

While Edge and Baker are scheming, Rock has an astonishing encounter with some of the girls. Earlier in the evening, Moira had persuaded him to venture down into the depths of the mansion. A clandestine student club meets in the cellar (though Moira does not initially divulge this). On this first occasion, their progress is stopped by a locked door; thinking to placate the sage, Moira kisses him: “soft lips brushed his that were dry as an old bone” (p. 204). Rock is most displeased by this but it does not stop him from shortly afterwards accompanying the girl again on a second expedition to the cellar. Though negotiating the stairs proves difficult for the old man, the pair eventually reach the club’s secret meeting-place, described by a handmade sign as “Institute Inn” (p. 225). A second girl kisses Rock – this is said to be part of his initiation – and he even accepts a drink that he judges to be “a kind of medicated syrup” (p. 226). The conversation of the girls of this so-called club is quite risqué. Several of them suggest, much to Rock’s horror, that students regularly visit the forester Adams at night; Moira also implies that she knows the whereabouts of Mary but refuses to elaborate. This devious girl then asks Rock to confirm a rumour that Sebastian Birt and Elizabeth were engaged to be married. This greatly upsets the old man, who denies the rumour and leaves immediately. Shuffling back to the dance floor, he finds Elizabeth and insists that they should leave:

“I’ve seen enough,” the old man proclaimed. “Miserable children that they are. Too much freedom here. Lack of control. All they have to do is chatter,” he ended. (p. 232).

Generational tension has been encountered before in Green’s fiction (the animosity between the senior and junior Duprets in Living, for example). Rock now resents the girls enough to call them “fiends” (p. 233), a judgment with which Elizabeth immediately agrees. Indeed, his outburst suggests an alignment between his views and those of the authoritarian directors. In high dudgeon, he goes off to find Edge so that he might pay his respects before leaving. The director is in her Sanctum, to which she had retired “for the treat of the day, a cigarette” (p. 234). As an “exceptional indulgence” on this special occasion, Edge was in fact smoking her second cigarette, the effect of which was to make her rather light-headed. Greeting Rock at the door, she finds her emotions
radically reversed and now feels “nothing but pity for the old man” (p. 234). Curiously, Rock has a similar change of heart: “he no longer seemed to hate the woman, all the go had gone out of him” (p. 235). Their encounter takes an even stranger turn when they begin sharing their most intimate views. Rock admits to disliking Birt and his “parlour tricks”; Edge readily concurs, describing the young tutor as “unwise” (p. 236). Their conversation becomes muddled at times, especially when the director accepts a third cigarette from the old man: “She knew it to be madness, but how could she refuse?” (p. 238). For his part, Rock could see that Edge was addled but assumes she must have been drinking. They also find themselves agreeing that the Institute girls “talk too much” and sometimes “go too far” (p. 237). Edge even admits to a deep level of frustration: “I do get sick and tired of these girls. At their age they are terribly full of themselves” (p. 240).

The old man is not beyond a little scheming himself. Concerned by what he had heard in the cellar from the members of the students’ “club”, he raises the possibility that Adams might be in some way connected with Mary’s disappearance. Cunningly, he points out that the forester is “a widower who lives alone in his cottage” – a clear attempt to encourage Edge to concentrate her attentions on seizing that man’s property. The result of his strategy is uncertain, however. Edge’s reply is non-committal, “not with quite the conviction for which he listened in her voice” (p. 240). Nevertheless, it shows that the sage and the director are not always so far apart in their behaviour. Then, even more amazingly, Edge proposes marriage. Her first overture is oblique and she wonders if Rock has understood; she giggles, recognising that it is “a desperate expedient to gain possession of a cottage” (p. 241). In this novel of repetitions, even a marriage proposal has to be said twice:

“I said, you must marry again.” She spoke out with a slow simper which allowed of no misinterpretation. This, he at last saw, was an offer, and unconditional at that. He took it in his stride as entirely understandable; unthinkable of course, but not, in her pitiable circumstances, in the least surprising. He proudly ignored it. (p. 242)

Rock then pleads his age because “he wished to let her down lightly” (shades of Nancy Whitmore in Back). He then takes his leave but, in the passage outside the Sanctum, “he gave one short, sharp laugh” (p. 243). Edge, the narrative makes clear, hears this
mockery, just as her colleague Baker had earlier heard Elizabeth Rock’s bray of contempt.

Through the darkened estate, Rock and Elizabeth head back to the cottage. Wisely, the old man decides not to divulge anything about Edge’s marriage proposal, knowing that Elizabeth “was sure to repeat it to Sebastian”, who would then spread it everywhere (p. 249). The young woman is disappointed to be leaving the dance and her lover so soon; secretly, she plans to return after escorting her grandfather home. At one point, Rock turns around and, seeing the mansion in the moonlight, utters the house’s former name: “Petra” (p. 245). This is, of course, the Greek word for “rock”, suggesting that it is the sage, above all, who is most profoundly associated with this Great Place. Earlier in the evening when Rock had been making his way to the mansion, he had witnessed a vast flock of starlings overhead; as might have been predicted, this leads to a rapturous experience, one of Green’s authorial signatures – the old man is enchanted by this “huge volume of singing” and “wondered, as often before, if this were not the greatest sound on earth” (p. 177). Now, on his way back home, he hears a different noise altogether: reverberating through the woods is the cry of “Ma-ree”, the same cry that had been heard in the opening pages of the novel. Once again, it is unclear what direction the voice is coming from; Elizabeth puts it down to a prank by some of the girls (p. 246).

As the couple near the cottage, they come across Daisy, who has had a single white slipper tied around her neck. Rock worries that the girls have been tormenting his beloved pig, but this concern is soon forgotten when the goose Ted almost flies into him. Rock has no idea how the two animals found their way back home: “We shall never know the truth,” he declares (p. 253). Entering the cottage, he hears his cat yowling; she, too, has returned. Rock goes up to bed: “On the whole he was well satisfied with his day” (p. 254). The novel closes with him falling instantly asleep.

Some of Green’s critics have interpreted the novel’s ending as signifying Rock’s triumph. There is no doubt that his rival Edge appears especially vulnerable after her final discussion with the sage. Michael North suggests that the director’s marriage proposal “shows that she is willing to make any sacrifice to keep her system intact”, but perhaps this is an exaggeration. Edge is, of course, disoriented by the stresses of the

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14 North, p. 193.
day and her excessive smoking. In any event, the system is not simply hers alone; there is no reason to think that it will not continue without her, perhaps in an even more draconian form. Marriage to Rock might have been a way of securing the cottage but it will do nothing to solve the problem of Mary’s disappearance – surely Edge’s major concern. Nevertheless, the proposal does show that the director is losing her grip, as Rock rightly intuitions. Like his granite-sounding name, the old man has a greater capacity to endure than Edge. Indeed, he represents the virtue of routine, with his tendency to repeat himself and his acceptance that “one day is much like another” (p. 192). Edge professes to be on the side of repetition, expressing her scorn for any departures from routine (“the odious deviations from what is usual”). Yet, in fact, she is the novel’s primary agent of change. It is Edge, much more than Baker, who contemplates staff dismissals, plots to seize the property of others and then ultimately makes her absurd proposal of marriage. The Institute she governs is barely a decade old with newly minted “traditions”. Rock, on the other hand, is linked with “Petra”, the great house’s true name; as Sebastian Birt recognizes, the sage is emblematic of the old order, with an entitlement to live in his cottage that pre-dates the regime of Edge and Baker. Undoubtedly then, Rock has prevailed against the system she loathes – for the time being. But in this respect the novel’s deathly images cannot be overlooked. Rock is likened to a “suiciding mole” when he walks to the mansion in the opening pages (this house is itself said to be “sickle-shaped”, suggesting the scythe of Time: p. 8). Then, during the final scene in the Sanctum, he tells Edge that he is “not much longer for this world” (p. 241); though she demurs, the director actually thinks the sage looks older than his seventy-six years (p. 243). Rock’s triumph, in all the circumstances, can only be a temporary one.

Thus the novel ends as it began, with the sage back in his bed. None of the perplexities have been resolved – the reader, like Rock, will never know the truth. Has Mary really disappeared? What happened to Merode when she escaped? Is Elizabeth engaged? All these mysteries remain. This lingering sense of ambiguity is a familiar one, however: the future for its characters is as uncertain as that of Roe and Dy in Caught, or Raunce and Edith in Loving, or Charley and Nancy in Back. Indeed, Rock’s bleak pronouncement – “We shall never know the truth” – echoes similar expressions of epistemological doubt in Green’s previous books. Repetition is really Concluding’s
primary mode of operation – not just internally, with its various duplications of speech and character, but externally as well, in terms of its relationship to Green’s earlier fiction. The reader is constantly recognising familiar themes and tropes – Rock’s not-reading, Elizabeth’s not-writing, the rapturous birdsong, the countless episodes of sensory failure – but ultimately there is no particular satisfaction in doing so. It is almost like the last act of an operetta where the cast sings a final number that recycles fragments of earlier songs, before departing from the stage altogether.

Unravelling: The Austerity of Nothing and Doting

Nothing and Doting are not without their champions. Jeremy Treglown, for instance, suggests that the two novels accurately represent various aspects of post-war British society, as well as having close connections with their author’s private life; Michael North scarcely mentions Doting, but he does defend Nothing on the ground that it continues to explore several themes from the earlier fiction. But the majority view is exemplified by Rod Mengham, perhaps Green’s most perceptive reader, who summarily dismisses both novels. For Mengham, the primacy of dialogue in these last works often amounts to little more than “a string of clichés”, as well as being a “devaluation” of the author’s earlier method. Green often said that his main purpose in writing was to create something that had a life of its own; but the final novels, in which everything depends on what is said or left unsaid, seem to fall a long way short of the special kind of realism developed in his earlier work. Life is not just talk; it is also what is seen or thought or felt. The strict rules governing the composition of Nothing and Doting resulted in texts that are, above all, emaciated.

16 Mengham, pp. 207, 209.
17 In an interview, Green once declared that “to me, the purpose of art is to produce something alive”: Surviving, p. 241.
On a number of occasions, Green suggested that his change in method was the result of a change in society at large. In particular, he emphasised the influence of new media on the modern novel:

> [H]ow is the reader’s imagination to be fired? For a long time I thought this was best lit by very carefully arranged passages of description. But if I have come to hold, as I do now, that we learn almost everything in life from what is done after a great deal of talk, then it follows that I am beginning to have my doubts about the uses of description. No; communication between the novelist and his reader will tend to be more and more by dialogue, until in a few years’ time someone will think up something better.\(^\text{18}\)

People strike sparks off each other, that is what I try to note down. But mark well, they only do this when they are talking together. After all, we don’t write letters now, we telephone. And one of these days we are going to have TV sets which lonely people can talk to and get answers back. Then no one will read anymore.\(^\text{19}\)

These explanations seem disingenuous. In his insistence that the reading public was somehow no longer interested in description, Green chose to ignore the possibility that modern society might actually be more interested in visuality than in orality. The change in Green’s narrative method might be better explained by pointing to internal factors – namely, the sense of exhaustion that can be discerned in *Concluding*. The decision to write dialogue-based novels was a way for Green to avoid repeating himself as much as it was a response to social transformation.

*Nothing* is set in London in 1948.\(^\text{20}\) The central character is John Pomfret, a widower of forty-five, who is first seen taking a young woman to lunch in a hotel overlooking Hyde Park. John relates a story to her of an elaborate game of make-believe that he had recently played with a young child. This child is Penelope Weatherby, the six year-old daughter of Jane Weatherby, a widow and one of John’s oldest friends. Some years before, John and Jane had had an affair; John’s wife was still alive at the time, so the affair had been broken off. When John had last visited Jane, he had tried to entertain Penelope by pretending to marry her, complete with a cigar-band for a ring; the silly

\(^{18}\) “A Novelist to His Readers”, *Surviving*, p. 140.
\(^{19}\) Interview with *The Paris Review*, *Surviving*, p. 239.
\(^{20}\) *Nothing* (London: Hogarth, 1950). All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text of this chapter.
charade had ultimately made the child cry. This embedded story figures the novel’s fascination with marriage. At that moment, Jane happens to arrive at the restaurant with her latest beau. She and John then have an animated conversation about a mutual friend, Arthur Morris, who had become dangerously ill after a simple surgical procedure. Morris had required a straightforward operation on his foot but infection had set in, leading to the amputation of his big toe. This becomes something of a running joke throughout the novel, even as Morris’s condition worsens; it seems a very long way from the comedy of Party Going and Loving.

Jane has a twenty year-old son Philip who works in the same government agency as John’s eighteen year-old daughter, Mary. A romance has developed between the pair, one serious enough for them to contemplate marriage. Their attitudes, though, are surprisingly stuffy, in marked contrast to the frivolity and hedonism of their parents. This results in some extreme expressions of generational resentment:

Philip Weatherby and Mary Pomfret were sitting in the downstairs lounge of the same respectable public house off Knightsbridge.

“They all ought to be liquidated,” he said obviously in disgust.

“Who Philip?”

“Every one of our parents’ generation.”

“But I love Daddy.”

“You can’t.”

“I do, so now you know!”

“They’re wicked darling,” he exclaimed. “They’ve had two frightful wars they’ve done nothing about except fight in and they’re rotten to the core.”

“Barring your relations I suppose?”

“Well, Mamma’s a woman. She’s really not to blame. Nevertheless, I do include her. Of course she couldn’t manage much about the slaughter. And she can be marvellous at times. Oh I don’t know though, I think I hate them every one.”

“But why on earth?”

“I feel they’re against us.”

“You and me do you mean?”

“Well yes if you like. They’re so beastly selfish they think of no one and nothing but themselves.” (p. 69).

This exchange is representative of much of the novel. The dialogue is not unrealistic but the characters seem lifeless, especially since there is no recourse to their mental states. In short, they do not exhibit the moral complexity of, say, Mr Rock or Miss Edge.
The mystery that hangs over the novel is whether Philip might be John’s son (there is considerable uncertainty as to when his old affair with Jane had ended). Of course, this would prohibit any marriage between Philip and Mary, owing to their relationship of consanguinity – they would, in law, be half-siblings. A taint of incest is obviously a serious moral question but Nothing treats it in a way that is cavalier. The young couple announce their engagement but continue to harbour suspicions about Philip’s true parentage. In an attempt to get to the bottom of the matter, they make various attempts to interview old acquaintances of their parents; Mary had even wanted to speak to the ailing Arthur Morris but he dies before she can do so. In the end, the mystery is not cleared up; there are even suggestions that Jane Weatherby, disapproving of her son’s fiancée, has all along deliberately fanned the flames of speculation about the possibility of incest. Partly as a result of this uncertainty and partly because of their own emotional detachment, the young couple break off their engagement. In the meantime, John and Jane have rekindled their relationship and now decide to marry. The novel ends with them sitting together on a sofa in Jane’s flat. When Jane asks if he would like anything, John replies, “Nothing … nothing”, before drifting off to sleep.

As in Concluding, there are various parallels between Nothing and Green’s earlier fiction. At one point, the child Penelope holds her finger to her lips to indicate silence (p. 155), a gesture that resonates with similar moments in Loving; another character has a ludicrous choking fit reminiscent of that suffered by Charley in Back (p. 243). Yet the overall impression is one of triviality (and Green’s choice of title may well be a sign that he anticipated this criticism). The conversations of the young socialites in Party Going also canvass unimportant topics, but their talk is contextualised by a much more elaborate structure of detail and description. In Nothing, the narrator has virtually withdrawn from the scene. This may also explain why the novel is so unfunny. In the earlier fiction, the narrator could give access to characters’ private thoughts, but in Nothing there are no rambling fantasists like Bridges or Mary Howells, nor are there any of Green’s extraordinary metaphors likening people to cats, camels or okapis.
Doting also explores social values and generational conflict among the upper middle-class.\textsuperscript{21} It centres on a married couple in their forties, Arthur and Diana Middleton, who dote on their only child, a son called Peter who is still at boarding-school. Arthur becomes infatuated with a young woman named Annabel Paynton who, at nineteen, is only two years older than Peter. In an attempt to get her own back, Diana begins to flirt with a middle-aged widower, though nothing comes of it. Indeed, very little happens in the novel:

“Seen anyone I know?”
“You’re a stranger these days,” Miss Paynton countered at once.
“You don’t mind my ringing you up like this?” he then asked.
“Why no, how should I?”
“Perhaps I just thought you didn’t sound too pleased.”
“I’m always glad to hear from you, Arthur,” she said quietly.
“D’you think we could possibly take lunch together again?”
“I might.”
“You don’t, quite, seem what is called impatient, Ann.”
“It isn’t that at all,” she explained, with her far away voice. “I happen to be rather full you see.”
“Could you manage Tuesday?”
“This week or next?”
“Tomorrow.”
“Just let me look at my book. Yes, as a matter of fact, I find I can.” (pp. 154–55)

This conversation gives some sense of the novel’s monotony. In Pack My Bag, Green had conceived fiction to possess a slow-burning intensity: “It should slowly appeal to feelings unexpressed, it should in the end draw tears out of the stone”.\textsuperscript{22} There are some moments of poignancy in Doting when characters fret about the encroachments of age, but generally the novel makes few claims on the reader’s emotions. Annabel also occasionally speculates about whether there is a difference between “doting” and “loving” (p. 160), though it is never made clear why such a difference might matter. The novel ends with a pronouncement that “the next day they all went on very much the same” (p. 252). Having banished all other techniques in favour of dialogue, Green had

\textsuperscript{21} Doting (London: Hogarth, 1952). All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text of this chapter.

\textsuperscript{22} Pack My Bag, p. 88.
again produced a text that seemed wilfully blind. At this point, the double thread of his fiction had completely unravelled.
This dissertation has sought to describe how the novels of Henry Green work – how assumptions about voice and vision combine to produce his particular art. For that reason, the emphasis here has been on explication rather than evaluation. Nevertheless, any study of Green’s writing is haunted by the question of its minority status. “I’m forgotten now,” he told a journalist a few months before his death.¹ Almost twenty years later, an English critic summed up the state of Green’s reputation as essentially one of anonymity:

Every so often a Henry Green revival is announced. There is momentary excitement, his admirers cheer, and then, very quickly, the books slip out of print once more.²

Why is Green so little known? Why does he have so few readers? It does not seem enough to point to the plotlessness of his novels or their stylistic difficulties; the same might be said for Proust or Joyce. Nor is it the case that Green’s novels are so rarefied that they are somehow divorced from social reality; even a cursory reading shows them to be deeply immersed in everyday life. But, of course, there is no accounting for taste; the history of aesthetic preference is entirely unpredictable. All interpretation, as Frank Kermode has pointed out, is governed by prejudice of one sort or another.³

If evaluation were called for, then it might be claimed that Green’s writing was at its best when he used the full range of resources available to him – that is, both his powers of voice and his powers of vision. For that reason, Party Going, Caught and Loving might be ranked his greatest achievements, with Back and Living not far behind. Yet it is a supremely difficult task for any writer to know the right way to proceed. Virginia Woolf, a novelist whom Green much admired, recognised the precarious nature of writing fiction – its dim prospects of success and its considerable risks of failure. In a

¹ Treglown, p. 309, n. 12.
celebrated discussion of fictional method, Woolf acknowledged the necessity for the novelist to make a choice:

[U]nfortunately, it seems true that some renunciation is inevitable. You cannot cross the narrow bridge of art carrying all its tools in your hands. Some you must leave behind or you will drop them in midstream or, what is worse, overbalance and be drowned yourself.4

But Green abandoned the wrong set of tools in Nothing and Doting – he overbalanced when, in effect, he decided to close his eyes. Without the lyricism enabled by visual description, his final two novels were diminished affairs. These were programmatic works, written to conform with his own straitened aesthetic theory; as such, they became exactly the sort of literature that Proust, another of Green’s heroes, would have scorned as art with the price tag left on it.5

It is impossible to hazard the future for Green’s fiction. Writers like Woolf and Proust might be considered well-entrenched in our culture – their books and lives turned into films, their faces emblazoned on T-shirts, their former homes visited by sightseers. But Green remains an outsider, extra-canonical, exotic – indeed, much like the self-portrait he furnished in Pack My Bag. This situation seems unlikely to change any time soon. In particular, the vocal nuances of all of Green’s writing (and not just the last two novels) might now struggle to find receptive readers. We are living, as John Updike has ruefully observed, “in an increasingly visual and non-oral culture”.6 In this iconophilic era, Green’s fiction might seem outdated to many, since so much of its artistry derives from the subtleties of human speech. Perhaps this sense of anachronism will become more acute in the decades ahead: we are constantly told that ours is a digital future, that technology is our teleology. In that event, we risk losing the capacity to attend to the human voice in all its beautiful complexity, thereby forfeiting the sensibility to relish the finest of Green’s novels; perhaps then his work will become even more exotic, as outlandish as morris dancing. That would be our loss but it need not be our destiny. If it does come to pass, then the fault will not be in our stars but in ourselves.

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5 In Search of Lost Time, vol. 6, Time Regained p. 236.
6 Due Considerations, p. 309. This view is shared by the Scottish writer Alan Massie: “The Death of the Novel,” The Spectator, 23 July 2008, p. 33.
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