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The Enigma Called Green

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Henry Green – A Literary Enigma

It is very hard to put a finger on the subject of who Henry Green is and what his works are about, because the two major features of his writing are lack of themes and classlessness. At best, one could consider him as one of the literary enigmas of the twentieth century. Even decades after his death, posterity seems still to be groping for an evaluation of his slim oeuvre - nine novels and a memoir, all produced between 1926 and 1952, when at the age of forty-seven he stopped writing. "I find it so exhausting now I simply can't do it anymore," (<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-literaryreview/reluctant-writers/article2274661.ece>), he told an interviewer, though he lived on for over twenty more years, increasingly eccentric and reclusive.

Green refused even to leave his London house for the last seven years of his life, nor would he consent to being photographed except from the rear. In 1973 he died, at sixty-eight. He achieved neither commercial success nor wholehearted enthusiasm from the literary pundits,

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though he commanded, then and now, excitement amounting to passion from certain readers, an oddly assorted group including W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bowen, Terry Southern, Eudora Welty, and John Updike. Such is the respect he commands from his avid readers that they continue to heap praises upon him. John Updike wrote, in an introduction to an omnibus edition of three of Green's novels: "His novels made more of a stylistic impact upon me than those of any writer living or dead." (Nothing 15)

David Lodge describes Green as "an exceptionally gifted and truly original writer." (119) Sebastian Faulks who wrote an introduction to the UK edition of Green's three novels calls Green "unique" and writes: "No fiction has ever thrilled me as the great moments in *Living* and *Loving*." (Loving 14)

About his readership Green exposed the ambivalence that characterized every attitude he ever held. "I write for about six people (including myself) whom I respect and for no one else," he quipped. (<http://www.bhikku.net/2005/09/12.html>) So oblique and subtle is Green's style that, as Terry Southern points out, he has been called not merely a writer's writer, but a writer's writer's writer. (<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4800/the-art-of-fiction-no-22-henry-green>)

Each Novel is Distinct in Every Aspect

Green's unwillingness to discuss aesthetics has resulted in a general critical uncertainty about his actual importance as a writer. His books are rarely in print and, though he receives a few passing glances from the academy, an enthusiasm for Green is now seen as evidence of specialized, even arcane tastes. When speaking of his work, people hesitate to commit themselves, usually saying that he is an interesting writer and the range of his gifts is indicated in the fact that, among the nine novels, there is virtually no repeat material; each novel attempts something wholly different from the last. Green was not one to develop a style or theme over the years, building onto it with every new book. Rather, with reckless confidence, he attacked each novel as though it were his first. In *Blindness*, his first novel, begun and mostly written while he was still at Eton, Green had already begun seeking the limits of possibilities of the English syntax, and in his second novel, *Living*, he found those limits and began to stretch them.

Magnificent Felicity

The diversity of Green's achievements is matched by a corresponding variety in quality. In one paragraph he will hit the bull's eye with a magnificent felicity of phrasing and in the next he will overreach himself and produce a piece of prose that is very bad indeed. He could produce a vivid image with a minimum of words, and Green was always strongest when handling the concrete, either in descriptive prose or in dialogue. This style takes centre stage in his books *Concluding*, *Caught* and *Loving*.

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Characters United by Vanity and Greed

Loving, a novel about the goings-on among a group of servants in a great country house in Ireland during the owners' absence is, perhaps, the best-known and best-loved of Green's novels. It is characteristic, too, of one of the features that has made Green such an anomaly among English writers of this century: his apparent classlessness. Though Green can describe his own milieu, and brilliantly (*Blindness*, *Party Going*, *Nothing*, *Doting*), he seems equally at home among the petty bourgeoisie (*Back*, *Caught*) and the working classes (*Loving*, *Living*), he did not commit himself to writing about a particular class. Rather than being divided by socio-economic factors, his characters are united by the vanity, greed, and generosity common to the species as a whole. The upper class characters found in his *Nothing* are not so very different in essence from the lower-class ones in *Loving* and *Living*. Green's refusal to judge his unregenerate characters is absolute, as is his refusal to endow them with any of the redeeming features most authors allow. All of his creatures are commonplace in the truest sense of the word: they are without intellectual or spiritual interests, without philosophy, wholly lacking in curiosity about the rest of the world and even in self-knowledge, but they are comic rather than tragic, and their very humanity is ultimately a force for redemption.

Mood

The most talked about story from this early period is *Mood* (1926), the beginning of what was to have been Green's second novel, abandoned after twenty pages. It is a subjective narrative from the point of view of a young girl, Constance Igtham, upper-class, unmarried, somewhere in the no-man's land between childhood and adulthood. *Mood*, for all its beauties, is not wholly successful. Later in life, Green was embarrassed by his youthful self's innocent use, in fragment, of the most obvious Freudian symbolism, and he wrote that "to establish a girl ... in a static situation where nothing is happening to her except her thoughts and feelings, is an impossible project for the novelist and one which only a young man, as I was then, would try for." (*Surviving* 91). Of course, other novelists have tried and succeeded in this venture; what Green really meant was that it was an impossible project for the kind of artist he was. For Green's most successful technique is the vivid presentation of significant surfaces; in his best work he never presumes to trespass upon his characters' thoughts or pasts. "Do we know, in life, what other people are really like?" he wrote, "I very much doubt it.... How then can the novelist be so sure?"

Communication by Accident

Green's characters, as his work develops, communicate only by accident, as it were; they expose their real motives and passions not through straightforward thoughts and deeds, but through chance actions and vacuous asides.

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We go about our daily lives, in great cities, thinking entirely about our personal affairs; perhaps every now and again sparing a thought for our partners, that is, the person we live with, and of course with even greater guilt, of our children. After a time, in married life, it becomes the other partner's fault that they have married one, but the only child, or, as chance may have it, the many children, have had no choice, they are ours, and this is what fixes the guilt on us.

(*Surviving* 19)

This, from a 1954 essay called "Impenetrability," represents for Green not a passing mood but a deeply felt conviction. Another excellent and disturbing exploration of this theme is *Journey Out of Spain*, a short, never-produced play that Green wrote for television. Ostensibly a variation on the hackneyed subject of the travel nightmare, in this case the apparent inability of an English couple to escape from the vile Spanish backwater they are visiting as unsuspecting tourists. The play is also a disturbing and sinister vision of the guilt, demands, and devouring selfishness behind the façade of a very conventional marriage. The sincere and almost religious conviction of the primacy of guilt in human relations is one of Green's most fruitful sources of inspiration, and he forcefully develops it in *Doting* and *Nothing*, his last, great, and dismally underrated novels.

Weak in Criticism

Surviving shows the line of development in Green's fiction to be straight and strong, but his non-fiction, particularly his criticism, tends to be weak throughout his career. For while certain advantages accrue to an artist who remains purely an artist as opposed to a critic, he will tend to be shown up rather badly when he does turn to criticism. And Green's anti-intellectualism, worn like a badge of honor, finally turned into a terrible handicap. His thought processes were finely adjusted to every nuance of observed behavior, but when he tackled the abstract they became convoluted and clumsy, his usually delicate prose fumbling. In his only attempt at art criticism, for example, a 1953 essay on the painter Matthew Smith, he is tentative in every statement, as though fearful of sounding either foolish or pedantic. He obviously recognized the problem, for he said at the time: "I have never written about painting before and never shall again. It has given me hell." (*Surviving* 55) Some of his attempts at expository writing show just how bad things could get when he lost control:

Now that we are at war, is not the advantage for writers, and for those who read them, that they will be forced, by the need they have to fight, to go out into territories, it may well be at home, which they would never otherwise have visited, and that they will be forced, by way of their own selves, towards a style which, by the impact of a life strange to them and by their honest acceptance of this, will be as pure as Doughty's was, so that they will reach each one his own style that shall be his monument? (*Surviving* 132)

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Green's Narrative Theory

One can only fear that Green's style, too, will be his monument. As H. G. Wells said of the later Henry James, "his great sentences sweat and strain," (<http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/319484-H.G.Wells>) and the more desperately he reaches for precision the further it retreats from his grasp. Green's essays on fictional technique also suffer from want of a frame of reference. In the fifties he wrote several remarkably naïve pieces on narrative theory. Here, for example, is his case against the omniscient narrator:

Writing in this sort of way the novelist speaks directly to his readers. The kind of action which dialogue is, is held up while the writer, who has no business with the story he is writing, intrudes like a Greek chorus to underline his meaning. It is as if husband and wife were alone in the living room, and a voice came out of a corner of the ceiling to tell them what both were like, or what the other felt... . What he tries to do is to set himself up as a demi-god, a know-all. That life has been so created in novels, in the past, is not for me to argue for or against. (*Surviving* 77)

It might be 1870 and Green inveighing against the despotism of Dickens and Thackeray, rather than 1950, with Proust, Joyce, and Woolf (to name only a few) already dead and buried; one would think the author didn't control what his creatures say as well as what they think, and that the novel had a life of its own independent from that of the author. The violence of his reaction to what he seemed to perceive as unquestioned literary convention is bizarre in view of the preceding century's achievements. But fortunately, Green the novelist never completely followed the dicta of Green the theorist. His art was both too delicate and too ambitious to yield to formulae, and indeed the reader who still turns to Green does so as much for his mysteries and illogic as for the frequent beauty of his style.

A man falls in love because there is something wrong with him. It is not so much a matter of his health as it is of his mental climate; as, in winter one longs for the spring. He gets so that he can't stand being alone. He may imagine he wants children, but he doesn't, at least not as women do. Because once married and with children of his own, he longs to be alone again. A man who falls in love is a sick man, he has a kind of what used to be called green sickness. Before he's in love he's in a weak condition, for which the only prognosis, and he is only too aware of this, is that he will go on living. And, in his invalidism he doesn't feel he can go on living alone. It is not until after his marriage that he really knows how wrong or sick he has been. The love one feels is not made for one but made by one. It comes from a lack in oneself. It is a deficiency, and therefore, a certifiable disease. We are all animals, and therefore, we are continually being attracted. That this attraction should extend to what is called love is a human misfortune cultivated by novelists. It is the horror we feel of ourselves, that is of being alone with ourselves, which draws us to love, but this love should happen only once, and never be

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repeated, if we have, as we should, learnt our lesson, which is that we are, all and each one of us, always and always alone. (*Surviving* 133)

That this magnificent and uncompromising declaration is sincere there can be no doubt. But neither can we doubt that Green was sincere in agreeing, at about the same time, that all of his books are love stories, “inspired by the belief that love is the most absorbing human experience of all and therefore the most hopeful.” Green himself ardently mixes darkness and light, and his work must always appeal to those readers who, like him, do not fear life’s inevitable contradictions.

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