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Volume 5

Handbook of the English Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Edited by
Christoph Reinfandt

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Ingo Berensmeyer

11 Henry Green, *Party Going* (1939)

Abstract: This chapter analyses Henry Green's novel *Party Going* (1939) as an example of modernist fiction that bridges the divide between realist and experimental narrative modes. *Party Going* is a farewell to the interwar period observed through the lens of the Bright Young People novel, a subgenre that flourished around 1930. Yet it addresses wider social and aesthetic concerns in its portrayal of personal intimacy, class relations, generational change, and celebrity. It captures the atmosphere of the late 1930s in the confined setting of a railway station by exploring the characters' wavering between outward appearances and inner insecurities, by contrasting their desire to be somewhere or someone else with their actual immobility, and by shrouding London in a dense fog. The omnipresence of fog underscores Green's epistemological concern with the unknowable and the inexpressible; a concern that makes *Party Going* a representative example of English late modernist writing.

Keywords: Bright Young People, late modernism, immobility, epistemology

Prose is not to be read aloud but to oneself alone at night, and it is not quick as poetry but rather a gathering web of insinuations [...]. Prose should be a long intimacy between strangers with no direct appeal to what both may have known. It should slowly appeal to feelings unexpressed, it should in the end draw tears out of the stone [...]. (Green 2000 [1940], 55)

1 Context: Author, Œuvre, Moment

Henry Green was the pen-name of Henry Vincent Yorke (29 October 1905–13 December 1973). Born into an English upper-class family, he started writing while still at school, and had his first novel, *Blindness*, published in 1926. Although this might have destined him to join the youthful 'golden generation' of the Jazz Age alongside Evelyn Waugh and his fellow Etonian Anthony Powell, his life took a different course. After two years at Oxford, he joined the engineering works of the family firm, H. Pontifex & Sons, in Birmingham, where he worked for two years on the factory floor before becoming a director for the firm in their London offices until his retirement thirty years later. The factory provides the setting for his second novel, *Living* (1929), which combines a vivid portrayal of working-class life, mainly by means of a naturalistic representation of vernacular speech patterns, with a radical stylistic experimentalism.

Green composed his third novel, *Party Going* (1939), over a period of almost ten years. The outbreak of war gave a previously unknown urgency to his literary production; in his autobiography *Pack my Bag* (1940), he assembles memories of his childhood and years at school, noting that he expects to die in the war. He served on the home front as a member of the Auxiliary Fire Service in London. Three wartime novels followed in quick succession: *Caught* (1943), *Loving* (1945), and *Back* (1946) focus on experiences of war, deprivation, and loss. In the post-war period, Green published his last three novels, *Concluding* (1948), *Nothing* (1950), and *Doting* (1952), which are usually regarded as lesser achievements. After his retirement from the family firm in 1958, he spent the rest of his life in London mostly as a recluse, rarely leaving his house in Belgravia after 1960.

Green's oeuvre – nine novels and an autobiography – spans the 'high' and 'late' modernist period. Especially in his writings of the 1920s and 1930s, Green employs experimental narrative techniques that place him at the centre of modernist innovation in England. However, his reclusive tendencies and his working life kept him apart from the predominant literary circles of London, so that he is also, paradoxically, a marginal figure. Even though *Party Going* was published with the Woolfs' Hogarth Press, he was never a member of the Bloomsbury group. Similar paradoxes make his work difficult to place in other respects. Generationally, and in terms of his upbringing, he would have been ideally situated to become another aestheticist satirist like Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and Anthony Powell, yet he kept himself apart from the 'children of the sun' (see Green 1976) or the 'Bright Young People' of the 1920s – those young celebrants of upper-class bohemianism who were the darlings of the society pages in interwar Britain (see Taylor 2008). Furthermore, he wrote what may be the best English 'proletarian novel' of the early twentieth century, *Living*, while not himself a member of the working class (cf. Hitchcock 1994; on working class fiction ↗ 5 The Burden of Representation).

Party Going can be considered Green's most fully achieved novel, a novel in which realist and experimentalist elements have equal weight, pulling in different directions and thus creating both tension and balance. While he never abandoned his interest in literary form and narrative technique, his later writings during and after World War II subdue the earlier experimentalism for the sake of formal restraint, a spare narrative style, and a wry sense of humour that is perhaps the closest English analogue to the prose of Samuel Beckett (↗ 12 Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*). In contrast to Beckett's post-war prose, however, Green's final novels do not progress further in the direction of literary minimalism and postmodernism, but remain elegantly (and by then somewhat stiffly) poised between realist and experimentalist modes of narration, repeating an already established pattern. *Party Going* perhaps best embodies Green's idea of prose as "a gathering web of insinuations" (2000 [1940], 55).

The title raises certain expectations in the context of the literary and cultural landscape of the 1930s. By alluding to the Bright Young People's cult of youth and

celebrity, and to their favourite pastime of organizing and attending extravagant parties (see Taylor 2008), it places the novel in the upper-class world of the *jeunesse dorée*. On a more literal level, it refers to a group of friends who are trying to get from London to the South of France. As the gerund implies, their going is a condition rather than an activity: the novel ends before their train actually departs. Yet the title's lack of a hyphen also betrays the fact that Green's novel is a kind of farewell to a vanishing lifestyle, a descant on the 'golden generation' that flourished in England after World War I. Its closest literary context, then, is the slew of novels, ranging from the mildly to the wildly satirical, that emerged from this generation: most notably, Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930), Nancy Mitford's *Highland Fling* (1931), Anthony Powell's *Afternoon Men* (1931), Bryan Guinness' *Singing Out of Tune* (1933) and Cyril Connolly's *The Rock Pool* (1936). Green was himself a member of that generation, in his early thirties when he wrote it. He was closely acquainted with many Bright Young writers, himself and his wife Dig living the life of Bright Young things in the 1930s. *Party Going* is possibly based "on a holiday with [the playboy] Aly Khan which went wrong in the fog" (Yorke 1993, 292). It is a swan song to that period, a farewell to what W. H. Auden famously referred to as the "low dishonest decade" in his poem "September 1, 1939", but the idea for *Party Going* was probably conceived as early as 1926 (there is an early narrative titled "Excursion" in Green 1993b, 64–74). Its late completion and publication on the eve of World War II places it in the same time frame as Terence Rattigan's play *After the Dance* (1939). Both this play and Green's novel are infused with a sense of belatedness and "futility [...] the resigned expectation of unpleasant things to come" (Taylor 2008, 258; cf. Carver 2014, 63–78 on futility as a signature of the interwar period in Oxford and post-Oxford novels).

2 Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns

For a short novel of only about 150 pages, *Party Going* presents a fairly large cast of characters in a very limited spatial and temporal setting. The events of the novel take place on a single evening, from afternoon to nightfall, and in a single setting: Victoria Station and an adjacent hotel. Lacking a traditional hero and focalised from multiple perspectives, it is best described as a group novel. The group at its centre are a number of Bright Young People who have gathered at London's Victoria Station in order to travel to the South of France for a three-week holiday. The reader learns fairly late in the novel that a similar trip to France has taken place a year earlier, apparently successfully (421)¹. The group consists of Max Adey, a rich bachelor who is

¹ Unless otherwise indicated page references in brackets without further designation refer to the most widely used and recent edition of *Party Going* in Green 1993a.

paying for the trip; Miss Julia Wray, one of his female admirers; Miss Angela Crevy, an even younger acquaintance; Alex Alexander, another rather ineffectual young man; the young couple Robert and Claire Hignam; and the rather less well-off Miss Evelyn Henderson. These are joined later by Amabel, Max' girlfriend and Julia's rival for his affections, who had originally not been invited. Amabel is a celebrity, perhaps "the first character in modern fiction who is 'famous for being famous'" (Dettmar 2006, 464). Towards the end, yet another young acquaintance arrives: Richard Cumberland, known as 'Embassy Richard', who is much talked about in the novel as a gatecrasher and practical joker. A dense fog, however, has caused an interruption of all train traffic, so the party are forced to wait and to find a way of killing time.

Also stuck at the station are a number of people who have come along to say goodbye: Miss Fellowes, Claire's aunt, who falls ill and is presented as elderly until it is revealed that she is merely fifty-one (524); Miss Crevy's 'young man', Robin; two pensioned nannies who are members of the Hignams' entourage; and a number of male and female servants who have to remain in the station while their employers withdraw to a suite of hotel rooms paid for by Max. For the most part the narrative consists of ensemble scenes and conversations among the group, who look down on the masses stranded below as the fog shows no sign of lifting. Waiting in the transitory zone of what Marc Augé calls a "non-place" (2009), they have plenty of time for conversation, to bore each other and be bored in return.

There is a clear separation between interior and exterior space in the novel, as well as between vertical and horizontal space. Stranded inside their hotel, the group begin to feel increasingly threatened by the crowd outside and below them. The distance is heightened by the fact that the hotel management "had shut the steel doors down" (437, cf. 415) to prevent the crowd from entering. At one point, the crowd begins to "chant" in unison: "WE WANT TRAINS" (437); later there is fear that the crowd might have broken into the hotel. The group's anxiety about the crowd is later joined by a fear of urban terrorism – or, indeed, of impending war: "'What targets,' one by him remarked, 'what targets for a bomb'" (483). This anxiety is finally alleviated when, during the night, the fog lifts and the platforms are opened again:

Separated there they became people again and were no longer menaces as they had been in one mass when singing or all of their faces turning one way to a laugh or a scream. [...] Dear good English people [...], who never make trouble no matter how bad it is, come what may no matter. (524–525)

The party are ready to embark when the novel ends.

The main characters all belong to the 'smart set' of English upper-class youth. Their behaviour is occasionally contrasted to that of their servants, in the manner of a country-house novel – a genre to which Green would return in *Loving* (1945) – but obviously without a country-house setting. They are at first hardly individualised. They slowly gain contours for the reader mainly by means of dialogue, sometimes

also through direct characterization. The description of Max, fifty pages into the novel, reads like a cliché of a Bright Young Person:

Max was dark and excessively handsome, one of those rich young men who when still younger had been taken up by an older woman, richer than himself. [...] It was generally believed that he had lived with this rich lady [...]. It follows that, having begun so well, Max had by now become extraordinarily smart in every sense and his reputation was that he went to bed with every girl. Through being so rich he certainly had more chances. (431)

The narrator, however, disrupts this cliché by clarifying that Max and the rich lady “on no occasion had anything to do with each other” (431), pointing to the discrepancy between rumour and reality that characterises many of the relationships in the novel. He also inserts a sociological comment that further serves to place Max in the social and economic world of the novel, which is a world of fine-grained distinctions of class and money: “Money always goes to money, the poor always marry someone poorer than themselves, but it is only the rich who rule worlds such as we describe and no small part of Max’s attraction lay in his having started so well with someone even richer than himself” (431). Distinctions of wealth play a greater role than simply class: while Max and his girlfriend Amabel are extremely rich, Angela Crevy is less so, and Evelyn Henderson is “in fact the least well off of all” (464). As Evelyn reminds herself, money is what “makes [people] different” (464) from one another. It creates distinctions that can be seen, for example, in the style of interior decoration – a style that does not reflect individuality but sameness, as a marker of belonging to a particular ‘set’:

Amabel’s flat had been decorated by the same people Max had his flat done by, her furniture was like his, his walls like hers, their chair coverings were alike and even their ash trays were the same. There were in London at this time more than one hundred rooms identical with these. Even what few books there were bore the same titles and these were dummies. (456–457)

This outward uniformity of being “fashionable” relieves the characters from talking about matters of “taste”; being rich, they are not “encumbered by possessions”, which can be easily replaced. So the most highly prized value for them is in “mutual relationships”: “Rich people cling together because the less well off embarrass them and there are not so many available who are rich for one rich man who drops out to be easily replaced.” (437) These relationships need to be constantly maintained and cultivated, and for most of the time that is exactly what the characters are doing: verbally dancing with and around each other in complicated figures that are at times reminiscent of the intricate psychological complexities of a Henry James novel. But the decisions that the characters are being offered never approach the seriousness and the consequences of a novel by James, Hardy or Conrad. They are mostly just killing time. As Beci Carver points out, *Party Going* is a novel in which “[e]verything seems to be in crisis, and yet nothing is allowed to matter seriously, or definitively.” (2014, 99)

For the characters, belonging to what Thorstein Veblen famously called the “leisure class” (cf. 1953 [1899]) frees up mental energies for complex social interaction and intimate encounters. But it also exerts new pressures on individuals, who become more insecure in their roles and relationships. Time and again, characters in *Party Going* reflect on the unknowability of others, and at times of themselves. The fog outside corresponds with this epistemological barrier between people’s minds in the novel: “At the same time no one can be sure they know what others are thinking any more than anyone can say where someone is when they are asleep.” (463) This intransparency is true not only for other people’s minds but even for some of the characters themselves, who are not particularly good at introspection. Thus, for Max, “it was not until he felt sure of anything that he knew what he was thinking of. When he thought, he was only conscious of uneasy feelings and he only knew that he had been what he did not even call thinking when his feelings hurt him.” (441)

The contrast between surface and depth, exterior façade and interior insecurity, is perhaps best exemplified by the character of Amabel. Rich and beautiful, she is adored and envied by many, but also secretly despised and hated by some. Julia Wray, who tries to displace Amabel in Max’ affections, seems positively afraid of her, as is Max himself for most of the time. Amabel is a celebrity, possibly modelled to some extent on Elizabeth Ponsonby, the darling of the society pages of the 1920s (cf. Taylor 2008 for details):

Amabel had her own position in London, shop girls in Northern England knew her name and what she looked like from photographs in illustrated weekly papers, in Hyderabad the colony knew the colour of her walls. So that to be with her was for Angela 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 or, as she herself would have put it, it was being grand with grand people. (461)

Evelyn, only a few pages later, thinks that

[...] Amabel had grown to be like some beauty spot in Wales. Whether it was pretty or suited to all tastes people would come distances to see it and be satisfied when it lay before them. Amabel had been sanctified, so she thought, by constant printed references as though it was of general concern what she looked like or how beautiful she might be. But then there was no question of beauty here, Evelyn thought, because there were no features, and it could not be called poise, and then she became offensive in her thoughts of her. But Amabel had that azure glance of fame and was secure. (464)

Such comparisons of Amabel to an exotic zoo animal or a tourist attraction add a Waughesque touch of the grotesque. Because of her celebrity status, Amabel has received an auratic charge; she has become an object of fascination as well as repulsion – rather like a fashion item with a high price tag. But this glossy sheen does not seem to correspond to her inward properties or qualities. To Evelyn, Amabel appears featureless (“there were no features”) and ultimately boring.

This featurelessness and emptiness is emphasised in the novel's treatment of Amabel, but it is in varying degrees true of all the characters in the novel. Most of them, like Max, are quite incapable of self-knowledge. They treat themselves and each other as clichés. The narrator at times appears to endorse these, at other times unmasks them with painfully piercing insight. (Because of the shifting focalisation in the novel, it is often difficult to tell whether we are reading reported thought or a straightforward comment by the external narrator; more on this below.)

For this reason, the characters' subjectivity is in constant need of being confirmed and ratified by their peers. Their desire for recognition, and the constitutive lack of an inner core, are exemplified when Amabel towels herself dry after a bath and contemplates her face and body in a mirror; in fact, in this room, "[t]he walls were made of looking-glass." (479) By writing her name on the steamed-up mirror, Amabel tries, apparently without success, to connect her physical body to her personal and social identity:

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. (479)

She seems, at this moment, entirely disconnected from her body, "that pink mass". The desired connection contains an auto-erotic dimension that becomes clear in the ironic use of the expression "to meet [...] in the flesh." The attempt at self-observation, perhaps self-knowledge ("to look at her eyes in the A her name began with") fails because the mirror image disappears when steam or the observer's own breath touches the mirror. In the next paragraph, she wipes the mirror to look at "all her face", admire her beauty and to experience a strange split between the self as both subject and object of desire:

She always thought [her face] more beautiful than anything she had ever seen, and when she looked at herself it was as though the two of them would never meet again, it was to bid farewell; and at the last she always smiled, and she did so this time as it was clouding over, tenderly smiled as you might say good-bye, my darling darling. (479)

She then proceeds to dry the rest of her body in an elaborate, self-loving series of caresses. Finally:

She stood out as though so much health, such abundance and happiness should have never clothes to hide it. Indeed she looked as though she were alone in the world she was so good, and so good that she looked mild, which she was not. (480)

The narrator's terse comment at the end breaks the narcissistic mould of self-love in the form of self-doubling (visualized in the text by the doubling of the word "darling").

Here, self-mirroring has taken the place of introspection – a trade-off between inside and outside, an externalised kind of self-knowledge that remains confined to looks, to the body as a façade that conceals rather than reveals a person’s true nature. In this case, it conceals the fact that Amabel is anything but “mild” in her relationships but rather egotistical and calculating. Her name is part of this game, since its Latin root means ‘lovable.’ While others may fall in love with her, she seems only capable of loving herself. Yet the core self-identity has lost stability because of the manifold simultaneous possibilities of what William James calls “spiritual, material, and social selves” in modernity (2007 [1890], 333). The range of options and freedom of choice brought about by wealth and leisure lead to insecurity and boredom rather than an assertive sense of stable selfhood. Paradoxically, material comfort generates new forms of discomfort and emotional stress. In the case of Julia, this anxiety is alleviated by a superstitious belief in charms: objects from childhood such as a spinning top. Childish, immature behaviour is a typical trait of these semi-adolescent characters; in today’s terminology, they could be said to suffer from ‘affluenza’ (cf. de Graaf et al. 2001).

But not only in representing social interaction among the main characters does the novel show a keen awareness of differences (of money, of experience, age and gender). Distinctions of class and of speech play an important role also in their interactions – or lack thereof – with the novel’s other characters. Pretending to be someone or something else is a related concern. Worth mentioning in this respect is the character of Embassy Richard, whose exploits are being discussed long before he actually shows up in person at the hotel (391–392). The character is named after the Embassy Club in Old Bond Street, a celebrated haunt of the Bright Young People. Another case in point is the unnamed “rough-looking customer” (393) who assists Miss Fellowes when she falls ill after having a drink in the station bar. He is later taken to be the hotel detective but arouses suspicion because he changes his speech patterns, switching between “Brummagem” and “educated accents” (477). Robert Hignam sends him down to the station to check on Julia’s luggage, but the hotel management does not allow anyone to enter or exit, so he is stuck in a downstairs lobby; finally he makes his escape through a window. While this unnamed character is ‘passing’ between classes, speech patterns and spaces, Miss Fellowes is immobilised in a transitory, dream-like zone between life and death.²

In the station, the servants also have to wait, missing their tea. Julia’s manservant, Thomson, and Max’s servant Edwards have a conversation that underlines their difference from their employers. When Thomson manages to get a girl to kiss him, he

² See Kermode 1979, 5–20 for an interpretation of the stranger in *Party Going* as a Hermes figure – a deliberately esoteric allegorical reading that, Kermode admits (17), lacks probability in the context of Green’s narrative strategies, which resist such hermetic hermeneutics.

contrasts her willingness to give “a bit of comfort” with the lack of “fellow feeling” in the upper classes (473), using quite drastic words to describe them:

‘No, it’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, not like some little bitches I could name,’ he darkly said, looking up and over to where their hotel room would be. (473–474)

If *Party Going* is, in part, a (bleak) comedy of manners, it is also a trenchant analysis of the social and personal barriers that make people desire, and withhold, “fellow feeling” from others. As Max ruminates in a later passage, being rich means living and dying comfortably, but without “community singing” and “fellow feeling” (493) – repeating the words used earlier by the manservant Thomson. Without offering any solutions, political or otherwise, *Party Going* depicts a consumerist society physically and spiritually stuck, lacking compassion and imagination, caught up in its own “dull antagonism” (493), its distinctions and divisions of class, gender, education, and money. *Party Going* is a novel about mobility and immobility: movement and the lack thereof, about changing places and staying put, about activity and passivity, stasis and change. It is also about social distinctions and divisions, “the half-tones of class” (Green 2000 [1940], 42) and about the effects of wealth and comfort on the selves and social lives of rich people.

3 Aesthetics: Narrative and Literary Strategies

Party Going explores its key topics of mobility and immobility less through telling a story in the conventional manner than through evoking an atmosphere. Although very little happens in terms of external events, there is a close, almost microscopic attention to detail and nuances of social interaction. The narrative traces the characters’ conversations and the minutiae of their behaviour, but this depiction does not aim at a representation of reality modelled on psychological realism (as, for instance, in the novels of Jane Austen or Henry James), or on the modernist innovation of interior monologue (as in ↗ 7 James Joyce, *Ulysses* or ↗ 9 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*). Rather, it is expressed in a combination of dialogue with flashes of observation by a rather terse, at times cryptic heterodiegetic narrator; Green frequently pointed to William Faulkner as a formative influence on his writing. Focalisation varies between zero, internal, and external. This technique is similar to Samuel Beckett’s experiments with narrative in *Murphy* (1938) and the 1950s trilogy (↗ 12 Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*). It also anticipates the French *nouveau roman* in its ‘objectifying’ focus on interpersonal relationships, showing character “from the outside” (Dettmar 2006, 465); but it is important to point out that Green

had already developed this technique in his two novels of the 1920s, *Blindness* and *Living*.

As usual in Green's writing, there is very little exposition or explanation. Stylistically, the novel combines realistic dialogue with passages of narrative, often in free indirect discourse. Sometimes these moments of description or reported thought are extended into vignettes (though consistently less lyrical than in *Living*) or distanced observations characterised by an acerbic wit. These stand in some contrast to the characters' often inflated, narcissistic visions of themselves, and also to their trivial conversations. The shallowness which is evoked through precisely observed speech patterns is a superficial veneer; underneath it there is, as in T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (1925), a sense of emptiness and approaching doom – fear of loss, of isolation, of death, and of a revolution brought about by the anonymous 'mass'.

Probably the best way to explain Green's narrative technique in *Party Going* is to point to the impact of cinema, in particular to Eisenstein's use of montage, which tells a story through juxtaposing often disparate images in quick succession, generating insights that flash upon the viewer's mind and that can be far more effective than verbal analysis or description. The violence of moving rapidly from one image or scene to the next is an effect shared by many 'party novels' of the 1920s and 1930s (a term coined by Julian Maclaren-Ross; cf. Taylor 2008, 252–253), but it is consciously reflected upon by Green in a letter to his friend Nevill Coghill in the late 1920s, while at work on his novel *Living* (1929): "I think you will like the book I am on now. It's written in a very condensed kind of way in short paragraphs, hardly ever much longer than 1½ to 2 printed pages and often very much shorter. A kind of very disconnected cinema film" (in Taylor 2008, 253; cf. Holmesland 1985, 15–17 for a discussion of Green's indebtedness to Eisenstein).

In *Party Going*, this literary "cinema film" is realised as an uninterrupted flow of narrative, only rarely segmented by a space between paragraphs but without chapter breaks. Moreover, there is a close match between story time and discourse time: events are unfolded in the narrative as they occur. Especially at the beginning, the narrator stresses that events happen simultaneously as the narrative shifts from one scene to the next: the word "meantime" (385, 390, 394) is a repeated connective between passages. This simultaneity may be seen as another cinematic effect in the novel. Yet another is the camera-like "perspective and distance" that "has displaced the traditional, situated narrator" (Hentea 2014a, 106) and that can range from a close-up to a wide-angle "seven thousand feet" above ground level (388).

Through withholding and delaying information, as well as shifting narrative perspective, Green's filmic narrative engages and frustrates the reader who seeks to establish coherence. On the semantic level, Green employs a range of images, metaphors and symbols, offering (at times conflicting and disparate) sense-making strategies in a densely woven pattern that invites but ultimately resists interpretation (cf. Taylor 2008, 268). The symbols (such as fog or birds; see below) are polyvalent in meaning, so that the sense-making strategies that are offered fail to add up to a single

coherent picture. For the characters as well as for the narrator, the modern world is not transparent or self-explanatory. Available schemata, patterns or clichés are interposed between the subjects and objects of knowledge; thus reality is mediated by sometimes conflicting and incoherent images. Moreover, fictions intervene between the mind and the world, so that human “hearts [...] make up what they [do] not like into other things” – a constant activity of metaphor that helps to make difficult circumstances “endurable.” (497) Most significantly, the narrator offers no overarching truth by which those incoherent patterns could be evaluated or checked for correctness. Unlike, for example, the ‘mythical method’ that T. S. Eliot (2005 [1923]) detected in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (↗ 7 James Joyce, *Ulysses*) as a principle to impose order on the chaos of everyday life, *Party Going* has no underlying ordering principle but traces a shifting cluster of images that make (some) sense of reality in various limited ways.³ The narrative ‘camera’ has no privileged access to this reality, no omniscience in the conventional sense.

The narrator’s limited insight fits well with the theme of unknowability; it is also in line with Green’s convictions about the art of the novel: “The conventional approach by a novelist in which he presumes to know all about his characters, what they are feeling and thinking at any moment, seems to me as dead as the Dodo”, he writes in 1952, adding that this was a long-held view of his (Green 1993b, 164, cf. 139 for a similar statement from 1950). There is a distance between events and their verbal reconfiguration: “[T]he moment anything happens which is worth while [...] one goes over it verbally after, and [...] in going over it one adds favourable interpretations, favourable to oneself, which colour and falsify the account one gives” (1993b, 139). In this mixture of Wordsworthian romanticism and Nietzschean disillusionment,⁴ Green’s poetics regards representations of reality as invariably affected by processes of selection and filtering that “colour and falsify” any account – including that of the narrator in a novel.

The most coherent symbol of this limited knowledge is the London fog. “Fog” is the novel’s first word. The opening sentence offers a striking image of fog as an agent in its own right that transforms mobility into immobility. It causes a bird to crash into a building and fall to its death: “Fog was so dense, bird that had been disturbed went flat into a balustrade and slowly fell, dead, at her feet” (384). This first sentence also contains another immediately noticeable stylistic particularity of Green’s, although this is less in evidence in the remainder of *Party Going* than in his earlier work: the use of nouns without articles. “Fog was so dense”, “bird [...] went [.]” This abbreviates and condenses sentences but also leaves nouns or noun phrases in a curious condition of being undefined, neither definite nor indefinite. Arguably, it slows down the reading

³ Kermode (1979, 5–20), however, attempts to distinguish between a latent and a manifest sense in *Party Going* and proposes a partial mythological reading based on the Greek god Hermes.

⁴ I owe this observation to Gero Gutzzeit.

process because of the deviation from ordinary language. Marius Hentea refers to this as “the amputation of language” (2014b, 112). It also emphasises the many verbs of movement which pepper the novel’s first page: “went”, “fell”, “hurried”, “penetrated”, “stepped out”, “crossed her path”, “shuttled past”, “to get to where they were going”: in short, “all that movement” (384). One might conclude from this that the emphasis in *Party Going* is on events, especially events of movement, rather than on the agents who do things or to whom something happens. Particularly, human beings as the traditional subject of history, or at least of stories, are being decentred in this process; they appear less defined than usual. The human agent in this first sentence (“at her feet”) is Miss Fellowes, who picks up the dead bird which the narrator then calls “her dead pigeon” (384), washes it and wraps it in a parcel, for no explicable reason. After her breakdown, she is confined to a bed in the hotel – confined, that is, to inaction, suffering, and bad dreams. In contrast to “all that movement”, then, there is stasis and a sense of death and decay. (But there is also some comedy when she recovers: “She looked as if she had been travelling” [522]). Beginning with the dead pigeon, images of death recur throughout the novel, from the “gravestone luggage” piled up in the station (497) to the image of “airmen, in danger of running fatally into earth” (482) or the description of silence falling “with lifeless wings” (494).

Fog as one of the major symbols in the novel connects impossibility of movement with impenetrability of the visual field. The fog is an epistemological as well as physical obstacle. It is, quite literally, deathly – since it causes the pigeon’s death – and a harbinger of impending doom. It also resists a univocal interpretation. A “dark flood” (388), it is even at one point assigned a religious connotation of divine punishment. For Julia, who decides to walk to the station rather than putting herself at the mercy of congested city traffic, the fog also erases social distinctions and identities:

As she stepped out into this darkness of fog above and left warm rooms with bells and servants and her uncle who was one of Mr Roberts’ directors – a rich important man – she lost her name and was all at once anonymous: if it had not been for her rich coat she might have been any typist making her way home. (388)

Like death, fog is a great leveller. This early scene in the novel prepares for the later images of the “mass” of people united by the fog into a terrifying Leviathan.

The fog also establishes an important element of geographical and historical specificity: it is a defining marker of industrialised London from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century and beyond. On one of its many levels, *Party Going* can thus be read, like Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), as a London novel, in which the city is more than a mere setting but an agent in its own right or even the novel’s actual protagonist. In a highly intertextual moment, the opening harks back to Charles Dickens’s famous scene-setting evocation of the London fog in *Bleak House* (1852–1853), and also to the frequent use of fog as a symbol of obscurity and the threat of crime or terrorism in late Victorian and Edwardian fiction, from the *Sherlock Holmes* stories

(1891–1927) to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907). Fog hints at hidden truths 'behind the veil' (cf. Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam*, section LVI; cf. Moretti 2013, 101–144 for a trenchant analysis of the "inherent vagueness" of the Victorian middle class and its impact on writing as fog, as "camouflage"). But Green's opening is truncated in a kind of telegraphic shorthand that highlights the effects of fog rather than engaging in an elaborate verbal description in the style of a weather report (cf. the famous opening of Robert Musil's *Man without Qualities*). Green's fog invites and resists an allegorical interpretation. Is it a symbol of the inability to see the world as it really is – or is it just bad weather? Making invisible, fog is illegible.

Birds are another key symbol in the novel, recurring in various guises. Like the dead bird of the beginning, they also invite allegorical reading but do not offer sufficient clues for a coherent interpretation. For example, Julia, while walking to the station, sees "three seagulls" (391) which remind her of "the sea they were to cross that evening"; later, she falsely remembers "two birds", and "now she forgot they were sea-gulls and thought they had been doves and so was comforted" (473), probably because doves (especially turtle-doves) are conventional symbols of love and faithful attachment, comforting to think about in her unsuccessful attempts to wrench Max away from Amabel. This 'mistake' also shows how the novel exposes the characters' acts of fiction-making in the process of recollection: seeking to alleviate their discomfort, they perceive their reality according to pre-established frames or schemata, while memory plays tricks on them. Similarly, the readers' memory and interpretative frameworks are constantly challenged by the narrative.

Another pervasive aesthetic strategy in *Party Going* is the description of human beings or man-made artefacts in terms of animals or plants. Such comparisons can stress the closeness as well as distance between the human and the natural world. People, in this vein, can be like "water-beetles" (395) or "ivy leaves" (497) or "like sheep herded to be fold-driven" (524); women can be "like camels" (494), "like cats" (485, cf. 520 "like a cat that has just had its mouse") or "like delicate plants" (520); bodies like "swollen bamboos" (407, cf. 483) or "tailor's dummies" (407, cf. 483). In one of Max's cryptic remarks, Embassy Richard is compared to a bird: "If he was a bird [...] he would not last long" (417). When Amabel falls asleep on Max's shoulder, her breathing is compared to "seagulls settled on the water cock[ing] over gentle waves" (511–512). Max, the group's centre of attention, is compared to "some sort of a Queen Bee" (526).

At times, the narrator expresses self-consciousness about the limited explanatory purchase of his (or the characters') comparisons and metaphors. Meeting at the station, the characters are "at once engulfed in swarming ponds of humanity" (395). This rather hackneyed metaphor is then extended and elaborated, giving free rein to the associative imagination but also unfolding the absurdity of such comparisons:

Like two lilies in a pond, romantically part of it but infinitely remote, surrounded, supported, floating in it if you will, but projected by being different on to another plane, though there was so much water you could not see these flowers or were liable to miss them, stood Miss Crevy and her young man [...] and Angela coveted for her looks by all those water beetles if you like, by those people standing round. (395)

The contingent, arbitrary character of these analogies between people, water lilies and water beetles is highlighted by the interjections “if you will” and “if you like”, and its lack of fit is stressed by the subclause “though there was so much water you could not see these flowers or were liable to miss them”. Again, the inability to see, or to see anything correctly, is underlined – as is the necessity of finding more or less fitting ‘objective correlatives’ for human experience in order to make sense of it (for an extended discussion of the limitations of visuality in Green’s early novel *Blindness*, see Tripp 2014). “If”, as the narrator continues, “that swarm of people could be likened to a pond for her lily then you could not see her like, and certainly not her kind, anywhere about her, nor was her likeness mirrored in their faces” (395–396). Here the language, in the etymological closeness between ‘likeness’ as analogy and ‘likeness’ as portrait, reveals an underlying aesthetic principle of limited accuracy in creating (self-) images for the characters by means of ‘likening’ them to other objects or orders of being – or, in the case of Amabel’s mirror scene, of an imperfect fit, a lack of identity between body and body-image, *ego* and *imago*, person and name. Perhaps this can also be read as a token of an ontological insecurity – the loss of a firm and stable grounding of humanity in the ‘order of things’ – that has often been viewed as a key feature of Western modernism in various guises, and that Green’s unstable metaphors highlight and explore.

The contingency of metaphors and/as clichés is also expressed by means of repetition, as when the same image recurs at a later point in the text. For example, the narrator notes that “it might all have looked to Mr Roberts, ensconced in his office away above, like November sun striking through mist rising off water” (396). Much later, the same comparison appears to occur to Julia: “it did seem like November sun striking through mist rising off water” (430). At this point, the arbitrariness of this image is emphasised by adding alternatives:

Or, so she thought, like those illustrations you saw in weekly papers, of corpuscles in blood, for here and there a narrow stream of people shoved and moved in lines three deep and where they did this they were like veins. She wondered if this were what you saw when you stood on your wedding day, a Queen, on your balcony looking at subjects massed below. (430)

Similarly, Robert Hignam’s image of the crowd as “a store of tailors’ dummies, water heated” or “soft, swollen bamboos in groves” (407) recurs when the unnamed pseudo-detective manages to escape from the hotel: “To push through this crowd was like trying to get through bamboo or artichokes grown thick together or thousands of tailors’ dummies stored warm on a warehouse floor” (483) – a highly unlikely coinci-

dence unless one assumes that Green makes purposeful use of such repetition, possibly to reflect on the narrator's limited creativity, to expose the artificiality of the novel's imagery, or to defamiliarize the reading experience.

The self-conscious literariness of the narrator's imagery may be related to some tendencies in modernist poetry, most notably T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who in turn were influenced by French symbolism and surrealism. The surreal nature of some of the narrator's images may be a parody of imagist poetry and its tendency to combine, in a single image, several conflicting registers (cf. Iser 1966). Indeed, Green's comparisons of the crowd to organic matter are reminiscent of Pound's famous poem "In a Station of the Metro", in which "[t]he apparition of these faces in the crowd" is juxtaposed and associated with "[p]etals on a wet, black bough." (Pound [1913] 2000, 23)⁵ In *Party Going*, this defamiliarization of comparison and perspective, in combination with a depersonalizing and dehumanizing tendency, is present in several extended comparisons, but they are exposed as derivative clichés – taken from the "weekly papers", from romantic reading ("lilies in a pond") or even colonial fiction (401), as when Alex compares himself to the Zulu character Umslopogaas from Henry Rider Haggard's *Nada the Lily* (1892). Defamiliarization and dehumanization are most apparent when Julia watches the crowd from above: "She thought how strange it was when hundreds of people turned their heads all in one direction, their faces so much lighter than their dark hats, lozenges, lozenges, lozenges" (437). This sight appears "terrifying" to her (437). The same image recurs later on when Max and Julia look down "on thousands of Smiths, thousands of Alberts, hundreds of Marys, woven tight as any office carpet [...] lightening the dark mass with their pale lozenged faces" (466).

In these passages, *Party Going* seems to come close to the distanced, scientific attitude towards life that has often been viewed as a key quality of modern(ist) avant-garde literature, from Gustave Flaubert to Alberto Moravia, identified as early as 1925 in Ortega y Gasset's essay "La deshumanización del arte". Modernist art, in this view, abandons the human form and the human perspective; art and metaphor, according to Ortega y Gasset, constitute a "triumph against the human" (*triunfo sobre lo humano*, 1969, 366). But it is important to understand that, for Green, life and living are core values, and the goal of art is "to create life, of a kind, in the reader" (1993b, 137); far from celebrating dehumanization in the manner of the Italian futurists, for instance, Green employs it for the critical aim of showing the limits as well as the possibilities of the human imagination in making sense of the world.⁶ As crowds are dehumanized

⁵ For convenience's sake I have ignored the spaces between groups of words inserted by Pound in the poem's first printing.

⁶ Here I disagree with Hentea, who argues that the mass is 'humanized' by being divided "into a number of frustrated individuals" (2014a, 98); in the passage he discusses (497), they are consistently likened to "ruins". Hentea avoids the term 'humanization' in his discussion of the same passage in 2014b, 40.

into patterns, natural events are in their turn anthropomorphized, as when the narrator compares nightfall and the cold to a woman with “long hair”, and her “curls” to “coils” (495) that threaten to strangle those having to wait outside. There is an almost constant blending of concepts in such comparisons between human, natural and technological attributes – showing the extent to which the perception of reality carries imaginary and fictional charges. In the absence of an overarching system of order, the imagination appears to run wild. Such a mobility of images contrasts sharply with the immobility of the situation of waiting (yet another parallel between *Party Going* and Beckett, especially *Waiting for Godot*, as well as later experimental novels such as Brigid Brophy’s *In Transit*).

One structural feature of the novel that has not been touched upon so far is its analogy to music and dance. If *Party Going* has a principle of composition, it is to be found in its analogy to a musical sonata, exploring a limited set of themes with a series of variations in a sequence of movements. The opening section of the novel (384–402) could be viewed as the first movement of a sonata or a symphony. Another musical parallel can be found in dance: the elaborate way in which the connections and separations between characters are choreographed resembles a ballet. Like many modernist writers, Green was fascinated especially by Diaghilev, Massine and the *Ballets Russes*, whose spectacular performances were extremely inspirational for many artists of the interwar years. Already in an early review of the novel, David Garnett compared the structural design of *Party Going* to *Les Sylphides* (Garnett 1939, 489; see also Russell 1960, 105; cf. Jones 2013 for a general assessment of modernist literature and dance).

4 Reception and Theoretical Perspectives

Henry Green has never been popular, nor has he received excessive attention from academic critics. Since the 1990s, however, there are indications of a resurgence of interest in his work. Most of his novels are back in print with mass-market paperback publishers (Penguin, Vintage, Harvill); a volume of ‘uncollected writings’ was edited in the early 1990s (*Surviving. The Uncollected Writings of Henry Green*, 1993), and a biography published in 2000 (Treglown 2000). A critical edition of his works still remains a *desideratum*.

Green’s early critical reception focused on stylistic characteristics, viewing Green as a modernist writer experimenting with narrative form and language, but also as a late inheritor of English aestheticism (Melchiori 1956, 191, 199). In formalist readings, Green is frequently said to place ‘style’ over ‘substance’ and to move from ‘history’ towards ‘abstraction’ (Gorra 1990, 23). The emphasis on technique and stylistic experimentation (cf. Gibson 1984) raises the question of social and political concerns in Green’s work, which have been addressed by critics such as Patrick Swinden (1984)

and Andrzej Gasiorek (1995). The dichotomy between readings of Green as a detached aesthete or a politically and morally committed writer has led to mutually exclusive interpretations. This impasse has arguably made Green difficult to ‘place’ in the canon of modernist literature.

More recent approaches, reflecting more general trends in modernist studies (see Mao and Walkowitz 2008), attempt to combine formal and contextual perspectives and to read Green in the expanded contexts of English, European and American modernism. For example, Peter Hitchcock suggests that Green’s “identification with the English working classes” is “a quintessentially modernist displacement” (1994, 16), discussing the question of Green’s particular style and class identity. Articles and books by Benjamin Kohlmann (2009) and Marius Hentea (2014a, 2014b) help to restore the literary, social and cultural contexts of Green’s early novels “such as 1920s book publishing, Birmingham working-class culture or the history of disability brought on by war” (Hentea 2014b, 3). But Hentea, in the most significant recent study of Green’s work, is certainly right to emphasize that “our existing critical categories [such as realism, experimentalism, or social commitment] do not provide a space to position Green” (2014b, 2). Perhaps this explains why interest in Green has revived since the 1990s, as the study of modernist fiction has expanded beyond the more traditional canon of Joyce, Woolf, and Lawrence. Green poses a challenge also to the conventional periodization of modernism, as a “critical figure between modernism and postwar [and, arguably, earlier forms of] realism” (Hentea 2014b, 3). As a representative of the second generation of modernist writers, Green is now discussed in connection with competing categories of periodization such as ‘intermodernism’, ‘late modernism’ and ‘limit modernism’ (see Bluemel 2009; Miller 1999; Hentea 2014b). Partly realist, partly (high) modernist, and partly anticipating emergent postmodernist forms of narration, what Hentea calls Green’s “experimental realism” (2014b, 6) defies categorization – and invites readers and critics to reassess the foundations for their categories.

Party Going in particular invites a range of perspectives for contextualization and interpretation according to these new lights. Jeremy Treglown considers *Party Going* the first English novel of World War II, as it describes a world of affluence and leisure about to be swept away by uncertainty and chaos (2000, 121). This is not very convincing, since the novel was conceived and written before the outbreak of war. An alternative reading is to see it as an artistic response to the social and economic changes and pressures of the 1920s and 1930s: the decline of the English aristocracy (cf. Cannadine 1999) and the increasing restlessness of the underprivileged during the Great Depression (for readings of *Party Going* as an anticipation of war, see e.g. Cunningham 1993; Beer 2007). Combining realist, modernist and to some extent postmodernist techniques, *Party Going* shares with the work of Samuel Beckett the decentring of narrative and authorial authority, as well as the theme of waiting for something to happen. This presentation of “the thinning out of thin moments” in a style approaching “syntactical vertigo” (Carver 2014, 97) can be meaningfully discussed

in the general context of Western modernism as well as in the more concrete English setting of ‘Oxonian futility’ (cf. Taylor 2008).

Beyond the narrower confines of modernist studies, Green still awaits discovery by a wider readership.⁷ Gillian Beer, amongst others, has praised *Party Going* for its “marvellously devious description of the moment-by-moment waverings of emotion” and its “bold narrative shape” (2007, 79–80). Another factor that should not be underestimated is Green’s “wholly unexpected” ability to create moments of comedy (Hentea 2014b, 130). Perhaps the most significant English novelist of the 1930s next to Virginia Woolf, Henry Green was and is much admired by fellow writers. He remains to be rediscovered not only as a stylistic innovator and a keen observer of class in Britain but above all as a master of prose as “a gathering web of insinuations” that can “draw tears out of the stone” (Green 2000 [1940], 55).

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⁷ *Party Going* has been translated into several languages, including Swedish (1984), German (1992), Argentinian Spanish (2005), and Italian (2006). Van Steenberg (2013) offers an interesting analysis from the point of view of translation studies.

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