

Precarious Bodies: Presence and Absence in Henry Green's *Party Going* and *Nothing*

Tom Lewek, 24 May 2016

In his interview with Terry Southern for the summer 1958 issue of *The Paris Review*, Henry Green, responding to a question about omission in his novels, responds, “I suppose the more you leave out, the more you highlight what you leave in” (*Paris Review*). This relationship between “highlight” and “omission” does seem relevant for a novelist whose style eventually relied primarily on dialogue and only featured sporadic narrative or description. It also serves as a good point of departure for considering highlight and omission, or the more accurate terms of presence and absence, as concepts that operate within his novels. In *Party Going* and *Nothing*, Green explores both concepts through meditations on bodies and the anxieties they induce in his characters. Before going further, it would be helpful to clarify what exactly presence and absence mean in this context. Presence indicates a multiplicity of bodies, or the illusion of a multiplicity of bodies, that induces anxiety. In *Party Going*, this concept appears relatively straightforward as a crowd comprised of working and middle class commuters becomes a menacing other to a group of wealthy travelers. In *Nothing*, however, presence operates in subtler, more complex ways through Green's visual multiplication of Jane Weatherby in mirrors—ultimately, her bodies, whether physical or envisioned, highlight anxieties related to manipulation and agency. Absence, meanwhile, indicates the sequestering of bodies that themselves induce anxiety through their disabilities. The sick and aging Miss Fellowes in *Party Going* falls into this category, as does the diabetic Arthur Morris and, eventually, John Pomfret in *Nothing*. In this context, absence does not imply that the respective novels do not speak of these disabled bodies. They do, but they do so obliquely and via characters who routinely isolate disability to mitigate unease about aging and illness. Indeed, as Marius Hentea has argued, “the

prosthetic gods of the modern era were in full evidence in Green's fiction from the start, and his narrative form and style contributed to a fuller engagement with the implications of disability" (99). Thus, Green's free indirect style in *Party Going* accentuates the drive of the travelers to sequester the fevered Miss Fellowes, and his dialogue in *Nothing* demonstrates how characters only allude to the diabetic Arthur Morris in limited ways.

This connection between absence and the disabled body draws on work done in disability studies, specifically David T. Mitchell's concept of "narrative prosthesis." Though the details of this concept require some unpacking, Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland Thompson summarize it succinctly when they write that much literature "depend[s] on disabled figures to introduce conflict, initiate difference, and expedite resolution" (5). This essay will focus primarily on the initiation of difference and draw on the related aspects of Mitchell's work. As he claims in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, "the arrival of narrative must be attended by the eruption of the anomalous" (22). Or, put another way, narrative requires difference. Moreover, "disability cannot be accommodated in the ranks of the norm(als), and thus there are two options for dealing with the difference that drives the story's plot: a disability is either left behind or punished for its lack of conformity" (23). Green's novels follow the first option: they leave behind disability through absence and, in the process, create difference through representations of presence. While both presence and absence in *Party Going* and *Nothing* focus on bodies and induce anxiety, disability, following Mitchell's theory, draws the distinction between the two concepts.

In *Party Going*, the presence and absence binary operates in the confined setting of a train station and its adjacent hotel. While the commuting masses, unable to travel due to thick London fog, become the presence, Miss Fellowes, sequestered in her own hotel room due to illness, becomes the absence. For the members of the wealthy traveling party, however, both

parts of this binary articulate unspoken anxieties. The masses constrain and menace them. That a novel composed between 1931 and 1938 makes this connection is no accident. As Marina Mackay has argued, British late modernist novels, reflecting the anxieties of impending or current warfare, tend to present London and its masses in dystopian ways. Meanwhile, Miss Fellowes not only constrains them but also becomes an ill and aging body foreign to this group of bright young things. If Green's characters express a discomfort with the crowd as an emblem of constraint or a harbinger of violence, then they express an equal discomfort with Miss Fellowes's sickness as bodily otherness. In this sense, both presence and absence join together in *Party Going* to create an overarching mood of unease.

As Green establishes this setting, he also introduces a gradually swelling crowd. Moving from the congested, fog-down-to-the-ground streets of London, he enters the station:

Inside, dolled up in his top hat, the station master came out under that huge vault of green he called his roof, smelled fog which disabled all his trains, looked about at fog-coloured people, his travelers who scurried though now and again they stood swaying and he thought that the air, his atmosphere, was wonderfully clear considering, although everyone did seem smudged by fog. And how was he going to find Miss Julia Wray he asked, whom he did not know by sight, and when by rights he should be in his office. (392)

Here, the station master's brief survey of the scene mixes resolve with admission. Though "his atmosphere" seems "wonderfully clear," he must admit that his travelers—"the fog-coloured people," those "smudged by fog"—have begun to form a "swaying mass." No longer are they individuals, scurrying through the station on their respective ways. Furthermore, his confusion with regards to finding Julia Wray highlights how this congested situation will soon produce confusion and frustration for the party of travelers. In fact, when the core of the party finally

arrives at the station, Green comments on the crowd's growth: "So now at last all of this party is in one place, and, even if they have not yet all of them come across each other, their baggage is collected in the Registration Hall. Where, earlier, hundreds had made their way to this station thousands were coming in now, it was the end of a day for them, the beginning of a time for our party" (402). The explicit third person omniscient narration lends this passage a sense of knowingness. By alluding to the current dispersal of the party but also the centrality of their baggage, it also provides a sense of prolepsis. The combination of the two then propels Green into the observation that where there had once been hundreds there are now thousands. This juxtaposition between a knowing and proleptic view of the travelers and the description of a swelling crowd suggests the importance of the relationship between the two groups. Meanwhile, Green's representation of the crowd as working or middle class—"it was the end of the day for them," with "day" meaning "work day"—grants it an otherness when compared to the novel's leisure class travelers.

Later, the growing crowd assumes a new, more menacing nature from the vantage point of the hotel room of the wealthy and womanizing Max Adey. Viewed from this perspective, the crowd sways (Green repeatedly uses this adjective) and emits a "continuous murmur" of "WE WANT TRAINS, WE WANT TRAINS" (437). In other words, the individuals of the crowd coalesce to develop an omnipresent murmur more forceful than expected, and the capital letters highlight this. This passage also draws an early portrait of the crowd as an impinging presence. Using a free indirect style to present the thoughts of Julia Wray, Green continues:

Also that raw air came in, harsh with fog and from somewhere a smell of cooking, there was a shriek from somewhere in the crowd, it was all on a vast scale and not far above her was that vault of glass which was blue now instead of green, now that she was closer

to it. She had forgotten what it was to be outside, what it smelled like, and she had not realized what this crowd was, just seeing it through glass. (437)

New sensory experiences bring about a new understanding of the crowd. Here, “raw air...harsh with fog” confronts touch, cooking food confronts smell, and “a shriek” confronts hearing. These sensations, combined with Julia’s higher vantage point in the hotel (where she recognizes that the glass window is blue, not green), allow her to realize the all-encompassing nature of the crowd whereas, previously, sight alone, mediated through glass, had not. Green also emphasizes its vast and amorphous qualities by repeating “somewhere” and thereby implying that pinpointing anything—for example, a smell or sound—in this swaying mass remains difficult. And yet Julia, and ultimately Green, cannot help but linger on its scope and nature:

It went on chanting WE WANT TRAINS, WE WANT TRAINS from that one section which surged to and fro and again the same woman shrieked, two or three men were shouting against the chant but she could not distinguish words. 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)

If Julia perceives the amorphous mass of the crowd through multiple sensory avenues in the previous quotation, then she perceives its repetitive qualities here. The “WE WANT TRAINS, WE WANT TRAINS” chant continues, voices emit difficult-to-distinguish sounds, and the mass subsumes the individuals that comprise it. The “lozenges, lozenges, lozenges” ellipsis that ends this passage accentuates this repetition, even as it transforms faces into standardized geometric shapes. Green, then, not only confirms the crowd as presence but also represents it as bodies that have become uniform.

Returning to the vantage point of Max’s room, Green finds the crowd simultaneously commonplace, exotic, and subtly menacing. Notice, for example, the turn from one metaphor to

another here: “Looking down then on thousands of Smiths, thousands of Alberts, hundreds of Marys, woven tight as any office carpet or, more elegantly made, the holy Kaaba soon to set out for Mecca” (466). In one respect, the most run-of-the-mill English names make up the crowd and form something no more interesting than a tightly woven “office carpet.” In another respect, however, it is equivalent to an orientalized other. At first glance, the juxtaposition of Smiths, Alberts, and Marys and office carpet with “the holy Kabaa” seems contradictory. Yet, for the privileged members of the traveling party, the commonplace nature of the individuals who comprise the crowd constitutes their exoticness. More interesting, however, is Julia’s misreading of the crowd as boisterous but friendly:

If they had been angry individually at first at the delay, and at not being able to get in or out, 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.  
(467)

While the melodious voices of the Welshmen seem to signal the crowd’s turn from anger to good humor, they actually disguise a violent tale. It remains menacing even when it seems harmless and inviting.

To confirm this menace, Green revisits Max’s room once more to demonstrate the manner in which the presence of the masses induces anxieties for the traveling party. That the novel sets so many of its extended explorations of the crowd from the perspective of this room is no mistake. Indeed, Max, by renting the rooms, removes the entire party from the crowd—through this action, Green establishes the crowd/party and exterior/interior binaries.

His room, therefore, becomes an opportune setting for examining how the exterior crowd affects the interior party:

Although all those windows had been shut there was a continual dull roar came through them from the outside, and this noise sat upon those within like clouds upon a mountain so that they were obscured and levelled and, as though they had been airmen, in danger of running fatally in to earth. Clouds also, if they are banked up, will so occupy the sky as to dwarf what is beneath and this low roar, which was only conversation in that multitude without, lay over them in such a pall, like night coming on and there is no light when one must see, that these people here were obscured by it and were dimmed into anxious Roman numerals. (481-482)

Here, the “dull roar” becomes the metonym for “that multitude” that sits outside and surrounds. Connecting it to “clouds upon a mountain,” Green echoes the fog external to the station and its environs, suggesting that the crowd can affect subjects as much as the weather. The anxiety in this passage, though, stems from the ability of the clouds to efface. In fact, the occupants of the hotel become “obscured and levelled” by the roar; they are “dimmed into anxious Roman numerals,” implying a loss of personality. The clouds (and therefore the roar and the crowd) can also invert perspective: they can “dwarf” otherwise lofty objects like mountains. In this context, Alex’s frustration about the travel delay articulates a larger sense of unease: “half the suburbs are stranded down below. As things are now, and with the government we have to-day, don’t laugh, it’s a serious thing, they are bound to evacuate them before they run our boat train” (514). The working and middle class bodies in the crowd confront the party’s presumptions of individuality and privilege.

While the crowd, and its attendant anxieties, highlights the sensibilities of Julia, Max, Alex, and others in the traveling party, it also articulates historical anxieties about war.

Published in September 1939, *Party Going* emphasizes what Marina Mackay has labelled the “corporeal turn” in late British modernism, which holds that, in the context of the Second World War, “the mere existence of other people somehow endangers one’s own” (1609, 1610). In “Is Your Journey Really Necessary?: Going Nowhere in Late Modernist London,” she charts the course of this turn, explaining that, whereas the modernism of the 1920s celebrates mobility and the city as a creative site, the modernism of the late 1930s and the 1940s concerns itself with stasis and the city as a site of “forced communality” and “diminished privilege” (1600).

Consequently, her reading of *Party Going* focuses on how the “apolitical” characters unwittingly convey “a sense of obscure but unmistakable sense of foreboding” that underscores expectations throughout the 1930s that “aerial bombing would lead to crushing civilian losses in any future war” (1603). In other words, proximity to the crowd makes you a target. The station, like late modernist London in Mackay’s reading, becomes “an apocalyptic place...it is one big antechamber to an anonymous, violent, and communal death” (1604). This impressive interpretation sketches out the context of the novel and places it within wartimes discourses, but it does not preclude reading the class snobbery of the party as an important source for the otherness and menace of the crowd. Again and again, Green highlights the differences between the wealthy travelers and the masses of humdrum office workers whose bodies threaten their senses of individuality. Presence in *Party Going* remains capable of producing anxieties about both social standing and impending warfare.

But what is the inverse of presence, absence, capable of producing? Though the bodies of the crowd create a presence that articulates larger anxieties, this presence alone does not describe how Green examines the body and anxiety in *Party Going*. In fact, Miss Fellowes’s fevered and frail body, and the ways in which the members of the party confront it, or refuse to



confront it, also produces a sense of unease. Consider, for example, how Claire and Julia immediately seek to isolate her upon learning of the illness:

“I think we must get her in here, don’t you?”

“Of course we must. As a matter of fact I know Max has taken an extra room, well to tell you the truth he’s taken three rooms, just like him.”

“Yes, he’s been very good. He’s arranged to have her taken in the back way, poor Auntie May, she can’t walk, you see. But nobody must know. Of course, darling, I would be miserable keeping it from you but not a word to another soul, please. Max didn’t say anything, did he?” (414)

Though Claire expresses a modicum of sympathy for her “poor Auntie May,” she also labors to conceal her condition. To that effect, not only “must” they get her in the hotel but they consider doing so via “the back way” honorable. Furthermore, Claire stresses that “nobody must know” and seems worried at the prospect that Max, privy to the whole situation, might have divulged something to someone. This passage, then, establishes the drive of the travelers to make Miss Fellowes absent. Her sickness, in Mitchell’s theory of “narrative prosthesis,” becomes a disability that is left behind, that others struggle to confront.

Green’s narrative approach to Miss Fellowes, and the free indirect style he adopts when conveying her consciousness, accentuates this drive to sequester and isolate her. Describing her fevered hallucinations, for example, he presents her as a solitary figure subject to fluctuations in the weather:

Miss Fellowes, in her room, felt she was on a shore wedged between two rocks, soft and hard. Out beyond a grey sea with, above, a darker sky, she would notice small clouds where sea joined sky and these clouds coming far away together into a darker mass would rush across that horizon towards where she was held down. As this cumulus

advanced the sea below would rise, most menacing and capped with foam, and as it came nearer she could hear the shrieking wind in throbbing through her ears. (423)

The movements from subject to scene and scene to body are striking here. Green begins his portrait of Miss Fellowes by returning to her room where others have isolated her. Then, he highlights her haplessness by describing her as “wedged,” as a dark sea and “a darker sky” join on the horizon and advance upon her. Ultimately, though, this passage returns to the body, as Miss Fellowes experiences the physical manifestation of these “most menacing” visions of the clouds and sea as “the shrieking wind in throbbing through her ears.” In other words, Green’s exploration of her consciousness emphasizes, first, her isolation in the hotel room, second, her isolation (and lack of agency) in her hallucinations, and, third, the sensations of her sick body. Later in this passage, Green delves deeper into the physical manifestations of these hallucinations:

Each time this scene was repeated she felt so frightened, and then it was menacing and she throbbed unbearably, it was all forced into her head; it was so menacing she thought each time the pressure was such her eyes would be forced out of her head to let her blood out. And then when she thought she must be overwhelmed, or break, this storm would go back and those waters and her blood recede, this storm would go back... (423)

Again, the free indirect style of *Party Going* emphasizes her sequestration and illness simultaneously. By repeating “throbbing” and referencing “pressure” and force in relation to the circulation of blood, Green foregrounds the sensations of illness in Miss Fellowes’s body. At the same time, he also, and once more, emphasizes her solitary and hapless nature—the storm recedes and the pain subsides but never of her own volition.

Even as the novel’s free indirect style foregrounds this sequestration, haplessness, and illness as emblems of absence, it also reveals how Miss Fellowes’s body induces anxiety in

others. She herself intuits this: “Lying inanimate where they had laid her she waged war with storms of darkness which rolled up over her in a series, like tides summoned by the moon. What made her fight was the one thought that she must not be in ill in front of these young people” (414). Alone, “inanimate,” and with seemingly little agency, Miss Fellowes wills herself to recover not just for the sake of her own body but also for the sake of her body’s influence on others. Demonstrating illness in front of “these young people” is unacceptable. And yet when Green’s subjects do come into proximity with this sick body, and do experience thoughts of insecurity, they sequester those thoughts as they sequestered the body in the opening pages of the novel. Consider, for example, Julia as she sits with Miss Fellowes shortly after hearing that the trains will start running: “And now she saw her all at once as very old and for the last time that day she heard the authentic threatening knock of doom she listened for so much when things were not going right. But it was impossible to upset her now they were really going” (522). Here, a sick and aging body becomes the coda for an entire day defined by “the authentic threatening knock of doom” and things simply “not going right.” These thoughts, however, are shrugged off at the prospect of travel, of moving away from this setting and this body. Ultimately, then, Green’s subjects must leave disability behind by isolating the disabled body and, when in its presence, they must also leave behind the unease it produces.

This drive, shared among the travelers of *Party Going*, to make absent Miss Fellowes’s body and the anxiety it causes, and Green’s free indirect presentation of this body as isolated, hapless, and in physical pain, begins to make more sense when you consider the novel’s representation of the young body. Here, Amabel serves as the prime example, especially when she admires her own, naked body:

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 unsmiling upwards to make it thin. When she came to dry her legs she hissed like grooms do. And as she got herself dry that steam began to go off the mirror walls so that as she got white again more and more herself began to be reflected. (480)

By mixing narcissism and anxiety in this passage, Green demonstrates the tensions related to the body in *Party Going*. While there exists a love of “shape and skin” that seems as cute as bathing puppies, there also exists “unsmiling” and hissing at the prospect of encountering body parts not as optimal as these breasts. More interesting, however, is the slow multiplication of the image of this body in the mirror walls. As more of Amabel appears in these mirrors, Green gestures towards a multiplicity of bodies that indicates presence, which in the novel’s schema also induces anxiety. Therefore, this body, as an emblem of “so much health, such abundance and happiness,” represents a precarious ideal that could have as much of an effect on Green’s subjects as the otherness of the crowd (480). If Amabel’s body demonstrates the allure and simultaneous fragility of youth, then Miss Fellowes’s body demonstrates the inevitability and sickness of age and, therefore, must be isolated.

Paradoxically, the distinction between presence and absence blurs when considering the ways in which both impinge upon the travelers of *Party Going*. In fact, it seems that both presence, as a multiplicity of bodies, and absence, as a disabled body, create a sense of insecurity. With the crowd, the travelers experience an overbearing sensation of working and middle class otherness—all those commuting Alberts and Marys transforming these wealthy bright young things into “anxious Roman numerals.” That this crowd impinges upon them in the run up to the Second World War, with its attendant anxieties about mass civilian casualties, only highlights this insecurity. With Miss Fellowes, the travelers experience an ill and aging body that confronts their youthfulness—therefore, they endeavor to make it absent. Here, Green’s own free

indirect style, which approaches Miss Fellowes's consciousness in ways that underscore her isolation, illness, and lack of agency, articulates this endeavor. The subsequent treatment of Amabel's body, meanwhile, that eroticizes its youthfulness while alluding to its fragility demonstrates the centrality of the youthful body to a sense of security. *Party Going* draws a distinction between presence and absence only to demonstrate that both induce anxieties connected to increasing senses of insecurity.

Where Green foregrounds bodies to explore presence, absence, and the specific anxieties they induce in *Party Going*, he lets them recede into the background to explore the same themes in *Nothing*. As Stephen Wall claimed in an early review, the novel "has its interest [...] but the lack of physicality makes it feel thin" (Brauner 190). Yet, for a novel that relies primarily on dialogue (and may, therefore, have little stylistic physicality), there remains a thematic concern for physicality. It just operates in subtler ways. In fact, Green visually multiplies the body of Jane Weatherby in mirrors to grant her a presence that articulates questions of agency in the novel. Simultaneously intent on ending her son's engagement to Mary Pomfret and marrying her old flame, and Mary's father, John, she represents an overbearingness that Green conveys through her presence and the visual multiplicity of her physical body. This stands in contrast to the presentation of disability in the novel. While, as noted above, Green's style in *Nothing* relies primarily on dialogue, we only hear about the diabetic Arthur Morris in the dialogue of others. He never speaks, he remains absent, and even his London home sits empty. Because his body exacerbates anxieties related to aging and sickness for the novel's characters, the novel itself sequesters him. Absence, in other words, operates not through the actions of younger characters isolating a sick body, or through a free indirect style that accentuates this drive to isolate, but through oblique references to an offstage figure.

In one of *Nothing's* rare long spells of descriptive prose, Green constructs a scene that will establish the connection between Jane Weatherby's body, its visual multiplications, and presence in the novel. At the hotel where Philip Weatherby's twenty-first birthday party, organized solely by his mother, will soon take place Green first steers us into a hall of mirrors:

Standing prepared, empty, curtained, shuttered, tall mirrors facing across laid tables crowned by napkins, with space rocketing transparence from one glass silvered surface to the other, supporting walls covered in olive coloured silk, chandeliers repeated to a thousand thousand profiles to be lost in olive gray depths as quiet as this room's untenanted attention, but a scene made warm with mass upon mass of daffodils banked up against mirrors... (67)

Obviously, by dwelling on the private room rented for Philip's party, Green highlights its importance, especially in a novel where the dialogue allows him to omit so much description (see the quotation from his *Paris Review* interview above for more on this). More specifically, though, the details about the space and scale of the room seem striking. Not only are the mirrors tall but they are arranged in two banks that face each and, therefore, reflect *ad infinitum*, producing, for example, a "thousand thousand" chandeliers. This, in turn, generates a "space rocketing transparence," a phrase that expands the scale of the room from the earthly to the cosmic. "Untenanted" in this passage, the room bears witness to the visual multiplication of objects; soon it will bear witness to the visual multiplication of bodies. Unsurprisingly, then, Jane's becomes the first body to enter this transformative space: "Then with a cry unheard, sung now, unuttered then by hinges and which fled back to creation in those limitless centuries of staring glass, with a shriek only of silent motion the portals came ajar with as it were an unoperated clash of cymbal to usher Mrs Weatherby in...the room could gather itself up at last" (67-68). Though the room remains still here, there exists an unheard trumpeting of Jane's

entrance—the paradoxical phrases “a cry unheard, sung now, unuttered then,” “a shriek only of silent motion,” and “unoperated clash of cymbal” convey this. That the room “gather[s] itself up at last” at this moment articulates Jane’s centrality to its space. Green, in other words, will use the room, and its mirrors capable of producing a “thousand thousand” multiples, to foreground her body and its relationship to presence in the novel.

In fact, the mirrors not only multiply this body but also transform it into a “painting” that emphasizes its striking features and sense of agency. After establishing this room as an important, and self-contained, space, Green describes Jane’s body within it: “As after a pause of amazement, she stepped through murmuring over a shoulder ‘*oh my darlings*’ the picture she made there, and it was a painting, was echoed a thousand thousand times” (68). Crossing the threshold into this room, she moves past her “pause of amazement” and into the scene of amazement herself with a self-assured step. During this entrance, Green makes sure to mention that she speaks “over a shoulder” thereby highlighting one part of the body that the mirrors multiply. Meanwhile, he also directs Jane’s murmur of “*oh my darlings*” towards offstage listeners yet to enter the scene, which underscores her overbearing presence in this space. This narrative staging leads first to a “picture” of her body and then to a “painting” of it—a movement from something mimetic to something more artful—that the mirrors ultimately echo “a thousand thousand times.” Of course, Green does not end his description here and lingers on the more striking features of this now visually multiplied body: “strapless shoulders out of a full gray dress that was flounced and soft but from which her shoulders rose still softer up to eyes over which, and the high forehead, dark wings of her hair were folded rather as a raven may claim for itself the evening air, the chimes, the quiet flight back home to rest” (68). Again, he focuses on Jane’s shoulders but, here, assigns them both visual and tactile qualities: “strapless,” and therefore more striking, they rise from a dress and become “softer” in their ascent. Leading us to

the eyes, forehead, and “dark wings” of hair, Green transitions into a metaphor where this aestheticized body has as much agency as a raven claiming “the evening air.” In other words, this body, and its “thousand thousand” visual multiplications, exerts a self-assured presence over this space. It is no mistake, then, that Green draws attention to Jane’s physicality in this space even as the novel veers back into dialogue. In fact, in the midst of conversation, we observe her finger daffodils and plant crossed fingers “down along a plump firm thigh” (69, 72). By returning to this body, and its multiplicity through the banks of mirrors, Green highlights its presence in this space and grants it an aura of agency in the novel.

At the same time, the minor and muddled nature of other bodies and things multiplied in these mirrors underscores the primacy and presence of Jane’s body. Consider, for instance, the way in which Green presents Mary Pomfret’s body in the mirror: “Mary studied hers in a mirror she had reached. Dressed in black with no jewelry the similar milk white of her face and chest was thinner, watered down beside Mrs. Weatherby’s full cream of flesh” (68). The staging here differs considerably with the staging of Jane’s entrance. Instead of striding between two banks of mirrors, Mary simply reaches “a mirror.” Green downgrades the scale of the scene from one where a body makes a “painting” and the mirrors multiply it a “thousand thousand” times to one where a body meekly approaches a single mirror. Furthermore, this mirror reflects neither ornamentation nor fullness: Mary approaches it without jewelry and her body appears “thinner” and “watered down.” Even as the narrative exotitizes her eyes as “a blue beyond any previously blessed upon humanity,” while describing Jane’s as “red veined as leaves,” it does not multiply them or the body that contains them (68). Green echoes this tone when he describes the interplay between the phenomena of the party and the mirrors:

It was almost as if, in time, the party had leaped forward between those mirrors so much had been recorded only to be lost, so much champagne had been consumed while, as day



passes over a pond, no trace was left in any of their minds, or hardly none, just the vague memory of friendly weather, a fading riot of June stayed perhaps in their throats as the waiters withdrew though three or four remained to serve coffee brandy and port. (87)

While the mirrors certainly capture these phenomena, they do so fleetingly (“so much had been recorded only to be lost”). Instead, a boozy, muddled sensation replaces a clear picture or striking painting. We see only hints of the phenomena that the mirrors recorded regardless of whether they are notional (a trace in “their minds” or a “vague memory”) or physical (“a fading riot of June” in “their throats”). It becomes clear, ultimately, that Green constructs this space to explore Jane’s presence and, in doing so, he connects it to the visual multiplicity of her body.

If Green establishes Jane Weatherby’s presence by emphasizing her body and constructing a hall of mirrors to multiply it visually, then he also ties this presence to questions of agency in *Nothing*. Though Jane affects the persona of someone ineffectual and easily dismayed, she actually operates with more cunning and shrewdness than anyone else. As David Brauner has described her, Jane remains “one of the great comic grotesques of British fiction, [who] deftly manipulates all her interlocutors through strategies of evasion, deferral, prevarication, and self-determination” (194). To that effect, through a series of dinners, she convinces John to send Mary to Florence thereby precipitating the end of her engagement with Philip. At the same time, she convinces John to marry her, exploiting the anxiety that accompanies his diabetes diagnosis. Viewed in the light of these acts, Green’s extended description of Jane and the visual multiplications of her body in the mirrors makes more sense. Whereas other subjects and phenomena remain minor or muddled in the mirrors, Jane’s body expands to create a presence, which articulates her agency throughout the novel.

Like *Party Going*, however, *Nothing* distinguishes presence, a (visual) multiplicity of bodies, from absence, a sequestered disabled body. Unlike *Party Going*, however, it does so

through oblique references to the diabetic offstage character of Arthur Morris. Consider, for example, the way in which Philip and Mary first discuss him:

“Have you heard of Arthur Morris?”

She immediately put those hands away on her lap and smiled upon Philip.

“Who?” she asked, all charm.

“You know that great friend of both our parents.”

“Oh,” she said and seemed to lose interest.

“He’s having his toe off.”

“Whyever for?”

Both began to giggle.

“Why does a man have his toe off?” he demanded.

“How should I know?”

“Because it’s diseased stupid.”

“Poor man,” she said no longer smiling, in an uninterested voice. (20)

Dullness, more than anything else, defines this exchange. Philip introduces Arthur into the conversation only for Mary to “lose interest” upon hearing that he belongs to their parents’ generation. Then, both giggle off the news of his toe amputation, though Philip knows full well why it must happen. And, though Mary pronounces him “poor man,” she makes this slight gesture of empathy “in an uninterested voice.” Thus, Arthur’s disabled body becomes a body left behind because of its disability, as Green’s use of dialogue introduces him only to cast him off into the margins. Liz Jennings and Dick Abbot, while gossiping, refer to Arthur in a similar fashion: “Oh Arthur Morris told me.” / “What a shame old Arthur can’t be here.” / “Yes,” she said, “and a terrible story to insinuate against a girl!” (75). Again, a character introduces Arthur into the conversation, her interlocutor alludes to his disability, the character registers that

disability but quickly turns from it. For Liz, in other words, it is a shame that Arthur cannot attend the party but what about the point of gossip she and Richard are discussing? Whereas *Party Going* features characters actively attempting to sequester a sick body, and a free indirect style that highlights this, *Nothing*, through its reliance on dialogue, demonstrates how a sick body has already been sequestered.

With this absence established, Arthur's body becomes an emblem for anxieties related to the aging body or, more ambiguously and cynically, a disabled body that Jane leaves behind to generate these anxieties. For instance, discussing the possibility of Mary traveling to Italy, and doing so after John's diagnosis with diabetes, Jane states, "you must remember that you've been so fortunate all your life and now you have a touch of illness I simply shall not allow it to warp your judgement. Or Arthur Morris now? He has no use for his flat while he's at the clinic" (161-162). Here, Jane references John's recent diagnosis, presents herself as his mental guardian, and then suddenly alludes to the offstage character also with diabetes, albeit in a more advanced state. This quick jump from John to Arthur is not meaningless; rather, it uses a disabled body, already made absent in the novel, to grant a recent, and perhaps manageable, diagnosis more gravity. The dialogue continues on this trajectory:

"In any case I'm sorry to say there's bad news about poor old Arthur. He's not so well at all they tell me."

"No no John," she cried "I simply don't want to hear!"

"Yes" Mr Pomfret went on "it seems they've told him he'll have to have his leg off now above the knee."

She covered her ears with two fat white hands.

“Too too disagreeable” she moaned. “And now that all one’s friends have reached middle age is there to be nothing but illness from now on, first Arthur then you my dear? Oh tell me are you really all right?” (162)

Here, Jane’s histrionics simultaneously attempt to remove Arthur’s disabled body from this conversation and heighten the anxieties related to John’s own diabetes. By proclaiming “I simply don’t want to hear” and covering her ears with “two fat white hands,” Jane pushes an already-absent body further offstage. Not only does *Nothing* refer to Arthur obliquely, it also features a character who wishes to avoid these references. Green, however, ultimately ties the disabled body to anxieties related to aging and illness through Jane’s return to John’s condition.

When Arthur dies, John’s disabled body becomes the one that *Nothing* makes absent. Indeed, the novel ultimately juxtaposes it with Jane’s to highlight the distinction between presence and absence and anxieties related to agency and aging. This turn first occurs when John and Jane agree to remove Arthur from their conversations: “they settled down to a long nostalgic conversation about old times, excluding any mention of Arthur Morris” (172). From here, John’s diabetic body assumes the position of the disabled body made absent. Nowhere does this seem clearer than in the novel’s coda where he yawns seven times (“yawning,” “yawned again,” “yawned a fifth time,” “yawned yet once more,” “yawning a last time”) over the course of one conversation and Green peppers John’s portions of the dialogue with ellipses (“Yes...thick ankles...hockey, Jane”) to suggest slowness, aging, and, ultimately, disability (202, 203). Whereas he once was Jane’s equal in conversation, John now recedes into the background—his voice mumbles, yawns, and whispers. And while disability seems like a subtext to all of this, Green elevates it in the final back-and-forth between his two primary subjects:

There was a longer pause while his eyelids drooped.

“And how’s your wicked diabetes my own darling?” she whispered.

“All right” he barely answered.

“And is there anything at all you want my own?”

“Nothing...nothing” he replied in so low a voice she could barely have heard and then seemed to fall deep asleep at last. (203)

Again, Green suggests a slowness with the “longer pause” and drooping eyelids that lead into this exchange. Yet the distinction between John and Jane becomes more pronounced here when the latter mentions the former’s diabetes. From here, John, and his overtly disabled body, sinks deeper into exhaustion and passivity whereas Jane remains present. Furthermore, her use of “my own” in this conversation suggests that she has begun to subsume John. Green, in other words, ends *Nothing* by intimating that another disabled body may become absent, and he juxtaposes it with Jane, whose body remains associated with presence and agency in the novel.

In *Nothing*, presence and absence eventually converge to demonstrate the interplay between questions of agency and anxieties of aging throughout the novel. By visually multiplying Jane’s body in the mirrors of the room that hosts Philip’s party, Green foregrounds the overbearing nature of Jane herself. The painterly descriptions of shoulders, forehead, and hair, as well as the allusions to fingers and a “plump thigh,” transform Jane’s body into a striking portrait when compared to the minor and muddled phenomena that seem indeterminate in these mirrors. Unsurprisingly, this body impinges upon others as the novel progresses: it ends an engagement and encourages a marriage. Meanwhile, Green establishes absence through oblique references to Arthur in order to heighten anxieties of aging and illness. Yet he replaces Arthur, as the absent disabled body, with John to suggest that Jane’s agency will subsume his passivity. Disabled bodies, then, as emblems of absence seem to orbit around Jane, whose body Green multiplies so that it becomes an emblem of presence. There exists, in other words, a symbiotic relationship between the two concepts.

A thread of precariousness runs through the presence and absence distinction and its use of bodies, both multiple (or visually multiplied) and disabled, in *Party Going* and *Nothing*. In fact, precariousness appears at those points where the distinction itself blurs or converges. For the wealthy travelers of *Party Going*, the crowd's presence represents a middle class otherness that also articulates contemporaneous expectations of civilian casualties in the impending Second World War. At the same time, however, these travelers isolate the sick body of Miss Fellowes because it confronts the idea of the youthful, healthy body. Presence and absence blur to create an overarching sense of insecurity for them. For the subjects of *Nothing*, meanwhile, the presence of Jane Weatherby, which Green illustrates by visually multiplying her body, represents an agency that manipulates relationships. Simultaneously, the bodies of Arthur Morris and, later, John Pomfret suggest that disabled bodies recede into the background and become absent. In the novel's final scene, presence and absence converge to confirm Jane's agency and demonstrate that it can only subsume the disabled body and its attendant anxieties of aging and illness. If Green makes any claim in these representations of presence and absence, then, it is that the security and soundness of the body remains fragile regardless of what confronts it.

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