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### Greener Pastures

IN JUNE OF 2016, BRITAIN VOTED to leave the European Union, choosing to opt out of a diplomatic relationship conceived in order to curb the forces which devastated Europe during the Second World War. While the divorce is being settled, and that nation's place in the world re-negotiated, the mythologies surrounding its 'finest hours' are begging to be rethought. As if on cue, New York Review Books have reissued the wartime novels of Henry Green.

Henry who? Prefacing a 2005 collection of Green's novels, Sebastian Faulks perfectly summarised the situation: 'Henry Green', wrote Faulks, 'is a writer who always seems to need 'introducing', like a stranger at a party: dark, louche, awkward'. 'Green' was the penname adopted by one Henry Vincent Yorke. He was born near Tewkesbury in 1905, the youngest son of a prosperous industrialist—'a mouthbreather with a silver spoon', as he later put it. He attended Eton College then Oxford University, skipping most of his classes in order to nurture an obsession with cinema. In his final year of study, he wrote and published *Blindness*, a novel about a teenage art-lover who is blinded by attackers on his way home from school. Yorke eventually abandoned his degree altogether and took up work on the floor of his family's factory, justifying the surprise decision in a letter to his father: 'I want badly to write a novel about working men'. *Living* was the result of that experience, an exploration of class distinctions within an iron foundry in Birmingham. Yorke married his lover, 'Dig', in the year of its publication. The newlyweds honeymooned in Ireland, then settled in London where Yorke wrote two more books before the outbreak of World War Two: *Pack My Bag*, his doom-laden 'self-portrait'; and *Party Going*, a comedy of manners in which a group of Bright Young Things find themselves trapped in fog at a London railway station. When war was declared, Yorke volunteered for London's Auxiliary Fire Service despite being convinced that it was, in his words, 'a suicide squad'. Whilst in the Service, he published the first three of the novels which New York Review Books have reissued: *Caught*, *Loving*, and *Back*. Sadly, Yorke's propensity for the bottle erupted into full-scale alcoholism when the War ended—a habit which took a severe toll on his health, his marriage, and his literary output. He published three more novels, *Concluding*, *Nothing*, and *Doting* before his death in 1973.

During his life, 'Green' was one of the most exorbitantly praised authors in English literature. In *Life* magazine, W.H. Auden hailed him as 'the finest living novelist', while in the *Times*, T.S. Eliot held him as evidence that 'the creative advance in our age is in prose fiction'. For Eudora Welty, his imagination was 'the most interesting and vital...in English fiction in our time', while for V.S. Pritchett, he was 'a spirit of poetry, fantasy and often wild laughter, an original'. Rebecca West described him as 'the best writer of his time', while Elizabeth Bowen claimed that his books 'reproduce, as few English novels do, the actual sensations of living'. In the middle of the twentieth century, as his biographer notes, 'anyone in the literary world on either side of the Atlantic who was asked to list the most important living writers in English would have immediately thought of Henry Green'.

What more recent admirers have lacked in number, they have made up for in rhapsodic enthusiasm. For the writer and actress Deborah Eisenberg, 'the experience of reading Green...can be almost physical, as if the thought or sensation expressed on the page were being generated by one's own, not the author's, mind'. For the writer and composer Amit Chaudhuri, meanwhile, Green is 'a singular kind of artist who, like the poets of ancient India and Greece, has nothing to offer us but delight'. The late writer and critic John Updike declared him 'a novelist of such rarity, such marvellous originality, intuition, sensuality, and finish, that every fragment of his work is precious, as casting a reflected light upon his achievement'. For the critic James Wood, Green possesses 'perhaps the greatest facility for the writing of dialogue in twentieth-century English fiction' whilst for Professor George Toles of Manitoba University, Green not only 'deserves to be ranked at the same level of experimental genius as his better-known contemporaries, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence', his novels also 'possess crucial dimensions that the work of so many of his fellow modernists lack'. Of course, there is a more obvious feature which distinguishes Green from this high company—namely, the obscurity which enshrouds his work today. Beyond professional literary cliques, his novels remain largely unknown and unread. 'Like Cubist painting,' suggested Dominic Green in *The New Criterion*, 'Green's fiction is now more interesting than inspiring.'

A certain reticence on Green's part is often blamed for this neglect—his 'unknowability', as Leo Robson recently put it in *The New Yorker*. The real-life Henry Yorke suffered his entire life from a debilitating shyness, a thoroughly unmarketable fixation with his own privacy. He opposed his novels being issued in paperback form, for instance, scolding one publisher, 'You can never popularise me'. In a telling photograph by Cecil Beaton, only the back of his head is visible—he refused to have his picture taken unless

from behind. For some, this same reserve is often found within the writing itself. As Professor Rod Mengham of Cambridge University once put it, ‘one tends to come from a first reading of any of Green’s works with the feeling that something has been withheld...that to a greater extent than is perhaps normal, it simply does not mean what it says’. This effect appears to have been deliberately cultivated. *Pack My Bag* makes the claim that prose should ‘slowly appeal to feelings unexpressed’, and in an interview with the novelist and screenwriter Terry Southern for the *Paris Review*, Green declared that ‘it is what is left unsaid which gives us food for thought’. His writing is not only experimental, but unrepentantly oblique. This, sadly, has landed him with the reputation of being, not an author suited to general tastes, but, as Southern put it in that same interview, ‘a writer’s writer’s writer’. But can this alone explain his fall from grace?

At the Berlin opening of ‘Germany—Memories of a Nation’, Neil MacGregor, the former director of the British Museum, lauded his host’s frank appraisal of its past. Germany’s handling of Nazi history, he argued, has won it admiration the world over. A sharp contrast is to be found in Britain, he lamented, where history is used ‘in order to comfort us...to remind ourselves that we were always, always deep down, good people.’ ‘Maybe we mention a little bit of slave trade here and there, a few wars here and there, but the chapters we insist on are the sunny ones.’

Rarely is this insistence more obvious than in the British accounts of the Blitz. The standard narrative usually goes something like this: during the aerial raids endured between 1940 and 1941, British civilians retained their composure, obeyed official instruction, put aside long-entrenched divisions of class, planted vegetables, maintained a wry sense of humour, and thereby staved off their fascist aggressors. The main characters are champions of passive resistance: firemen, air-raid wardens, nurses, factory workers, bomb-disposal units, community gardeners. Democracy prevailed, as a thousand coffee mugs, daytime documentaries, and interactive museum experiences continue to assure us, because Britain kept calm and carried on.

It was to this story that Angus Calder’s *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991) gave the lie—or, at least, some context. Following on from his influential *The People’s War* (1968), the Scottish historian showed that the standard narrative omits some inconvenient truths. Some 60,000 Brits objected on conscientious grounds. A quarter of London’s population sought refuge in the countryside. Churchill and the royal family were booed when they visited the sites of raids. Yet Calder’s—and subsequent historians’—main concern was not

for the inaccuracies of the received tale, but rather for its cathartic value, its ability to alleviate the suffering of shell-shocked individuals by assimilating their experiences within a larger, more comforting, picture: a morally infallible and staunchly resilient nation, singlehandedly defending its democracy from the evils on the continent. In recent political rhetoric, the image has proven to be an enduring one.<sup>1</sup> When Britain is cast as an island stronghold, a lone outpost of merry virtue doggedly enduring this or that threat from Europe—recession, immigration, bureaucracy—to the uniquely egalitarian way of life preserved within its borders, the nation is coloured in the sepia tones of a soothing, but largely imaginary, past.

Green's novels, and his wartime novels in particular, stray wildly from the received account of the Blitz. Though his characters are the passive heroes of the home-front—civilians, firefighters, factory workers, repatriated soldiers—they are anything but heroic; instead, they are hedonists, loners, hysterics, petty criminals, liars, fornicators, and loafers. They bicker and squabble, divided by class boundaries, and crippled by anxiety. Many are not interested in surviving the War, let alone winning it. Green's reticence might have contributed to his neglect, but it is the enduring preference for the 'sunny' chapters of history, surely, that has kept him there.

*Caught* takes place during the 'Phoney War'—the eight months after Germany's invading Poland throughout which, to the surprise of many, precisely *no* bombs fell on Britain. Richard Roe, a wealthy widower, has recently joined London's Auxiliary Fire Service. He serves beneath the over-promoted, and histrionically working-class, Arthur Pye, with whom, it quickly transpires, he shares some personal history: several years prior to the war, Pye's sister abducted Roe's son. Understandably, the relationship between the two men is tense, though this is only one of an elaborate network of fraught ties within the novel. The fire station, it turns out, is no bastion of heroism, but a hive of gossip, adultery, despair, class-conflict, paranoia, and even incest. When the bombs start falling, the firemen welcome them. 'Boy am I enjoying this', says one, trying in vain to control the flames. The destruction of the Blitz offers an escape from what has felt like an extended nightmare.

*Caught* opens with the deceptively legalistic claim: 'The characters...are all imaginary men and women. In this book only 1940 in London is real'. But what at first appears to be merely a prosaic disclaimer might actually be read as a declaration of the novel's central concerns. The characters are constantly attempting to draw lines between the real and the imaginary, the authentic and 'phoney' aspects of their experience. 'The real

thing’, says one ‘is the picture you carry in your eye afterwards’. ‘I don’t know’ comes the reply, ‘only the point about a blitz is this, there’s always something you can’t describe’. *Caught* closes with a gesture toward that indescribable ‘something’. Roe boasts to his sister-in-law about his heroic experience of a fire at a dock, but his version of events is regularly interrupted by parentheses containing a more traumatic account. The voice is recognisably his own, but it contradicts the tale in which it is enclosed. Clearly, Roe cannot properly assimilate the real experience within a broader narrative. Green’s implication is that fundamental truths of the Blitz, or of any traumatic experience for that matter, consist in precisely those episodes which cannot be encompassed within some overarching feel-good story.

*Loving* might be described as the sole member of the Revisionist Big House genre. While similar, both in plot and setting, to Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* and Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September*, the novel challenges several of the presumptions which these novels take for granted—particularly, the moral integrity of the house’s inhabitants, and their claims to live on the land. *Loving* takes place during the War, in a castle-cum-stately-home in Northern Ireland which is inhabited by the descendants of English colonists. The owner of the property, Mr Jack Tennant, is away fighting. In his absence, his widowed mother is entrusted with the house’s upkeep—an impossible task, it turns out, when the senior nanny and the butler are, respectively, sick and dying. Everyone else is caught up in a Gordian knot of intrigues: blackmail, theft, double-booking, insurance fraud, adultery, alcoholism, elopement, and a dead peacock which refuses to stay buried. None of these are resolved but merely put aside when the central characters decide to run off and get married in England.

*Loving* has elicited high praise from all but two of its reviewers. Perhaps understandably, Evelyn Waugh disliked Green’s take on the Big House, calling the novel ‘obscene’, and accusing the author of ‘debasing the language vilely’. More recently, Professor Clair Wills of Princeton has criticised the book’s misrepresentation of wartime Ireland. No doubt, Wills is right to do so. Green’s knowledge of Ireland was both partial and prejudiced, having been drawn only from the honeymoon he took there in the heyday of the Munich Crisis. But the novel does not really seem to be about Ireland at all. It begins with the words ‘Once upon a day’ and ends with the phrase ‘they were married and lived happily ever after’. The English characters, at least, inhabit a sort of Neverland, and whenever they issue slurs against their Irish neighbours, Green makes it clear that they are indulging in fantasy. At one point, Mrs Tennant claims, ‘it would be hopeless trying to buy

anything in this wretched country'. But her slander would better describe herself: she is more concerned with purchasing luxury products than she is with the conflict in Europe which is making those products difficult to purchase. Later, she erupts: 'Well it looks like we're out of it in Eire as we are or whatever they call this country of savages. ... I can't seem able to express myself but there you are'. Green is playing on the Ovidian maxim, 'Here I am a barbarian where I am not understood': Mrs Tennant is herself guilty of the ignorance of which she accuses the locals. For the English characters, 'Neutral Eire' repeatedly functions as a fairy-tale fantasy, a screen onto which they project a host of vices, but particularly, their own apathy toward the conflict in Europe.

*Back* is set in London towards the end of the War. The main character, one Charley Summers, has recently returned from Germany where he was brought as a prisoner of war after losing his leg in France. A host of changes have taken place in his absence, and to a large extent, the novel is a record of his failure to adapt to them. His village has begun speaking in a language—mostly comprised of acronyms and administrative jargon—which he does not understand. The local government has been reorganised, and he cannot figure out how to access the welfare that he has been promised. His former mistress, Rose Grant, has married another man, had a child by him, and died. Rose's mother, meanwhile, has developed dementia, and continuously mistakes Charley for her brother who was killed in World War One. Charley takes a job at his old factory, but fails to hold it down: his old organising system proves insufficient to deal with the new demands. He tries to start a relationship with a girl from work, but he cannot hold on to her either. Eventually, he falls in love with Rose's half-sister Nancy, deluding himself on and off that she is actually his former mistress. The novel concludes with the pair in bed together 'for the first time in what was to be a happy married life', and with Charley sobbing his dead lover's name into the side of her sibling's body.

A doctor offers the following explanation of Mrs Grant's dementia: 'Nature' he claims, 'provides her own defence ...the nervous system rejects what is surplus to its immediate requirement'. The diagnosis matches not only Charley's mother in law, but just about everyone in the novel. Charley finds out that, as a repatriated soldier, he too is 'surplus' to his community's 'requirements'. While his compatriots revere the soldiers who died in the conflict, they do not really know what to make of the ones who have come 'back'. Charley's friends and colleagues attempt to trivialise, to deny, and even to explain his experiences to him. Eventually, he finds himself wondering if 'it would have been best' if he had died in captivity. While the novel is, in part, a classic story of a soldier's struggle

to return to civilisation, it also offers a potent critique of a changing culture's failure to accommodate its repatriated servicemen.

These novels cast shade on one of the most persistent images in British history—one which continues to shape the way that that nation imagines itself today. For Green, Britain is not some bastion of virtue, haplessly defending its local democracy; it is the seat of a crumbling empire, alarmingly complacent with its own destruction. For this reason his work has been ignored, and for this reason it is high time for us to return to it.

### Notes

1. In January of 2017, for example, British MP David Davis said of the Brexit referendum, 'If our civil service can cope with World War Two, they can easily cope with this'. In May of 2016, Davis quoted directly from Churchill's 'Finest Hour' speech, describing the 1867 Reform Act as 'a breakthrough into the *sunlit uplands* of modern democracy, just as Brexit will be' (my emphasis). Davis is one of a host of Brexit supporters to have quoted Churchill's phrase. In July of 2016 Andrea Leadsom claimed that her 'ambition' would be 'to guide our country to those sunlit uplands', while in March of the same year, Boris Johnson summarised his view of the political situation: 'The jailer has accidentally left the door of the jail open and people can see the sunlit land beyond'. What Churchill himself would have made of the Brexit referendum is a matter of some debate.

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