

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 22

HENRY GREEN

Henry Green is a tall, gracious, and imposingly handsome man, with a warm, strong voice and very quick eyes. In speech he displays on occasion that hallmark of the English public school: the slight tilt of the head and closing of the eyes when pronouncing the first few words of some sentences—a manner most often in contrast to what he is saying, for his expressions tend toward parable and his wit may move from cozy to scorpion-dry in less than a twinkle. Many have remarked that his celebrated deafness will roar or falter according to his spirit and situation; at any rate he will not use a hearing aid, for reasons of his own, which are no doubt discernable to some.

Mr. Green writes at night and in many longhand drafts. In his memoir, *Pack My Bag*, he has described prose in this way:

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 which go further than names however shared can ever go. 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 . . .

An ancient trade compliment, to an author whose technique is highly developed, has been to call him a “writer’s writer”; Henry Green has been referred to as a “writer’s writer’s writer,” though practitioners of the craft have had only to talk with him momentarily on the subject to know that his methods were not likely to be revealed to them, either then or at any other time. It is for this reason—attempting to delve past his steely reticence—that some of the questions in the interview may seem unduly long or presumptuous.

Mr. Green, who has one son, lives in London, in a house in Knightsbridge, with his beautiful and charming wife, Dig. The following conversation was recorded there one winter night in the author’s firelit study.

—*Terry Southern, 1958*

INTERVIEWER

Now, you have a body of work, ten novels, which many critics consider the most elusive and enigmatic in contemporary literature—and yourself, professionally or as a personality, none the less so. I’m wondering if these two mysteries are merely coincidental?

HENRY GREEN

What’s that? I’m a trifle hard of hearing.

INTERVIEWER

Well, I’m referring to such things as your use of a pseudonym, your refusal to be photographed, and so on. May I ask the reason for it?

GREEN

I didn't want my business associates to know I wrote novels. Most of them do now, though . . . *know* I mean, not write, thank goodness.

INTERVIEWER

And has this affected your relationships with them?

GREEN

Yes, yes, oh yes—why, some years ago a group at our Birmingham works put in a penny each and bought a copy of a book of mine, *Living*. And as I was going round the iron foundry one day, a loam molder said to me, “I read your book, Henry.” “And did you like it?” I asked, rightly apprehensive. He replied, “I didn't think much of it, Henry.” Too awful.

Then, you know, with a customer, at the end of a settlement which has deteriorated into a compromise painful to both sides, he may say, “I suppose you are going to put this in a novel.” Very awkward.

INTERVIEWER

I see.

GREEN

Yes, it's best they shouldn't know about one. And one should never be known by sight.

INTERVIEWER

You have, however, been photographed from the rear.

GREEN

And a wag said: “I'd know that back anywhere.”

INTERVIEWER

I've heard it remarked that your work is “too sophisticated” for

American readers, in that it offers no scenes of violence—and “too subtle,” in that its message is somewhat veiled. What do you say?

GREEN

Unlike the wilds of Texas, there is very little violence over here. A bit of child killing, of course, but no straight shootin’. After fifty, one ceases to digest; as someone once said: “I just ferment my food now.” Most of us walk crabwise to meals and everything else. The oblique approach in middle age is the safest thing. The unusual at this period is to get anywhere at all—Goddamn!

INTERVIEWER

And how about “subtle”?

GREEN

I don’t follow. *Suttee*, as I understand it, is the suicide—now forbidden—of a Hindu wife on her husband’s flaming pyre. I don’t want my wife to do that when my time comes—and with great respect, as I know her, she won’t . . .

INTERVIEWER

I’m sorry, you misheard me; I said, “subtle”—that the message was too subtle.

GREEN

Oh, *subtle*. How dull!

INTERVIEWER

. . . yes, well now I believe that two of your books, *Blindness* and *Pack My Bag*, are said to be “autobiographical,” isn’t that so?

GREEN

Yes, those two are mostly autobiographical. But where they are about myself, they are not necessarily accurate as a portrait; they aren’t photographs. After all, no one knows what he is like,

he just tries to give some sort of picture of his time. Not like a cat to fight its image in the mirror.

INTERVIEWER

The critic Alan Pryce-Jones has compared you to Jouhandeau and called you an “odd, haunted, ambiguous writer.” Did you know that?

GREEN

I was in the same house with him at Eton. He was younger than me, so he saw through me perhaps.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find critical opinion expressed about your work useful or interesting?

GREEN

Invariably useless and uninteresting—when it is from daily papers or weeklies, which give so little space nowadays. But there is a man called Edward Stokes who has written a book about me and who knows all too much. I believe the Hogarth Press is going to publish it. And then the French translator of *Loving*, he wrote two articles in some French monthly. Both of these are valuable to me.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to ask you some questions now about the work itself. You've described your novels as “nonrepresentational.” I wonder if you'd mind defining that term?

GREEN

“Nonrepresentational” was meant to represent a picture which was not a photograph, nor a painting on a photograph, nor, in dialogue, a tape recording. For instance, the very deaf, as I am, hear the most astounding things all round them which have not in

fact been said. This enlivens my replies until, through mishearing, a new level of communication is reached. My characters misunderstand each other more than people do in real life, yet they do so less than I. Thus, when writing, I “represent” very closely what I see (and I’m not seeing so well now) and what I hear (which is little) but I say it is “nonrepresentational” because it is not necessarily what others see and hear.

INTERVIEWER

And yet, as I understand this theory, its success does not depend upon any actual sensory differences between people talking, but rather upon psychological or emotional differences between them as readers, isn’t that so? I’m referring to the serious use of this theory in communicative writing.

GREEN

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

INTERVIEWER

And that is your crabwise approach.

GREEN

To your question, yes. And to stop one’s asking why I don’t write *plays*, my answer is I’d rather have these sparks in black and white than liable to interpretation by actors and the producer of a piece.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider that all your novels have been done as “nonrepresentational”?

GREEN

Yes, they all of course represent a *selection* of material. The Chinese classical painters used to leave out the middle distance. Until *Nothing* and *Doting* I tried to establish the mood of any scene by a few but highly pointed descriptions. Since then I've tried to keep everything down to bare dialogue and found it very difficult. You see, to get back to what you asked a moment ago, when you referred to the emotional differences between readers—what one writes has to be all things to all men. If one isn't enough to enough readers, they stop reading, and the publishers won't publish anymore. To disprove my own rule I've done a very funny three-act play and no one will put it on.

INTERVIEWER

I'm sorry to hear that, but now what about the role of *humor* in the novel?

GREEN

Just the old nursery rhyme—"Something and spice makes all things nice," is it? Surely the artist must entertain. And one's in a very bad way indeed if one can't laugh. Laughter relaxes the characters in a novel. And if you *can* make the reader laugh, he is apt to get careless and go on reading. So you as the writer get a chance to get something into him.

INTERVIEWER

I see, and what might that something be?

GREEN

Here we approach the crux of the matter which, like all hilarious things, is almost indescribable. To me the purpose of art is to produce something alive, in my case, in print, but with a separate, and of course one hopes, with an everlasting life of its own.

INTERVIEWER

And the qualities then of a work of art . . .

GREEN

To be alive. To have a real life of its own. The miracle is that it should live in the person who reads it. And if it *is* real and true, it does, for five hundred years, for generation after generation. It's like having a baby, but in print. If it's really good, you can't stop its living. Indeed, once the thing is printed, you simply cannot strangle it, as you could a child, by putting your hands round its little wet neck.

INTERVIEWER

What would you say goes into creating this life, into making this thing real and true?

GREEN

Getting oneself straight. To get what one produces to have a real life of its own.

INTERVIEWER

Now, this page of manuscript you were good enough to show me—what stage of the finished work does this represent?

GREEN

Probably a very early draft.

INTERVIEWER

In this draft I see that the dialogue has been left untouched, whereas every line in the scene otherwise has been completely rewritten.

GREEN

I think if you checked with other fragments of this draft, you

of mine, you know, of the pain I brought here from London
last time?

No Madam

Nix of any of the servants have come across it. And a

nonsense

Yes madam

And, R Arthur, how is Eldon

He's about the same, I believe Madam

Oh dear yes know you, that all Arthur the doctor

is he has diversity the doctor "Thick all"

~~Common sense is that the world's the fumes that to a
And it is not clear we be fairly thought Do I get the job?
& remember to get them from still but that is plenty of time, fine
Perhaps the best way would be to give notice to my the place
to answer me before his afternoon days of death. The second thing
I thought best for the same reason. The third thing
which I thought best was to give notice to my the place
before I go where his hands were days so to But giving ten
days would please. I do wish to give notice. To say the old
man's health is not so good as it was. He goes off his
place would seem to be some where the best place & best
in afternoon days of his health. Before the 15th (maybe) As he
then that he must be well enough to leave. He says, But if he
has on the best is better of getting his father's job
knows where the old man kept his things & red books. But
at a great expense of the money, but the parks, the there
seems to be some thing you be meant. Charles says I thought
the old gentleman perhaps you do not eyes on the down
think you could help looking can you? I have
you wish to buy a new old man has been of a morning
to you were, did you ever about? Don't take so stiff that
the of ever. He would be steady at night when he went
in evening you, but you wished to see I am steady, then?~~

From a draft of Henry Green's novel *Loving*. The conversation at the top of the page is between Rounce, the hero of the book, and his female employer, who is addressing him here as Arthur not because that is his name but because her footmen have always been called Arthur.

would find as many the other way around, the dialogue corrected and the rest left untouched.

INTERVIEWER

Here the rewriting has been done in entire sentences, rather than in words or phrases—is that generally the way you work?

GREEN

Yes, because I copy everything out afresh. I make alterations in the manuscript and then copy them out. And in copying out, I make further alterations.

INTERVIEWER

How much do you usually write before you begin rewriting?

GREEN

The first twenty pages over and over again—because in my idea you have to get everything into them. So as I go along and the book develops, I have to go back to that beginning again and again. Otherwise, I rewrite only when I read where I've got to in the book and I find something so bad I can't go on till I've put it right.

INTERVIEWER

When you begin to write something, do you begin with a certain *character* in mind, or rather with a certain *situation* in mind?

GREEN

Situation every time.

INTERVIEWER

Is that necessarily the *opening* situation—or perhaps you could give me an example; what was the basic situation, as it occurred to you, for *Loving*?

GREEN

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

INTERVIEWER

Well, now after getting your initial situation in mind, then what thought do you give to the plot beyond it?

GREEN

It's all a question of length; that is, of proportion. How much you allow to this or that is what makes a book now. It was not so in the days of the old three-decker novel. As to plotting or thinking ahead, I don't in a novel. I let it come page by page, one a day, and carry it in my head. When I say carry I mean the *proportions*—that is, the length. This is the exhaustion of creating. Towards the end of the book your head is literally bursting. But try and write out a scheme or plan and you will only depart from it. My way you have a chance to set something living.

INTERVIEWER

No one, it seems, has been able to satisfactorily relate your work to any source of influence. I recall that Mr. Pritchett has tried to place it in the tradition of Sterne, Carroll, Firbank, and Virginia Woolf—whereas Mr. Toynbee wished to relate it to Joyce, Thomas Wolfe, and Henry Miller. Now, *are* there styles or works that you feel have influenced yours?

GREEN

I really don't know. As far as I'm consciously aware, I forget

everything I read at once, including my own stuff. But I have a tremendous admiration for Céline.

INTERVIEWER

I feel there are certain aspects of your work the mechanics of which aren't easily drawn into question because I don't find terms to cover them. I would like to try to state one, however, and see if you feel it is correct or can be clarified. It's something Mr. Pritchett seems to hint at when he describes you as "a psychologist poet making people out of blots," and it has to do with the degree to which you've developed the "nonexistence of author" principle. The reader does not simply forget that there is an author behind the words, but because of some annoyance over a seeming "discrepancy" in the story must, in fact, *remind* himself that there is one. This reminding is accompanied by an irritation with the author because of these apparent oversights on his part, and his "failings" to see the particular *significance* of certain happenings. The irritation gives way then to a feeling of pleasure and superiority in that he, the reader, sees *more* in the situation than the author does—so that all of this now belongs to *him*. And the author is dismissed, even perhaps with a slight contempt—and only the *work* remains, alone now with this reader who has had to take over. Thus, in the spell of his own imagination, the characters and story *come alive* in an almost incredible way, quite beyond anything achieved by conventional methods of writing. Now, this is a principle that occurs in Kafka's work, in an undeveloped way, but is obscured because the situations are so strongly fantasy. It occurs in a very pure form, however, in Kafka's *Diaries*—if one assumes that they were, despite all said to the contrary, *written to be read*, then it is quite apparent, and, of course, very funny and engaging indeed. I'm wondering if that is the source of this principle for you, or if, in fact, you agree with what I say about it?

GREEN

I don't agree about Kafka's *Diaries*, which I have by my bed and still don't or can't follow.

But if you are trying to write something which has a life of its own, which is alive, of course the author must keep completely out of the picture. I hate the portraits of donors in medieval triptychs. And if the novel *is* alive, of course the reader will be irritated by discrepancies—life, after all, is one discrepancy after another.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe that a writer should work toward the development of a particular *style*?

GREEN

He can't do anything else. His style is himself, and we are all of us changing every day—developing, we hope! We leave our marks behind us, like a snail.

INTERVIEWER

So the writer's style develops with him.

GREEN

Surely. But he must take care not to let it go too far—like the later Henry James or James Joyce. Because it then becomes a private communication with himself, like a man making cat's cradles with spiderwebs, a sort of Melanesian gambit.

INTERVIEWER

Concerning your own style and the changes it has undergone, I'd like to read a sample paragraph—from *Living*, written in 1927–1928—and ask you something about it. This paragraph occurs, you may perhaps recall, as the description of a girl's dream—a working-class girl who wants more than anything else a home, and above all, a child . . .

“Then clocks in that town all over town struck three and bells in churches there ringing started rushing sound of bells like wings tearing under roof of sky, so these bells rang. But women stood, reached up children drooping to sky, sharp boned, these women wailed and their noise rose and ate the noise of bells ringing.”

I'd like to ask about the style here, about the absence of common articles—*a*, *an*, and *the*—there being but one in the whole paragraph, which is fairly representative of the book. Was this omission of articles throughout *Living* based on any particular theory?

GREEN

I wanted to make that book as taut and spare as possible, to fit the proletarian life I was then leading. So I hit on leaving out the articles. I still think it effective, but would not do it again. It may now seem, I'm afraid, affected.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that an elliptical method like that has a function other than, as you say, suggesting the tautness and spareness of a particular situation?

GREEN

I don't know, I suppose the more you leave out, the more you highlight what you leave in—not true of taking the filling out of a sandwich, of course—but if one kept a diary, one wouldn't want a minute-to-minute catalogue of one's dreadful day.

INTERVIEWER

Well, that was written in 1927–1928—were you influenced toward that style by *Ulysses*?

GREEN

No. There's no “stream of consciousness” in any of my books that I can remember—I did not read *Ulysses* until *Living* was finished.

INTERVIEWER

That was your second novel, and that novel seems quite apart stylistically from the first and from those that followed—almost all of which, while “inimitably your own,” so to speak, are of striking diversity in tone and style. Of them, though, I think *Back* and *Pack My Bag* have a certain similarity, as have *Loving* and *Concluding*. Then again, *Nothing* and *Doting* might be said to be similar in that, for one thing at least, they’re both composed of . . . what would you say, ninety-five percent? . . . ninety-five percent dialogue.

GREEN

Nothing and *Doting* are about the upper classes—and so is *Pack My Bag*, but it is nostalgia in this one, and too, in *Back*, which is about the middle class. Nostalgia has to have its own style. *Nothing* and *Doting* are hard and sharp; *Back* and *Pack My Bag*, soft.

INTERVIEWER

You speak of “classes” now, and I recall that *Living* has been described as the “best proletarian novel ever written.” Is there to your mind, then, a social-awareness responsibility for the writer or artist?

GREEN

No, no. The writer must be disengaged or else he is writing politics. Look at the Soviet writers.

I just wrote what I heard and saw, and, as I’ve told you, the workers in my factory thought it rotten. It was my very good friend Christopher Isherwood used that phrase you’ve just quoted, and I don’t know that he ever worked in a factory.

INTERVIEWER

Concerning the future of the novel, what do you think is the outlook for the Joycean-type introspective style and, on the other hand, for the Kafka school?

GREEN

I think Joyce and Kafka have said the last word on each of the two forms they developed. There's no one to follow them. They're like cats which have licked the plate clean. You've got to dream up another dish if you're to be a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe that films and television will radically alter the format of the novel?

GREEN

It might be better to ask if novels will continue to be written. It's impossible for a novelist not to look out for other media nowadays. It isn't that everything has been done in fiction—truly nothing has been done as yet, save Fielding, and he only started it all. It is simply that the novelist is a communicator and must therefore be interested in any form of communication. You don't dictate to a girl now, you use a recording apparatus; no one faints anymore, they have blackouts; in Geneva you don't kill someone by cutting his throat, you blow a poisoned dart through a tube and *zing*, you've got him. Media change. We don't have to paint chapels like Cocteau, but at the same time we must all be ever on the lookout for the new ways.

INTERVIEWER

What do you say about the use of symbolism?

GREEN

You can't escape it, can you? What, after all, is one to do with oneself in print? Does the reader feel a dread of anything? Do they all feel a dread for different things? Do they all love differently? Surely the only way to cover all these readers is to use what is called symbolism.

INTERVIEWER

It seems that you've used the principle of "nonexistent author" in conjunction with another—that since identified with Camus, and called the absurd. For a situation to be, in this literary sense, genuinely absurd, it must be convincingly arrived at, and should not be noticed by readers as being at all out of the ordinary. Thus it would seem normal for a young man, upon the death of his father, to go down and take over the family's iron foundry, as in *Living*; or to join the service in wartime, as in *Caught*; or to return from the war, as in *Back*—and yet, in abrupt transitions like these, the situations and relationships which result are almost sure to be, despite any dramatic or beautiful moments, fundamentally *absurd*. In your work I believe this reached such a high point of refinement in *Loving* as to be indiscernable—for, with all the critical analyses that book received, no one called attention to the absurdity of one of the basic situations: that of *English* servants in an *Irish* household. Now, isn't that fundamental situation, and the absence of any reference to it throughout the book, intended to be purely absurd?

GREEN

The British servants in Eire while England is at war is Raunce's conflict, and one meant to be satirically funny. It is a crack at the absurd southern Irish and at the same time a swipe at the British servants, who yet remain human beings. But it is meant to torpedo that woman and her daughter-in-law, the employers.

As to the rest, the whole of life now is of course absurd—hilarious sometimes, as I told you earlier, but basically absurd.

INTERVIEWER

And have you ever heard of an actual case of an Irish household being staffed with English servants?

GREEN

Not that comes quickly to mind, no.

INTERVIEWER

Well, now what is it that you're writing on at present?

GREEN

I've been asked to do a book about London during the blitz, and I'm into that now.

INTERVIEWER

I believe you're considered an authority on that—and, having read *Caught*, I can understand that you would be. What's this book to be called?

GREEN

London and Fire, 1940.

INTERVIEWER

And it is not fiction?

GREEN

No, it's a historical account of that period.

INTERVIEWER

Then this will be your first full-length work of nonfiction?

GREEN

Yes, quite.

INTERVIEWER

I see. London and Fire, 1940—a commissioned historical work. Well, well; I daresay you'll have to give up the crabwise approach for this one. What's the first sentence?

GREEN

My 'London of 1940' . . . opens in Cork, 1938.

INTERVIEWER

. . . I see.

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