

activity in which issues can be resolved and actions concluded. They too are drawn into aesthetic patterns which are created out of an eccentric combination of the events described and a language that does more than merely describe them.

So Melchiori's 'precarious balance' is not only a balance between the asymmetrical shapes of events in the narrative. It is also a balance between events as constituents of the novel's plot, and events as opportunities for a display of style. Green's dislocated language gathers to itself and disengages itself from the story in an almost random way. It leaves a double impression in the mind – of events occurring in almost plotless inconsequence, and a queer elegance of style which uses incidents thrown up by the narrative as opportunities for displays of linguistic celebration.

*Party Going* is at the opposite end of the spectrum from *Concluding*. It inaugurates what *Concluding* concludes, and in so doing carries with it a 'cruder', and less abstracted picture of the world. Both the sensuousness and the abstraction of *Concluding* are less in evidence. In spite of the condition of stasis which both circumstance (the fog) and character contrive to bring about, more seems to have happened at the end of this novel than at the end of the later one. There are more tangible relationships and intimacies waiting to be left unresolved.

Stokes has remarked on Green's talent for 'creating an effect of livingness through incongruities'. He was referring to incongruities of events rather than of language. Particularly to the way these are assembled to produce the strange atmosphere of frivolousness and threat that permeates *Party Going*. Miss Fellowes's peculiar behaviour over a dead pigeon she finds near the Departure area of the station is just one of those 'intrusions of the abnormal on the normal' mentioned by Stokes. It is not restricted to the opening pages, but winds its way in and out of the events and conversations of the whole novel. Initially there is no explanation why the pigeon should have fallen dead at Miss Fellowes's feet at that particular time. Or why Miss Fellowes should have behaved as she did towards it. Green's description of what she does, after bending down and lifting the pigeon by its wing, indicates clearly what his attitude to the event will be:

No one paid attention, all were intent and everyone hurried, nobody looked back. Her dead pigeon then lay sideways, wings outspread as she held it, its dead head down towards the ground. She turned and she went back to where it had fallen and again looked up to where it must have died for it was still warm and, everything unexplained, she turned once more into the tunnel back to the station.

Miss Fellowes's behaviour is not strictly rational. It is not altogether peculiar either. Having suddenly been brought into such immediate contact with the dead bird, Miss Fellowes does not behave strangely when she picks it up by the tip of the wing. And, having done that, as the prose confirms, it becomes '*her* dead pigeon', her responsibility. Also, the return from the Departure tunnel to the place where the bird had fallen is unconstructive but not irrational. The bird still warm in her hand, she might well look up into the fog where it must have just died. The brief authorial parenthesis, 'everything unexplained', is a comment not only reproducing Miss Fellowes's thought processes, but mirroring our own. From this point on, with Miss Fellowes's decision to wash the bird so as to get rid of any fleas that might be lodged in its feathers, the old lady's behaviour does become more odd. Even so, it is a natural consequence, given her background and experience of dead animals in more appropriate rural surroundings, of her decision to *notice* the pigeon. The description of her in the ladies' washroom, drawing up her sleeves and plunging her fingers in the hot dirty water where the pigeon drowns in 'a thin wreath or two of blood', is grotesque. She is observed by two threatening 'granite' nannies and an attendant who is described as the 'guardian of this place' as she does 'what she felt must be done with hot water, turning her fingers to the colour of its legs and blood'. Miss Fellowes cannot get rid of the pigeon. She has the attendant wrap it up in brown paper. Later, feeling faint, she allows one of the hangers-on of the party to deposit it in a wastepaper basket. Still feeling unwell but having come out of her fainting-fit, she retrieves the parcel. That is the last we hear of her for the time being. Members of the party have begun to assemble on the platform, forcing her to withdraw into a subordinate position. The next section opens in the fog outside, with Julia Wray, one of the principal females of the party, leaving her uncle's house to make her way to the station.

Thereafter Miss Fellowes and her dead pigeon move to the side of the story. They will not go away altogether, though. In the tea-room she reflects on the correctness of her action in attending to the bird. But she is badly shaken and, after ordering a whisky and enduring the rudeness of the girls who are serving the drinks, she falls ill again. As a result she has to be taken into one of the rooms at the station hotel booked by Max Adey, the host. There she remains as a constant reminder of the vulnerability of human beings in the face of death (if she is as ill as some of them think she is) or of some spiritual infirmity which has been expressed through her behaviour with the pigeon. The nannies, attending in the sick-room, have 'an unfailing instrument for disaster'. They ruminate on the signs of mortality in comic-grotesque terms which later, in *Nothing*, are found to be absurdly appropriate to the way one of the minor characters, Arthur Morris, actually dies. From time to time we are invited to share Miss Fellowes's interior monologue, in which a frightening death is dreamed into being through images of crushing and drowning. Claire Hignam, her niece, and Evelyn Henderson, another member of the party, feel weighed down by their responsibility for this sick woman, separated from the frivolity and carelessness of the party by a single flight of stairs. Meanwhile Miss Fellowes mentally transfers her argument with the girl in the tea-room into an argument with death. A trivial social inconvenience takes on the character of a desperate struggle for health and life. And all the time the dead pigeon in its brown-paper parcel exerts an indefinable but powerful influence over everyone in the room:

'I think what we are both afraid of', said Evelyn, 'is that parcel she had and what was inside it. You know I have absolute faith in searching out whatever it is that is really worrying one underneath what seems on the surface to be the matter with anything . . . and I know in my case it was her having picked that pigeon up somewhere and then seeming so ill.'

Evelyn concludes, however, that 'it isn't anything to worry about'. Other characters in the novel don't worry about it. Julia, who is also related to Miss Fellowes, takes only a perfunctory interest in the old lady. The others are happy to accept the diagnosis of a doctor they are able to secure for a cursory examination, that nothing is seriously wrong. Again Green has

largely separated the feelings of his characters from the feelings of his readers. We share some of the anxiety of Claire and Evelyn, not the purposeful ignorance of the rest of the party, and the presence of the sick woman and the dead pigeon colour our picture of everything else that happens. The sexual games of the principal characters are played against a background of sudden death (of the pigeon), 'natural' behaviour leading to hysteria, and inadequately diagnosed illness. The fact that these things are sealed away from Max, Amabel, Julia and Angela Crevy, busy with their own sexual and social activities in the rooms downstairs, does not mean that they are put out of our minds as they are out of theirs.

The mixture of the odd and the threatening, that which provokes unease and anxiety in the midst of a light-hearted upper-class frolic, is by no means restricted to the incident involving Miss Fellowes and her pigeon. What is concentrated there spills out into the general situation in which Max and his party are discovered. One small example of this is the presence of the 'mystery man' who speaks to Miss Fellowes in the tea-room and follows her as she is carried into the station hotel. He is convinced of the seriousness of her illness and is recognised by the party-goers as a possible threat to their enjoyment of whatever facilities the hotel offers. He appears several times at unexpected moments, sometimes abashed, sometimes vaguely threatening. His dialect slips in and out of Yorkshire, Brumagem and standard English. His role also changes from scene to scene. At first it is rumoured he is the hotel detective, anxious to ensure that a seriously ill person does not remain on the premises. At other times he is made use of by the party-goers to (unsuccessfully) bring up Julia's servant, Thomson, with her luggage. In the process of performing this service for Julia, the man moves through a station platform which has been metaphorically transformed into a graveyard. Abandoned commuters stand like mourners over tombstones, which are their cases: 'they were like the dead resurrected in their clothes under this cold veiled light'. And the man 'dodged about asking any man he saw if he was Miss Julia Wray's so much as to say, "I be the gravedigger, would I bury you again?".'

It might be argued that this Pinteresque figure is unsuccessfully imported into the novel, adding to it a deposit of dramatic fantasy that is foreign to its essential character. Apart from Miss

Fellowes's disturbing presence in the hotel, a more potent and mysterious threat issues from general properties of the scene: the fog itself; the huge vault of glass under which everyone in the station is trapped; the steel shutter, forming a trap within a trap, that separates the hotel foyer from the crowds outside on the platform; and those milling crowds themselves, appearing ever more threatening and rebellious as the evening, and the fog, wear on.

The imagery of the fog is especially striking. One of the finest descriptions appears immediately after the affair of Miss Fellowes and the pigeon, during Julia Wray's walk to the station. Here the movement of human beings along the pavement is experienced as a 'dark flood' passing beneath a 'pall' of fog that renders traffic motionless and blocked. The lamps seem to be great distances away, making it 'like night', with fog as a 'ceiling shutting out the sky'. At any moment Julia expects the fog to 'drop suddenly down to the ground', enveloping her in a palpable gloom. After a movement onto more open ground she is 'reassured to see leaves brilliantly green veined like marble with wet dirt and these veins reflecting each light back'. The lights, from car headlamps, come 'like thoughts in darkness, in a story' until Julia is able to leave them and join the crowds disappearing down tunnels into the station and under that great vault of glass.

The fog has precipitated Julia and the others into a region of death where those tombstones and mourners on the platform are appropriately assembled. The emphasis falls almost continually on a claustrophobic sealing in of the people. 'Palls', 'marble' and 'vault' suggest a burial. The tunnels and dark floods summon up a picture of some pagan Underworld strangely infiltrated, as in a surrealistic fantasy, by the modern appurtenances of street-lamps, conduits and heavy suitcases.

It is in this land of the dead, of claustrophobic restraint, that the party-goers are prevented from travelling to their destination in the South of France. But the urge to escape, to free themselves from whatever restraint is represented by the fog, strangely and vitally crystallises out of the very heart of the fog. Julia, having decided to return home for her 'charms' – a wooden revolver, an egg with toy elephants inside it, and a top – crosses a footbridge and then, 'struck by misery', feels she has to stand still and look down at the stagnant water beneath her. 'Then three seagulls flew through that span on which she stood and that is what had

happened one of the times she first met him [Max], doves had flown under a bridge where she had been standing when she had stayed away last summer. She thought those gulls were for the sea they were to cross that evening.' As her charms suggest, Julia is one of the most empty-headed and selfish of all the party-goers, competing first with Angela Crevy, then with the more formidable Amabel, for Max Adey's attentions. And yet this image of the birds flying under the bridge, through the fog into clear skies, has a potent effect on her. It brings her superficial self-concern into contact with more general feelings of release and freedom. At the end of the novel, where she had renewed hopes of engaging Max's interest, her mind reverts to birds – perhaps these birds, which have changed from swallows to doves already, and might therefore have produced the image of pigeons in her thoughts now. Then, also, it is hinted that Julia's ambition might be less frivolous than she has ways of expressing it. She hopes 'it would be as though she could take him back into her life from where it had started and show it to him for them to share in a much more exciting thing of their own'.

Most of the rest of her story, and Amabel's, throw out few suggestions that their feelings for Max or for anyone else spring from such deep-seated psychic need. For the most part they are competitive, shallow and manipulating young women. They have little to do with their lives but impress suitable members of the opposite sex with their sophisticated manners and provocative sexuality. Also the men in the party are self-indulgent and charmingly predatory. They appear to have no sense of the seriousness of living, because their lives have never brought home to them that anything could happen differently from the kinds of things that were happening to them now. A minor inconvenience – fog delaying the boat train – can be made the opportunity for any number of sexual and social diversions. In any case, Max has so much money that he insists on their taking over half of the rooms for the evening. Then the competition between Julia and Angela can provide a welcome *divertissement*, with Julia in the stronger position, and Angela something of an outsider forcing her personality onto the other members of the party with the ultimate ambition of detaching Max from Julia. Further complications arise with the arrival half-way through the book of the beautiful, wealthy Amabel. Now the focus changes to Max's uncertainty as to whether he will drop Julia in favour of his

uninvited mistress, or find a diversion for Amabel. Such a diversion eventually materialises in the form of a hitherto much discussed, but not actually present, young man called Embassy Richard. When the fog lifts, the exchanges of partners and confidences in the hotel are seen to have acted as an amusing prelude to further potential complications.

The competition for Max among the three unattached young women is almost entirely frivolous. Each of them directs her ambitions and her feminine guile to the single aim of securing this rich and glamorous individual for herself. But there is beauty, too, in the physical presence of these women, and Green is very susceptible to it. Nowhere is this more seductively charming than in the description of Amabel's bath. It is interesting to trace the way Green shares this susceptibility with his readers by carefully distributing impressions of it from a variety of points of view – to all of which every reader, but none of the characters, is privy.

Amabel proposes that she will take a bath after a brief conversation with Angela Crevy, whom she has just met and doesn't appear to care for. Alex Alexander rings down to order it and telephones Amabel's maid to bring her crystals. This involvement with Alex, coupled with his use of Max's name to secure another room with a bath, establishes Amabel's sense of her own pre-eminence. It also establishes a propensity to tease Miss Crevy, which dominates the later description of the actual bathing. When her maid finally arrives with the crystals, Amabel repels Angela's bid for intimacy (she has asked if she should come and watch her have her bath) by inviting Alex to come into the room with her. Angela is left wondering whether Alex is actually watching Amabel in her bath. She weaves erotic fantasies around the situation by wondering whether it will be expected of her that Max shall play a similar rôle *vis à vis* herself.

This mixture of anxiety and excitement is accompanied by speculations about Alex and the maid being in the bath-room together: 'But surely not in front of her maid, she thought, without noticing how this would make it better in one sense, even if it could not make it right.' She decides that, even if Amabel does call, she will not enter the room if Alex is there: 'she could not be by the bath in front of Alex, looking into his eyes . . . it would be to look into his eyes laid upon the woman's nakedness'. Amabel is perfectly aware of Angela's discomfort and manoeuvres Alex into sharing it – in an imaginatively voyeuristic sense. For Alex is

firmly placed behind the bath-room door, forced to imagine Amabel's nakedness after being told, with a giggle, that 'She thinks we are in here together.' Alex asks if she takes her rings off when she has her bath. On being asked why, he confesses 'I was wondering what you looked like.' Meanwhile next door Claire is telling Evelyn that Amabel is keeping Alex hanging on. She tells her that, incongruously (and improbably – since it is Embassy Richard's gossip), Amabel allows no one, not even those who go to bed with her, to see her without clothes on, 'because someone quite early in life had carved his initials low on her back with an electric-light wire'. This absurd Firbankian allegation closes the incident for the time being.

Green has placed Amabel at the centre of several outer rings of voyeurs, or would-be voyeurs. First there is the maid, who plays a potent part in Alex's erotic picture of Amabel: he thinks of her as a negress, dark against the pink of Amabel's skin, with eyes that 'might have shone like two humming birds in the tropic airs she glistened in'. Alex converts Amabel into a pink-skinned Olympia, a healthy complement to Manet's pale-bodied courtesan. One circle further from the centre of Amabel's luxuriant immersion is Angela Crevy. She is calculating what kind of erotic exposure might follow her own displacement of Amabel from the position Amabel (or is it still Julia?) at present occupies in Max Adey's scheme of sexual gratification. Then, to import an additional air of ridicule into the situation, and particularly Angela's position in it, there is the gossip between Claire and Evelyn in the adjoining room.

What the description of the positions occupied by members of the cast in relation to Amabel excludes is our own position, what we ourselves are privileged to see. As it happens, we are in a position of the greatest privilege. Before Alex asked his question about the rings, we had seen them from an observation point even closer to the adorable nude than even her maid has occupied; 'She kicked her legs and splashed and sent fountains of water up among the wreaths of sweet steam, and her hands with rings still on her fingers were water-lilies done in rubies.' When Amabel gets out of the bath, with Alex and the others still at various removes from the inner sanctum of her self-exposure and self-adoration, we are still present. It is for our benefit as well as for her own that Amabel's body is allowed slowly to emerge from the wreaths of steam:



The walls were made of looking-glass, and were clouded over with steam; from them her body was reflected in a faint pink mass. 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. . . .

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 of herself began to be reflected.

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.

This loving and witty celebration of the woman's body comes to an appropriate climax with that stinging little comment 'so good that she looked mild, which she was not'. But in the description of her drying we see her as she sees herself – with narcissistic delight at the changing colours of her skin and at the slow emergence of her body as the steam evaporates from those provocatively misted mirrors. We are at the core of Amabel's charm, her delight in herself, which is inseparable from her occupation of that splendidly exposed but still private flesh. Her drying and polishing of herself is an erotic act, the towel descending from face and neck and shoulders down to breast and stomach and legs. Every feature emerges doubly from the ever more luminously reflecting mirrors in which she delights to view herself.

The astringent framework of rumour, embarrassment and sublimated desire encloses ourselves as well as Amabel: we are an unseen presence, an appreciative mirror before which she stands and enjoys herself. We have to go back to Donne and Carew, or at least to Keats in 'The Eve of St Agnes', to come anywhere close to the calm, aestheticised eroticism of this passage. It is not,

however, so very unusual in Green. Merode, too, in *Concluding*, takes us into her bathroom – though for considerably less time. And there is the climax to Charley Summers's discovery of his dead Rose in the living body of her half sister Nancy, on the last page of *Back*.

In *Party Going*, as in most of Green's other work, a frank appeal to the reader's sensuality is made through images which are erotic but not pornographic. They are not pornographic because they relate back and forward to the changing lives of women who become them, and because they are placed in the setting of a physical awareness of the world which exists quite apart from them. But Green's awareness of the desirability of women and the constant undercurrent of sexual attraction and disturbance he knows this gives rise to does not always create the kind of sensuous epiphany we have enjoyed in the descriptions of Amabel's bath or Nancy Whitmore's bed. More often it is responsible for an undercurrent of physical awareness that coexists with other activities, desires, and often trivial worries and anxieties. Two of Green's novels where this is conspicuously the case are *Caught* and *Loving*. To my mind these two novels represent the apex of Green's achievement, bringing together more satisfyingly than any of the others do the intricate patterning and the insight into human psychology which are the hallmarks of his art.

All of Green's best work is marked by his experience of the war years. Usually it takes as its subject some aspect of civilian life during that time. The threatening atmosphere of the fog-bound station in *Party Going* suggests some imminent catastrophe, though the nature of that catastrophe is muffled by an eccentric symbolism. Charley Summers's mental disturbance in *Back* has been caused by the death of his mistress while he has been separated from her in a POW camp in Germany. What happens in it happens in London during the last half of 1944, the period of the 'flying bombs', which play an important part in the plot. *Caught* is set in the period of the 'phoney' war and the first air raids of May 1940; *Loving* at some unspecified time during the middle of the war.

Of all Green's novels *Caught* is the most closely involved with the war. The private fantasies of the characters are seen against a