

1955

Comment

University of New Mexico Press

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

University of New Mexico Press. "Comment." *New Mexico Quarterly* 25, 2 (1955). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol25/iss2/22>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

COMMENT

6 *Something About Henry Green*

I WANT TO SAY something about Henry Green because I think that such comment as he has had, especially in this country, has usually done less than justice to him. He has not been treated harshly, but with one or two exceptions he has been dismissed too lightly. *Life* magazine's grin over his dual life, as an industrialist and a novelist, typifies the acceptance of Green as an amusing oddity. It is not surprising. If one approaches his novels expecting the idle recreation of an eccentric businessman, one will find what seems ample indication of the work of a dilettante who has picked up the clichés of modern novelists: the style is brittle and grammatically peculiar; such form as is apparent seems that of a short story, pneumatically inflated; the characters are shallow and insignificant, and their affairs—the plots of the novels—are supremely trivial. Indeed, the novels give a strong impression of mere oddity and faddish vacuity.

But I do not think that Green's novels are really odd and I do not think that they are merely clever. Without pretending to present the Writer of the Century, I think I can nevertheless make out a case for the view that Green is a serious novelist whose accomplishment is very impressive. I want to argue that Green is a superb craftsman whose craft is devoted to the exposition of a limited but interesting view of life. In other words, I want to argue that what may seem capricious or trivial or faddish in Green's writing is the product of real art and not of dilettantism.

Green's achievement in the novel to date is the creation—indeed, the evolution—of a medium for expressing a particular view of reality which sees some significant aspects of life through the seemingly incoherent and insignificant superficialities of it. In aim and in method Green is reminiscent of Jane Austen, piercing into the heart of human reality without philosophizing or generalizing but only by exposing patterns in the small, nameless, thoughtless acts and notions and feelings which are the ordinary stuff of our individual and corporate lives.

Novelists have always been confronted with the fact that their subject matter, this "stuff of life," is chaotic, and generally unmanageable, and that it is the artist's function to create meaningful order. Traditionally, absolute religious or ethical systems which transcend

human life have served, so to speak, as magnets whose positive and negative poles of value line up the iron filings which are the raw material of life. In our times Freud, Marx, and Einstein, in their various ways, have neutralized the absolute orders; modern writers are left with only the iron filings.

"Realism" has thus become the philosophical substitute for absolute value judgments, with the result that the chaotic materials of life become life itself, the true definition of life. The realistic writer is less concerned with major, clearly "important" action than with the sum of trivial acts which seem to have no particular result and no special significance. Each writer arranges his material in his own order, a pattern which reveals the true reality as he sees it. Thus "realism" takes on as many forms as religion ever did, and perhaps the best way to explain Henry Green's unique point of view will be to distinguish it from two extremes which the realistic approach has taken: for convenience we might call these the objective and subjective methods.

Objective realism is the easier to describe. The objective realist takes the meaningless, chaotic stuff of life and gives it all the order it needs by arranging it in lists. In his *Story of a Novel*, Thomas Wolfe tells of the ledgers in which he set down "everything from gigantic and staggering lists of the towns, cities, counties, states, and countries I had been in, to minutely thorough, desperately evocative descriptions of the undercarriage, the springs, wheels, flanges, axle rods, color, weight, and quality of the day coach of an American railway train," and he says that he wrote 100,000 words about the journey of a train across Virginia at night. This is the objective method: to record all experience for its own sake, a man being the total of all the places he has been, things he has touched, words he has heard, etc. Thus a man may find himself; thus he can establish his identity and his relation to the world at large. (At its extreme, of course, such a principle may be an absurdity, as if counting grains of sand would define a beach.)

The subjective realist like Virginia Woolf is also interested in trivialities—not, however, in themselves, but as they enter the stream of consciousness, where these things take on symbolic significance. She sees the inner consciousness as the true reality, and anything may be significant as it makes an impact on the mental and emotional life. For example, in *To the Lighthouse*, the lighthouse of the title has function in the novel only as it represents to various characters a vague, impotent yearning. Nothing is important, nothing is real, ex-

cept as it is apprehended; but through apprehension anything may become important—a grain of sand becomes a symbol while a mountain passes unnoticed.

Henry Green stands in an oblique relation to these two divergent points of view. To him, the external and the internal are not sharply distinguished. External facts and incidents, internal thoughts, feelings, and fancies, together comprise the chaos out of which each person must create the order which is his life. It might even be said that Green's characters themselves are directly dealing with the problem of realism; to separate the trivial from the significant, the fancied from the actual, is the problem which all of them must somehow solve. Their one awareness is the necessity to gain their own identity by finding a pattern for their lives; but the awareness is not deliberate and the search is half-conscious and confused, a kind of puberty of the mind and spirit. His characters are constantly amazed at the trivialities of their existence, at the inconsequence of their efforts to be effective, at the absurdity of their attempts to understand or to be understood. Green's stories, therefore, as their titles often indicate—*Living, Party-going, Loving, Concluding, Doting*—are concerned with processes, not with achieved states of being.

Thus, though they are no more stupid or indecisive than anyone else, Green's characters muddle their way through life, trying to define their own reality, trying to express themselves in word and action. They finally achieve what they can momentarily accept as a solution, though they are actually little nearer than before to self-awareness. Yet there is a way out of this chaos; and if the characters in the novels do not find it, it is partly because they are negative examples—they are, ultimately, in the gentlest possible sense, satiric portraits. But they are satirized only gently because they all try, and to a greater or less extent trying is success. Thus the general title for all Green's novels might be *Doing*. *Doing* is better than *Not-Doing*; sloth is the trap. Some doings are better than others, of course, and the best of all is loving.

It is significant, I think, that *Loving* should be the novel which seems most thoroughly realized. Its subject is, of all Green's extremely various subjects, closest to the central problem in his awareness of life, for among human experiences it is the process of loving which most immediately raises the question, who or what am I? and sets in conflict the greatest range of associated ideas, moods, and actions.

To express this paradoxical view of reality as a meaningful and pur-

poseful aggregate of the meaningless and purposeless details of life, Green has evolved a style and form for the novel which, though of course not created by him whole cloth, are uniquely his and are a thoroughly fitting medium for what he has to say.

Green chooses to treat the novel as a self-contained but only arbitrarily limited segment of experience which must be made to reveal itself casually, without apparent premeditation. Thus his novels have neither beginning nor end in the Aristotelian sense—he attempts to create for the reader the illusion that he is being introduced to a group of people who already know each other and have no particular reason overtly to explain their pre-existing characters or situations; one gradually gets to know them from their actions, from casual allusions that they make to what little of importance has happened to them previously. Finally, by living with them for a while—sometimes by having access to thoughts one would not in life be let in on—one gets to know them well; this accomplished, nothing more of significance will transpire and so the novel may stop—not end, just stop. Although *Loving* might seem something of an exception to this principle in that it begins and ends with definite events, even these do not begin and end the action in the usual sense. What happens in *Loving* does not follow with any kind of necessity from the event which opens the story, the death of a butler, with the consequent elevation of Charley Raunce to that position; and the essential unimportance of the elopement of Charley and Edith at the end of the novel is pointed up by the manner in which Green treats it: "Over in England they were married and lived happily ever after." He is saying, of course, that you can think this concludes the matter if you want to; if you want the kind of ending stories have, well, here is a real story-book ending for you—but life doesn't really come to conclusions this way.

This indefiniteness at the limits of the stories serves, as it characteristically does in Virginia Woolf's novels as well, to avoid the isolation of the chosen experience—to keep it from seeming an island of significance in an otherwise normal life. At the same time, and more directly serving Green's particular point of view, the device suggests that this process of self-definition, what I have called the puberty of the mind and spirit, does not have a chronological inception and completion, as physical adolescence does. Rather, this is the very process of a lifetime.

Technically, this device imposes a particular necessity that the action be, or at least seem, self-contained. If a novelist chooses, by means

of a narrator or his own unacknowledged intervention, formally to introduce the characters and the situation to the reader, he has considerable freedom in the exposition of extraneous information: when he brings in a new character, for example, he may pause to review the person's history from birth if he chooses. In creating the illusion of non-intervention, Green accepts severe limitations upon exposition because it must seem that the reader is dropping into the action almost accidentally or at random. Illustration of this principle would have to be lengthy; I may only observe here that Green is remarkably skillful in keeping matters of concern within the actual scope of the story and remarkably subtle in introducing what he cannot work into the immediate action.

Green's style reinforces the impression of immediacy which is created by such a carefully restricted form. Since his characters do not reveal themselves in large and crucial acts, but rather in their minute concerns within a narrow scope of action, the emphasis must be upon conversation and gesture at the expense of narration and description in the more general sense. Green's perception is shrewd and humorous, and he has developed a style which is clean and economical but at the same time suggests the vagaries and redundancies of speech; without awkwardness or obscurity he manages to suggest the usually clumsy attempt to "say just what I mean." In *Loving*, for example, there is a conversation between the housemaids, Edith and Kate, just after Edith's discovery of Mrs. Jack and the captain:

"There 'e was," Edith broke out between gasps. "I seen the hair of 'is 'ead, large as life, you could 'a' knocked me down with a leaf," she said.

"The what?" cried Kate arrested. . . .

"The captain," Edith replied calmer, put a hand to her throat, and swallowed. With obviously a great leap of her mind Kate got there.

"In your young lady's bed? O goody," she shouted, at which both began to giggle helpless. "Large as life," one said, the other repeated, then the two of them giggled again. "In her bed," one said, the other echoed, and both shouted with laughter. "All night?" shrieked Kate, and it seemed she forgot that she had been at odds with Edith about Charley Raunce. "All night," Edith screamed back. Holding their sides, they crowed with laughter.

These devices of abrupt, unstated transition, the elimination of dispensable words with merely grammatical function, and conversational repetitiveness, the fragmentary remarks and the economical narrative device of "one said, the other repeated," all contribute to a vivid evo-

cation of the girls' titillation and confusion, their amusement which verges both on embarrassment and on tears. What Green is aiming at in style is much the same thing that he is aiming at in the structure of the novel: a sense of direct participation and a reduction, a pruning down to what is absolutely essential.

Just as it is typical of Green's characters that they are always talking but seldom seem to listen, so his style and technique put the reader in precisely the same position: the reader finds that he too isn't really listening. Something that he read a bit ago was probably significant but he missed it; what he is reading at the moment seems to have a significance which he cannot entirely grasp. The transparency of the writing, the casual, unclimactic order of events are not so much trappings of style as they are the subjects of the novels. As the characters muddle along, the reader muddles along behind; as the characters fail to find purpose in their lives, the reader may almost fail to find purpose in the novel. But not quite, for the disorganization of the novel is only apparent.

This view of Green's central communication and his medium for expressing it seems to me to explain the sense of importance which attaches to his characters; in spite of the fact that what they are up to is of flamboyant unimportance, we are concerned about them and what they are doing. We are made to follow the process that each one goes through in attempting to define, to articulate, to communicate, to achieve—something, or nothing.

JAMES APPLEGATE