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Abstract

Henry Green did not finish his second novel, *Mood*, nor, for very different reasons, did he finish the memoirs of his fire-fighting experience in London during the Blitz. On the collapse of his last project, an attempt to return to and complete his 'interim' autobiography, *Pack My Bag* (1940), he produced for *The Spectator* in 1963 what in effect were his last words as a writer ([1992 284-85]). 'For Jenny with Affection from Henry Green' was a kind of apology for being unable to write novels any more and, more obliquely (since it was to Jenny Rees that he had been dictating his autobiography), for leaving unfinished business. This is the death of the author, although the retired businessman, Henry Yorke, lived on for another sad decade. He could not, finally, articulate his traumatic experience in the Blitz, for like many of his tormented protagonists, from *Blindness* (1926) to *Back* (1946), he found it impossible to tell the whole painful story. In the fiction he had by many devices to 'tell it slant', as Emily Dickinson put it, which also meant to sustain ambiguity to the end, in the end.

ALISTAIR STEAD

On Not Having the Last Word: Back to Henry Green

‘The end of my life,’ Charley said, thinking aloud. ‘That’s what it is. I’m finished,’ dramatizing it.

(Henry Green 1946 89)

Henry Green did not finish his second novel, *Mood*, nor, for very different reasons, did he finish the memoirs of his fire-fighting experience in London during the Blitz. On the collapse of his last project, an attempt to return to and complete his ‘interim’ autobiography, *Pack My Bag* (1940), he produced for *The Spectator* in 1963 what in effect were his last words as a writer ([1992 284–85]). ‘For Jenny with Affection from Henry Green’ was a kind of apology for being unable to write novels any more and, more obliquely (since it was to Jenny Rees that he had been dictating his autobiography), for leaving unfinished business. This is the death of the author, although the retired businessman, Henry Yorke, lived on for another sad decade. He could not, finally, articulate his traumatic experience in the Blitz, for like many of his tormented protagonists, from *Blindness* (1926) to *Back* (1946), he found it impossible to tell the whole painful story. In the fiction he had by many devices to ‘tell it slant’, as Emily Dickinson put it, which also meant to sustain ambiguity to the end, *in the end*.

Here, I return to some unfinished business of my own work on Green (Stead), to address last words again. Dying words tend to constitute another kind of unfinished business, susceptible to divergent interpretations. Are Gogol’s last words,¹ for instance, those quoted in *Blindness* (see below) or those, on his prescribed Biblical epitaph, quoted by Jonathan Green: ‘And I shall laugh a bitter laugh’ (113), to which the sardonic subtitle to Part I of *Blindness*, ‘Laugh’, may allude?² When, at John Lehmann’s suggestion, Green adopted the supposed last words of the philosopher F.H. Bradley for the title of his autobiography, he self-dramatisingly evoked the prospect of his own imminent death in the Second World War. Yet the quoted words license another reading: the last words of a man who looked like ‘a highly civilised explorer’ (Wollheim 14) may represent a point of (excited) departure into the unknown rather than resignation to the preordained. As in Paul Muldoon’s witty listing of the dying words of the notable in ‘Famous First Words’ (39–40), they may seem to inaugurate an immortality of repetition and re-interpretation. The novel’s closure, its last word, may resound just as memorably and ambiguously as the exit lines of either the famous dead or

novel characters. The idea that, as Karl Guthke says, last words might betray the real self in a 'final, self-validating articulation of consciousness in extremis' (4), is implicitly questioned by Green's modernist preference for enigmatic utterance, subtextual revelation, and anticlimactic or double denouements.

I want to examine last words in two contexts to do with unfinished business. First, I compare the allusive practices in the early and late novels, *Blindness* and *Back*, which are involved in internovel dialogue. In *Back*, Green doubles back on the *Blindness* portrait of the aspiring public school boy to explore in another traumatised, now older, now middle-class protagonist, his struggle to establish a new identity, via a mistaking of another's identity. Then, I consider the relation of critical to creative practice. According to Roland Barthes, 'the critic, like the writer, never has the last word' (xi); here, the dialogical interplay of writer and reader opens up rather than closes down the text. Quotation and allusion presuppose critical choices and are subject to critical processes of selection and editing to contribute to the new work. The explicitness of a quotation usually enables the reader to recognise more immediately a source and its function in the text, whereas allusion, making a more submerged or partial reference, serves to quicken the reader's imagination, conjuring up without stating what is unspoken or even unspeakable.³

As a first novel, *Blindness* is both teasingly self-referential (like Joyce's) and ostentatiously literary (like Lawrence's). The protagonist John Haye sees himself as a 'budding author', so his reading and the use he makes of it matter. He is dialogically contrasted with other (lesser) readers and would-be writers, quoters and alluders (chiefly his stepmother, his 'girlfriend' Joan, Joan's father, and two schoolfriends). Yet critics have considered *Blindness* exceptional in having a writer-hero. John Russell finds Green 'the most unquoting, unallusive of writers. There are no literary references, no literary personages in his books' (1964 435); but others (from Giorgio Melchiori to Treglown) counter this view, and Green does indeed dramatise readers and reading in most of his fiction, from Mr Craigan, working-class lover of Dickens in *Living* (1929), to upper-class Richard Roe in *Caught* (1943).

Blindness self-consciously enacts Green's theoretical shift away from self-reflexively literary writing (Russell 1964 444). Thus, as his diary shows, John is, like young Henry, a voracious and eclectic reader, but his accidental blinding puts paid to reading for himself and throws him back on memory, imagination, and a compensating heightening of his other senses. Although the middle-aged Green claimed, 'I forget everything I read at once including my own stuff' (1992 243), in *Pack My Bag* (1940) the writer-critic recalls influences, re-reading and quoting his early work. Moreover, where a fictional protagonist is most readily identifiable with Green, as in the wartime story 'The Lull', 'Henry' easily recognises a quotation from Verlaine (1992 108). Although this constantly experimental writer does not usually re-read his novels, it is clear that he

remembers them, repeating them with a difference which combines intuition with craft.

Both *Blindness* and *Back* pivot on acts of reading by their protagonists, the embryonic writer John, who will lose his sight, and the repatriated soldier Charley Summers, who has lost a leg. These acts have a direct bearing on ‘last words’ and are at the heart of that ‘gathering web of insinuations’ (1989 88) which, as Green theorises, provokes the reader to active creation of meaning. Both major acts are doubly critical: judgement is passed at some crux in experience and will be examined in turn.

In *Blindness*, John’s diary breaks off (interrupted by the catastrophe of his blinding) as he has just set down his ecstatic praise of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (33–34), a culmination of his record of maturing critical and creative responses. What follows is coloured by the Russian literature he has cited or allusively drawn on, but the book’s climax is a vision-bearing Dostoevskyan epileptic fit, its explosive form rhyming with the diarist’s opening and closing enthusiasms, for Carlyle’s ‘explosive style’ and for Dostoevsky’s refashioning of conclusions. The inner pattern of harking back to beginnings inside the diary corresponds to the larger strategy of revisionary self-quotation in the novel as a whole. Much the same happens in *Back* (and other major fiction by Green), where novelist, character and reader share remembering. As Green told Harvey Breit in 1950, ‘I have to make my opening statement and for the remaining seven-eighths of the novel revolve around it’ (75). If ‘The opening chapter is where you have to learn to read the book’,⁴ then openings may well be critically creative and, in Green, one may only understand endings, last words, in terms of recollected beginnings. As Green felt compelled to return to the beginning again and again, so the co-creative reader may feel the need to re-read as the book constantly quotes or alludes to itself.

Critics like Russell and Mengham have recognised the thematic and structural import of allusion to *Crime and Punishment*, but not the range of Green’s reference to Russian writing. Thus Russell (1960 Ch.3) traces the main movement from the intellectual self-absorption of the hero through to his yielding to authentic impulses of sympathy and self-awareness, while Mengham, more provocatively, examines the ‘hysterical guilt’ common to both texts (2–12). Yet *Blindness* parodies *Crime and Punishment*, simultaneously in homage and mockery, acting as both critique and new creation. It does not completely invert the near-tragic exposure of a haunted criminal consciousness working towards possible regeneration. The literally blinded John, like the morally blind Raskolnikov, does fall ill, subject to sick thoughts and visions but, no megalomaniac murderer, he is merely an upper-class youth — self-regarding, pretentious and aloof — who looks for solace, if not redemption, from the slatternly country girl Joan rather than from a saintly whore. Endeavouring to repeat the Dostoevskyan gesture of replacing the ‘last word’ of the landowner writer with the ‘new word’ of the

social class identified with the modern city (the downtrodden prostitute making one with the exiled intellectual), John fails to cross class boundaries, leaving Joan behind and heading as a would-be modern novelist for London — an urban space more conducive to modern writing.⁵

The novel is transposed from major into minor key, converting potential tragedy into unheroic, seemingly trivial comedy, but not untroubled comedy. John's climactic seizure would seem to confirm his Dostoevskyan status as a visionary (*Blindness* 33). The fit does not, however, segue into a Dostoevskyan guilty depression, *pace* Mengham (12), nor does the excited emergence of the tyro novelist constitute Weatherhead's 'uncritically conclusive' ending (20). That the novel 'comes to a halt with a shock of revealed truth' (Mengham 11) is subtly contested by a nascent Greenian play on last words and his early doubling of denouements. First, as John in his seizure experiences a rising sensation, he utters (slightly modified) Gogol's dying words: 'A ladder, bring a ladder' (253). John, who had in his diary quoted admiringly, unconsciously empathetically, from Gogol's unfinished *Dead Souls* (Part II), now unconsciously identifies with the *novelist* himself, abandoning fiction for his religious mission, deliriously seeking a symbolic ladder to ascend from the profane to the sacred sphere. John's reading has not been *generally* recollected. Gogol's words return, forcefully, but with their significance secularised and inverted. *That* ending is a near miss. Recovering, John enjoys a kind of resurrection, like the Lazarus of the Gospel according to St. John which, in a scene that impresses him (33), Sonia reads so inspiringly to a reviving Raskolnikov (Dostoevsky iv), but a resurrection both tentatively erotic and aesthetic.

A coda follows: John's rather gushing letter to an ex-schoolfriend is merely a promissory note that he will succeed in writing now that he has given up the country estate for a flat in London. The allusion in it to Sonia's almost frightening happiness in Siberia on the verge of what John had read as 'freedom, reconciliation, love' (34). This last sentence of John's, 'Why am I so happy today?', problematises any correspondingly ideal happy ending for himself, and seems to echo, too, similar vulnerable expressions of doom-shadowed self-consciousness shared by Olga, Irina and Andrey in Act One of *Three Sisters*, all dispossessed by Act Four (Tchekhov 5, 28).

The last word, signing off the letter and the novel, is John's name. Here the text quotes itself, revisiting the resonant name with irony: first, Joan's mother's indecorous 'last words' [sic] were '*John*', the name of the postman with whom she has committed adultery (104), as though we are meant to see some curious parallel with the namesake hero, who, thwarted in his desire for Joan, may sublimate erotic release in becoming a man of letters. Then, his stepmother's repeated calling out of his name in her alarm at *his* possible last moments is seemingly answered by the newly confident signature of one who is nevertheless still dependent on her care. But the paraph may also allude to the note of

unfinished, unfinishable business, with which St. John concludes that Gospel in which he has narrated the raising of Lazarus: 'And there are also many things which Jesus did, the which, if they would be written everyone, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written' (*John* 21:25). In its insinuation that he who has not yet written within this narrative what he has projected might be the author of the book we read, it repeats something of the similarly disconcertingly modernist strategy of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Turning now to *Back* in order to examine the way judgement in that fiction is also passed at a crux in experience, we find that the remarkable subject of the principal act of reading which is a turning point for Charley Summers, the disabled hero of *Back*, is an extract from the translated memoirs of an eighteenth-century French aristocrat called *Souvenirs de la Marquise de Créquy* (93–104).⁶ Quoting from translations in both novels may afford a strong hint that the act of reading involves a creative opportunity as well as the risk of misreading. Both protagonists 'misread' the women: John whimsically translates Joan into 'June'; Charley hysterically translates Nancy into 'Rose'. The choice of the *Souvenirs* for Charley's foreign reading matter may underline the point, for the quoted text is obscure, and the reader may not know that Green himself translated the original, or that it is possibly a forgery (Mengham 171–72).

In spite of the inversions and perversions of them in the intertextual play of *Blindness*, the distinguished Russian writers function as a species of authority, a supportive modern tradition. In *Back*, the literary source is minor, and lacks traditional authority, even authenticity. Yet Green's creatively edited translation deviously focuses attention on its transposition to the new context: the contemporary instance of mistaken identity (and its pathetic outcome). James Phillips, the husband of Charley's dead love, Rose, finds the translation in a literary magazine to which either Rose or James's sister has subscribed. Neither James nor Charley are 'literary', but James becomes temporarily, parodically, surrogate author in recognising some application of the translated story to Charley's situation and in inciting the character (and the reader) to find meaning in what is quoted. James even uses quotation, from the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent in *The Book of Common Prayer*, to make his point: 'Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest' (91). It is noteworthy that ironic references in *Back*, in general contrast with *Blindness*, often spring from *unmarked* quotation, like the allusion which implicitly compares Charley's forgetting of Rose to Peter's denial of Christ (13, 151) or from 'popular' sources ('the dear departed'; for better or worse, richer or poorer'; Grimms' fairy tales, *Briar Rose* and *Snow White and Rose Red*).

Charley as man-child reminds us of John, being 'queer' in disability, slowness, baffled desire and sense of disorientation; but he lacks the adolescent's precocious erudition or artistic ambition. Indeed, returned to his office job in a manufacturing

firm still traumatised by his almost unspeakable experience as a prisoner of war, he sets out to forget the immediate past but finds he cannot forget his Rose, who is so well remembered that she seems to him to be still alive in the person of Nancy. As urgent in quest of meaning as a Dostoevskyan hero caught between reality and dream, he appears to be an obsessive reader, but not of fiction, or even something similar, like the *Souvenirs*. Where, for example, in *Blindness* John embarrassingly bombards Joan with quotations from seventeenth-century lyric poetry mentioning roses (180), in *Back*, Charley is overwhelmed by bizarre accidental reminders of Rose's name:

He fled Rose, yet every place he went she rose up before him; in florists' windows; in a second-hand bookseller's with a set of Rhoda Broughton, where, as he was staring for her reflection in the window, his eyes read a title, 'Cometh up as a flower' which twisted his guts; also in a seed merchant's front that displayed a watering can, to the spout of which was fixed an attachment, labelled 'Carter's patent Rose'. (56)

This microcosmic paragraph begins and ends with Rose, but also modulates from romantic elegy into the bathetic quotidian, just as everything in the text reverts to the introductory scene of Charley returning to find her burial place in a rose-wreathed country graveyard where he is identified as a reader of monumental last words. The names of both unknown and familiar women, Sophie and Rose, are cut into tombstones (and the identificatory card on Nancy's door will sport the same Gothic lettering as appears on Rose's grave, encouraging Charley to confuse the living Nancy with his dead love). That Rose and Nancy are to play a part in Charley's neurotic fiction-making, his confusion of the real and the fantastic, is initially signalled by his reading of 'Sophie', uncanny proleptic quotation, which only a retrospective reading will identify with one of the names of the heroine of the *Souvenirs*, but a reading ostensibly beyond Charley. The ambiguous address to Nancy, 'I wrote you' (53), confirms him as a kind of re-writer who reads his own paranoid fancy into most of the texts he encounters: for example, a poster outside a church allows him to see in 'Grant, O Lord' the detested name of Rose's father Gerald (58).

As *Blindness* parodies Dostoevsky, the whole story of *Back* parodies that of *Souvenirs*. This memoir functions as a *mise-en-abîme* — with a critical difference. The chronologically earlier account of a woman who falls in love successively with two men (Count de Gisors and M. de Guys), half-brothers who are the doubles of each other, is reversed in the modern novel when it is a man (Charley) who falls in love with two women (Rose and Nancy), who are half-sisters and strongly resemble each other.

The *Souvenirs* end with Madame de Créquy's comment on Sophie Septimanie's unforgettable 'last moments, when, with both lovers gone, she seemed, as in her turn she lay dying before my eyes to fuse the memory of these two men into one, into one true lover' (104). Sophie utters no last words but her dying moments are translated, as if articulated, into that final romanticised image

of convergence. Green's own translation deviates from the French to create something less abstract, more erotic, and more rhetorically pointed toward a fabulous identification: 'into one, into one true lover'.⁷ After the romance comes, the by now familiar pattern, the bathetic yet mysterious conclusion to this crucial section, the laconic exclamation of the sceptical Charley when he has 'read right through to the end' ('Ridiculous story') and his enjoyment of unexpectedly good sleep (104). If we compare this finale with the close of the novel, attention does not seem to be focused on his dying moments. On the contrary, it is the last moments of Gerald Grant, as reflected in the animal cries of his distressed wife, Amy, which play a significant role in moving Charley towards the possibility of recovery. The last moments of the reader's encounter with him at first stress initiation: 'he went to her room for *the first time* in what was to be a happy married life' [emphasis added]. But then the conventional fairy-tale discourse of the narrator's reassuring prophecy is crucially supplanted, characteristically contradicted, by a lyrically sensuous description of the approach to carnal union. It is only an approach, and the ideal union of Sophie's imagination, fusing two lovers into one, seems to be mocked by Charley's apparent mistake in naming. Charley's last words in the novel are notoriously ambiguous: "'Rose," he called out, not knowing that he did so, "Rose"' (208). The iteration of 'Rose', quoting an earlier ingemination (179), may suggest that, still under Rose's spell, he has regressed to his illusion that Nancy is Rose. Is this the sign of a blind persistence that would indeed fuse two loved ones morbidly into one? If Charley gets a good night's sleep for the first time after reading the *Souvenirs*, then his unconscious 'inward digestion' of the romanticism of the parable is matched by his calling out of Rose's name, 'not knowing that he did so'. Or is this the last of Rose whose death has now become real to him so that he can truly, cathartically mourn and cry out loud, twice, the dead love's name, like the recovered amnesiac Amy Grant calling out her dad humsband's name, 'Gerald. Gerald' (185), as, on this Christmas day, Charley is to be reborn (he 'bawled like a child') and not to die?

The penultimate shift to pragmatic Nancy's corresponding monosyllabic iteration ("There", Nancy said, "There") and to her *consciousness* ('She knew' ...) might suggest that Rose, and all that her proper name has meant in the way of frustrated and confused desire, fails to have the last word. That has, perhaps, been written and read when Charley, even more clearly a parody of a writer, has attempted to tell the story his own fantastic way. Like the 'ridiculed' Sophie, the Rose whom he has denied becomes 'just a tale' (151). He re-reads the five letters from her which he has saved and, in order to prove by a handwriting test that Nancy is Rose, cuts them up to compose, in collage, a single specimen. This editing of the letters mimics the hidden practice of the author, Green, in his translation and transposition of part of the *Souvenirs*. Charley, however, finds that his critical practice has resulted not in a new creation but in a destruction of the letters as only tangible souvenirs of Rose. In the last of the quoted letters the

manifestly feckless and manipulative tale-teller Rose has left out her name: ‘Your —’ (121). That aposiopesis may be read as deceased Rose’s ‘revelatory’ last word, a careless dash emblematic of her withholding of the truth, notably about the paternity of her child Ridley,⁸ and a blank screen onto which her lover may project his compensatory imaginings. In his fabricated letter, he preserves her usual signature, now an empty signifier in a mystified message. His good night’s sleep for the first time after this betrayal repeats the apparently therapeutic consequence of his reading of the *Souvenirs* and anticipates the first time of lovemaking with Nancy announced but not quite enacted on the last page. All this leaves Charley and other readers ‘right through to the end’, critically-creatively, to sort things out for themselves, attuned to Nancy’s low-key note of resignation (‘It was no more or less, really, than she had expected.’): last words which leave open the extent and cost of the unfinished business of loving.

NOTES

- ¹ Most writers on Gogol repeat but misquote the memoir of his doctor given in A.T. Tarasenkov’s *Last Days of N.V. Gogol* (1856): *Lestnitsu, poskoreye, davai lestnitsu* in Russian, literally translated as: ‘A ladder, faster, bring a ladder’.
- ² Curiously, neither version of Gogol’s last words appears in Guthke, the most thoughtful study of the *ultima verba*.
- ³ Compare Green’s explicit theorising in 1950 about the force of plurisignificance and the left-unsaid in dialogue in ‘A Novelist to His Readers: I’ (1992 136–42).
- ⁴ Frank Kermode in a review of Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* in the *London Review of Books*, 8 March 2001, p. 29.
- ⁵ To Dostoevsky, the literature of Tolstoy and Turgenev, as ‘the apogee of the landowner’s word’ was ‘the very last. The new word that is to replace the landowner’s has not yet been heard’ (Dostoevsky’s Letter to N.N. Strakov, 18/30 May, 1871, Frank and Goldstein 361)
- ⁶ The extract is quoted as ‘From the *Souvenirs* of Madame de Créquy (1710–1800) to her infant grandson Tancrede Raoul de Créquy, Prince de Montlaur’. Just as the Russian literature in *Blindness* is the product of a prior reading (by Constance Garnett), so this French text is mediated by Green’s translation.
- ⁷ ‘Je n’oublierai jamais ses derniers momens, où le souvenir de ces deux aimables frères était confondu dans un meme sentiment de fidelité si n maive et si tender’ (*Souvenirs* 1865, III, 25)
- ⁸ Charley, too, will leave this tale untold: ‘That would be telling’, he teases Nancy (203). Not even having the last *word*, he merely gestures to his putative son to keep complicit silence (207).

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