

Being Engaged: Trauma in Henry Green's *Party Going*

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1 Introduction

Lyndsey Stonebridge boldly asserts that “Green is a trauma writer, not before, but very much of his time” (57). She points out, in connection with Henry Green’s later novel (but the statement is equally true of *Party Going*), that “*Caught* is not only a psychoanalytically informed genealogy of trauma, an exploration of the belated effects of the past upon the present lives of war-anxious characters [but] it is also a text which [...] gives poetic form and shape to the trauma, not of the told, but of the telling” (58–9). The condition of the malfunctions of memory is the condition of waiting, being in transit, a suspended state between event and non-event, non-war and war, “which stubbornly refuses to unfurl into an event” (Stonebridge 61). Henry Green’s (1905–1973) only novel of the 1930s can be evaluated as manifestations of a traumatised decade, revealing several aspects of ontological dilemmas such as the existence in a suspended, parenthesised, immobile period determined by the catastrophe of the First World War and threatened by the imminent second one. In this paper I shall discuss *Party Going* (published in 1939) as illustrative of the memory crisis of the 1930s, highlighting that in the apocalyptic atmosphere, on the threshold of the war, Green produced a text which illustrates the mechanism of trauma both in its subject matter and by its peculiar stylistic devices; in short, this novel is “about” trauma and is a traumatised text itself.

2 The theoretical framework of trauma

After a certain point, of course, every catastrophic or painful event may be regarded as “traumatic”, thus the interpretational field of trauma is very often broadened to such an extent that trauma often loses its precise meaning, becoming a too quickly and too easily applicable tag. To reveal the traumatic nature of Green’s text, a more precise examination of the nature of trauma is needed. Of the several theories I wish to emphasise three aspects, attempting to focus on *trauma as an epistemological, existential and narrative problem*.

The *basic epistemological paradox* of trauma is that the sufferer does not necessarily experience the original occurrence as traumatic and does not necessarily know that he has undergone a trauma. As Freud, very early,

explained in “The Aetiology of Hysteria”, it is not the original event itself that exerts a traumatic influence on the victim, because it very often comes too early in his childhood to be understood and assimilated; nor is the second event inherently traumatic, but it triggers a memory of the first one that is retrospectively given a traumatic meaning (see Leys 20). Between them is the period of temporal delay, which defers interpretation and prevents immediate reaction. As Freud points out later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, “it may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident” (see Caruth, *Unclaimed* 17). Amnesia, latency, or as Freud put it, an “incubation period” follows the scene of trauma, due to the fact that during the occurrence of trauma, the patient could never become conscious of its significance; in other words, he/she simply *does not know* that he underwent a trauma, thus existing in a state of epistemological void. The experience of trauma, Cathy Caruth maintains, “would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself” (*Unclaimed* 17). The victim may leave the site of the event, apparently unharmed, without realising that he has in fact become a victim, perhaps never to return again, but he cannot leave trauma behind. Amnesia is most clearly indicated by the fact that the psyche cannot treat the “event” as memory, it is not able to integrate it into the life history of the patient, on the basis of the simple past/present dichotomy. What signals that a traumatic event took place at all is that the shock returns in nightmares, flashbacks, bodily and conversion symptoms, nightmares, repetitions, traumatic re-enactments, etc. in the latency period. “Survival” thus has a very ambiguous meaning: the “passage beyond the violent event” is accompanied by “the endless inherent necessity of repetition, which ultimately may lead to destruction” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 63). Trauma thus causes a temporal delay of reaction and understanding and hinders creating a teleological, linear story of the self since the experience always exists in its belatedness, which is the reason why therapy is needed to create a story including memories, putting an end to latency and endless repetition; in short, to create a past instead of the permanent present of trauma.

A traumatic occurrence, conceived as *a narrative and temporal problem* subverts several basic notions of “normal” existence: linearity, teleology, narrative logic, symbolic integration, remembering, representation and the sense of possession or ownership of one’s life story. Since the effect of trauma is permanently present (at least until the end of therapy), it is impossible to tell it, remember it, for it is inconsistent with the field of knowledge pertaining to memory (Belau xv), or, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, it “is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe” (quoted by Belau xvi–xvii). In the precise sense, it is *not an event* that may be narrated, it always already precedes narration, it has always already taken place before narration, and thus shatters narrative into isolated and unmanageable fragments (Bényei, “Sebek” 360). At the heart of traumatic memory (which is, in fact, an oxymoron)

there is the idea of unrepresentability, for trauma interposes the disruption of memory between an event and its representation (Hodgkin and Radstone 6). Basic differences exist between narrative and “traumatic memory”, as van der Kolk and van der Hart summarise (163): as opposed to narrative memory, traumatic events take a long time to recount, the narrative is disrupted by hesitations, gaps and silences. It is not adaptive at all, for it is invariable and inflexible. Another important difference is that it is evoked under certain conditions. The victim is characterised by a permanent duality and simultaneity of “normal” and “traumatised” selves, which is “related to the fact that traumatic experience/memory is, in a sense, timeless. It is not transformed into a story, placed in time [...] If it can be told at all, it is still a (re)experience” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 177). To put it in another way, traumatic narrative at best can only exist as a story, the different elements remaining isolated to only be linked by continuatives (“and... and”)¹, but it is the task of therapy to emplot the fragmented story of trauma. Trauma induces a strong urge to tell, which is supposed to lead automatically to some sort of cure, but, as Dori Laub puts it, “there are never enough words or the right words” (“Truth” 63). Another important dilemma of trauma narratives is whether telling would not lead to an even greater pain (with the victim going over his “memories” again and again), and whether he/she should remain silent, risking the “perpetuation of [trauma’s] tyranny” (Laub, “Truth” 65). Trauma in fact reveals “inhumanity, the bare life” (Edkins 214), therefore trauma exists outside the realm of language, and the attempt to bring it back to this realm, by setting it within a linear narrative form, is to destroy its truth (Edkins 214). The victim thus becomes entrapped in a vicious circle of repressing the desire to talk about trauma or remain in constant search for words apt to insert the meaningless, subversive traumatic occurrence into symbolic narrative.² Dominick LaCapra terms this paradox “a fidelity to trauma” (22), which creates “a more or less unconscious desire to remain within trauma” (23).

The third aspect of trauma to be briefly summarised is its *ontological context*, by which I mean the manner in which the traumatised victim lives the event, the shocking situation, and how he is able to live after its survival. First and foremost, the trauma victim feels hopelessly passive, betrayed (Edkins 4), immobile, frozen, characterised by “panic inaction”, “catatonoid reactions”, immobilisation and automaton-like behaviour (Krystal 80); they submit themselves to the circumstances, even claim that the traumatic event was

¹ See Ruth Leys’s criticism of Caruth’s notion of trauma narrative as a literal repetition of the past: “Caruth’s theory of how the traumatic past is ineluctably registered and transmitted thus comes to seem like an extremely literalist version of history as a chronicle, conceived as a nonsubjective, nonnarrative and nonrepresentational method of memorialising the past [...]” (273, Note 9)

² “That the speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to – and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and a place of bondage. Silence is for them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, a binding oath.” (Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness” 58)

justified by its causes (Krystal 83). At the moment of the trauma, the ego is dissociated into a subjective emotional system (that feels the trauma but cannot represent it, of which the result is the appearance of conversion symptoms) and an objective intellectual system (that perceives the trauma but cannot feel it, as if it were happening to another person) (Leys 131). The other consequences characterising a trauma victim is the fragmentation or loss of unity resulting from the radical unbinding of the death drive but also the simultaneous binding (or re-binding) of cathexes (Leys 34). This dialectic of binding and unbinding, hate and love constitute traumatic reaction. A profound split characterises trauma victims, as if they were living in two different worlds. The success of the therapy naturally depends on to what extent gaps can be bridged between emotional and intellectual selves, the desire to tell and the imperative to stay silent and between past and present. Trauma victims are also bound to confront, not primarily with their own trauma, but their “enigma of survival” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 58) and the insight they gained through the traumatic experience (Caruth, “Interview” 134).

3 In parentheses: *Party Going*

As the author’s signature at the end of *Party Going* indicates (“London, 1931–38”), this novel had been written through almost the entire span of the thirties, thus encapsulating (and subverting) the major preoccupations, anxieties and myths of the decade.³ In what follows I intend to treat *Party Going* as symptomatic of the traumatic 1930s and discuss it as a text that enacts a post-traumatic state at several levels.

The plot of the novel is deceptively simple. A group of rich young men and women are about to set out by train for a holiday in the south of France, the London railway station is, however, shrouded in fog, and the trains are delayed. The commuters and working class people are forced to gather in the hall, while the wealthy young people are given rooms in the station hotel. There they pass the time, gossiping, confessing to each other, getting angry, creating and revealing secrets to each other, while the impatient crowd threatens to break down the hotel door. Finally the fog lifts, the trains leave, and the party is free to continue its journey.

Even this nutshell summary shows that the novel manifestly lacks any turning point or major revelations; in a strange manner, most of the plot is filled with impatient waiting. One of the major features of the text is the masterful way it dramatises the inertia of waiting, a state, from which, apparently, there is no escape. Like the thirties itself, the characters are entrapped, bracketed in the

³ According to Rod Mengham, Green, especially in *Party Going*, reconsiders basic myths of the 1930s, including the extensive use of bird imagery, for instance (“Thirties” 369, see also North 80), but he also subverts the intense preoccupation with frontiers, crossings, transgressions, the fetishistic pleasure in trains, the symbolic treatment of journeys and also the Audenesque use of definite and demonstrative articles.

large hall of the station, doomed to remain literally in transit, journeying from one place to another, but without the energy and determination that the word “journey,” or “going” would imply. The feeling of being encapsulated is even more emphasised by the fog that shrouds the station and makes everything impenetrable (386, 392) and the streets (“dirty cotton wool saturated with iced water” [401]) as well as by the scenes depicting London at night and in rain. The novel powerfully subverts one of the main myths of the thirties, and perhaps that of modernism itself, fast travelling, speed, the symbolic sense of departure, going in new directions, to a new country (*New Country* was an influential anthology of poetry in 1933, edited by Michael Roberts). If we approach the sense of waiting from Kirby Farrell’s prosthesis theory, we might say that the failure to travel is powerfully indicative of a traumatic situation. According to Farrell, we are continuously engaged with the world through prosthetic extensions, “tools and relationships” to “make up for our creaturely limitations” (175). These can be voices but also cars, trains, aeroplanes to transcend our own body. In case of an accident, the vulnerability of these prostheses is revealed, and attention is called to their supplementary nature. Since a prosthesis reveals the scar of an earlier trauma, by wishing to make it seem undone (see also Takács 6), the basic situation of the novel, “a railway accident” is especially apt to depict a post-traumatic state, since “trauma reflects a disruption of prosthetic relationships to the world” (Kirby 176).

3.1 “Waiting at the gates”: The land of ghosts

The temporal paradox of trauma and the disruption of prostheses are symbolised by the opening scene where we can see the characters entering tunnels that, perhaps paradoxically, have “DEPARTURES lit up over” them (384); a word which, instead of the joy of leaving for a sunny place, entraps the characters in a space with artificial lighting, full of smoke and noise, and more importantly, also conjuring up the notion of departing, dying, as if the travellers were entering the land of the dead. Other references to tunnels reinforce this impression: Angela and Robin (who are engaged to each other) “also had to engage in one of those tunnels to get where they were going” (384). The expression “engage in” opens up peculiar associations here, for normally one is engaged in a conversation, or in reading a book, one is busy doing something when he is engaged, or is bound by a promise, especially to get married. The characters of the novel – against their will – are engaged, bound, fixed to the situation, and to each other and once they are engaged, there is no way back (not one of the party leaves for home, in fact they are “engaged” more and more in the world of the station). Angela and Robin want to “get where they were going” (384), by entering one of the tunnels; the text does not let us know where they are travelling to or which tunnel they enter, it says considerably less (and more) than it should: it claims that “they too went in under one of those tunnels” (385), as if descending to the underworld; the passengers “came into the station by way of those tunnels, then

out under that huge vault of glass” (388, the word “vault” might be associated with a vault in a cemetery); the taxi driver who brings Alex to the station “also went in under into one of those tunnels and was gone” (402). The words “departure,” “engage in,” “went in under,” “vault of glass,” “was gone” open up a wide referential field pertaining to death, passing, loss, “going”, and set up a marked contrast with the original idea of the party going on holiday. Green, recalling an episode in his autobiography when he was saying goodbye to a family he spent the vacation with (interestingly) in the South of France, meditates on the act of bidding farewell and leaving a pleasant place. He links it to dying: “Every farewell, as the French have it, is to die a little. Calling these to mind now may be in a way to die a little less” (Green, *Pack My Bag* 133). There are many references to “going” and travelling in the novel, all of which, thus, may be seen in the context of dying. It is said about Max that “he goes about a great deal” (387); when Edwards, his servant warns him that maybe his train will not run, he answers: “That’s not the point, I’ve got to go” (400); when he is in the mood not to care about the others, we are informed that “His feeling was he must get across the Channel and it was better to go with people than alone” (406). Later Alex declares, “one always goes” (440). It is as if “going” was an inevitable compulsion, an urge that Max cannot resist. The point of the journey seems not to be in reaching its destination, the South of France, but to “get across the Channel” (which evokes the tunnels at the station and other frontiers). The most obvious point where the alignment of “going” and death is linked is the judgement of the mystery man at the hotel, who repeats several times that “She’s a goner” (478).

The novel makes it clear several times that the characters and the place might be likened to the dead and a cemetery, respectively. Alex Alexander, one of the party, heading for the station in a taxi,

likened what he saw to being dead and thought of himself as a ghost driving through the streets of the living, this darkness or that veil between him and what he saw a difference between being alive and death. [...] He did not know where he was, it was impossible to recognise the streets, fog at moments collapsed on traffic from its ceiling. (401)

The inside of the station is also infected with death, and looks like a huge cemetery full of ghosts: “there was so much luggage round in piles like an exaggerated grave yard, with the owners of it and their porters like mourners with the undertakers’ men [...]. Several other passengers were nearly in hysterics” (402); Robert Hignam’s man is “making his way from one grieving mourner to the other, or, as they sat abandoned, cast away each by his headstone, they were like the dead resurrected in their clothes under this cold veiled light and in an antiseptic air” (498). One of the party, Julia, shortly exclaims: “My darling, my darling, in this awful place I wondered whether we weren’t all dead

already" (414). Later on the faces of passengers, depicted as uniform lozenges, also recall coffins (437); after the steel shutters are put on the hotel door, to prevent the angry crowd from breaking in (the crash sounds like closing a monumental coffin), Alex and Julia order the sick Miss Fellowes to be taken up to a room, a scene which bizarrely resembles a funeral procession:

As they went up short flights from landing to landing on deep plush carpets with sofas covered in tartan on each landing, Miss Fellowes was being carried by two hotel porters up the back stairs. For every step Alex and Julia took Miss Fellowes was taken up one too, slumped on one of those chromium-plated seats, her parcel on her lap, followed by the two silent nannies, and, coming last, the same man who had sat next her, he who winked. (416).

The importance of these scenes lies not so much in the fact that certain parallels may be drawn with either a cosmic vision of the anxiety of purgatory, "the fear of a threshold" (Mengham, *Idiom* 35), with another representation of the "Waste Land" (Odom 63) or a surrealist fantasy of the underworld (Swinden 70). Undoubtedly, the text may be read as suggesting these literary and cultural parallels, it should not be forgotten, however, that this is a text very much of the traumatised thirties. What is apparent in the above quotations is the hesitation and uncertainty surrounding life and death; we are not simply in the land of the dead, but in that of people lingering between death and resurrection, being in limbo; between finality and imperfectivity, highlighting the temporal dislocation caused by a traumatic occurrence. What should become memory (the memory of the dead) is brought back again by the journey and the site of the railway station (and the hotel) themselves that by their very nature reflect transition and the impossibility of closure. These sites are not habitable, they are not "homes", however the passengers would like to make them more comfortable (the rich partygoers ordering tea, taking baths, the commuters starting to sing, trying to evoke the much repeated "fellow-feeling", a girl kissing the elderly porter, Thomson), the scene remains for every one of them inhabitable, unhomey, that is, *unheimlich*, powerfully dominated by traumatic returns of pathological memories.

The general movement of the novel is from large transitory spaces (street, hall) towards "recession to cavities" (Mengham, *Idiom* 37) that become smaller and smaller (hotel corridor, rooms, then finally the bathroom where Amabel looks at herself in the mirror). Yet these enclosures offer no stability, no protection, and are marked by a lack of finality and a suspension of time. In the long hall of the hotel we can see a man who "had a cigar in his mouth, and then she [Julia] saw he had one glass eye, and in his hand he had a box of matches which now and again he would bring up his cigar. Just as he was about to strike his match he looked round each time and let his hands drop back to his lap, his match not lighted" (414). The others are constantly looking at the huge

illuminated clock in the hall, which, according to Julia, resembles an enormous doctor's waiting room (414). She contends that "it would be like that when they were all dead and waiting at the gates" (414). The metaphor of the waiting room recalls or anticipates Leonard Woolf's simile when he likens the war to "endlessly waiting in a dirty railway station waiting room with nothing to do but wait endlessly for the next catastrophe" (quoted by MacKay 93). Mark Rawlinson mentions that *Party Going* takes place at Victoria station, which was a starting point for many journeys to war in the 1930s (74). The party heading for France is suspended between Mayfair and their destination, like during an air raid (75). As Rawlinson recalls, John Strachey spoke about air raids as bringing relief because at least they stopped what seemed to be an endless wait for catastrophe (76). With these in mind, we can say that the novel very spectacularly enacts the "waiting room atmosphere" of the whole interwar period. The characters are suspended between two catastrophes, waiting for relief; as one of the occupants of the hotel remarks, "what targets for a bomb" (483). We are witnessing in the novel how the members of the party are trying to put an end to this temporariness, suspended time, the permanent present of trauma, using basically two methods: most of the rich members of the group withdraw into smaller and smaller places, attempting to shield themselves from uncertainty and suspended time (in close connection with this, they create secrets and fictionalise their situation), but one character, Miss Fellowes, who, significantly, does not participate in the journey, deliberately engages in a traumatic situation and dares to undergo the risk posed by the surfacing of traumatising occurrences.

3.2 "Dim whirling waters": Fluidity and trauma

The other devices that the novel uses to illustrate the contrast between finalised, self-enclosed, safe and nostalgic worlds and unfinished, transitory, limbo states are images of fluidity and instances of repetition. Both – directly or indirectly – strongly represent the (violent) intrusion of the past into the present. Images of fluidity are represented in the text in so many ways that it would be impossible to list them all here (just a few examples: fog floats into the station [396], noise, fog and smell invade the hotel [437], through the thick curtains noise can still be heard [466], the noise of the crowd resembles that of aeroplanes [483], Robert feels as if drowning [450, 457], etc.).⁴ Images of fluidity also dominate the description of the mass: "As pavements swelled out under this dark flood [...] these crowded pavements would have looked to you as if for all the world they might have been conduits" (388). Angela and Robin are described as two lilies

⁴ The notion of fluidity invades other layers of the novel as well. Mengham, in connection with Green's first novel *Blindness*, mentions the "fluidity of names" (*Idiom* 8), which makes it very difficult to differentiate between Joan, John and June. The characters in *Party Going* particularly resist memorialisation, too: we have Alex Alexander, Angela Creevy, Claire Hignam, Robert Hignam, Robin Adams, Max Adey, Amabel, Edwards, Evelyn Henderson; the recurrence of "a" and "e" makes it especially difficult to remember them and separate them from each other.

on a pond, “engulfed in swarming ponds of humanity” (395), while later the crowd is referred to as “dim whirling waters” (474). When at last the train arrives, “at the gates a thin line of people were being extruded through in twos and threes to spread out on those emptier platforms” and they “would slowly begin to drain away again, their tide had turned” (524–5).

Another equally revealing metaphor is used in the novel to illustrate the temporal displacement of the station's world, namely, when the narrator compares the waiting people to ruins:

They were like ruins in the wet, places that is where life has been, palaces, abbeys, cathedrals, throne rooms, pantries, *cast aside and tumbled down with no immediate life and with what used to be in them lost rather than hidden* now the roof has fallen in. Ruins that is not of their suburban homes for they had hearts, and feelings to dream, and hearts to make up what they did not like into other things. But ruins, for life in such circumstances was only possible because it would not last, only endurable because it had broken down and as it lasted and became more desolate and wet so, as it seemed more likely to be permanent, at least for an evening, they grew restive. (497, emphasis mine)

This passage is primarily disturbing because, similar to the graveyard, or limbo metaphor, it uses another powerful image: ruins recall ghosts, being haunted, places “with no immediate life”, and they deny the possibility of existing fully in the present. Just like trauma, the image of ruins (similarly to the station itself) effects an uncanny colonisation of the present by the past, resulting in the transformation of the place into an uninhabitable, *unheimlich* site. Life in these circumstances is, by definition, marked by a permanent loss, traumatised, which cannot be hidden by small talk or any hope for the coming trains.

The motif of fluidity is not only present at the level of the characters or in descriptions of the crowd; it can be detected at the level of the arrangement of the text. It happens several times that the same word is used within the space of one or two paragraphs to refer to different entities or people. At the beginning of the novel the word “ensconced” refers to the narratee (“if you had been ensconced in that pall of fog”), while two paragraphs later it is used in connection with the station master: “Mr Roberts, ensconced in his office” (388). Later we can see Miss Fellowes holding a dead pigeon wrapped in a paper parcel, thinking that “it was going to be a nuisance”, right after which a man begins to speak to her, and Miss Fellowes “hoped he was not going to be a nuisance” (394). In the same passage, Claire and Evelyn greet each other “with cries not unlike more seagulls” (394), which recalls the seagulls that Julia saw on her way to the station (391). When Julia looks down on the crowd, she imagines it as corpuscles in blood, “for here and there a narrow stream of people shoved and moved in lines three deep and where they did this they were like veins”. A few paragraphs later we can see Miss Fellowes having a nightmare:

“In terror she watched the seas rise to get at her, so menacing her blood throbbed unbearably” (430). The stability of frontiers, thus, is not only threatened in the physical world but also on the level of representation (the crowd, noises, fog, smoke) and even at the very level of language and text organisation. It is language itself that enacts the permeability of frontiers, refusing to assign precise and stable meanings to signifiers; it is as if an ever permanent belatedness or dislocation existed between paragraphs that corrupts the signification of morphemes.

In close relation to the motif of fluidity we find repetition (with variation) as the structuring principle of the novel, which is again a powerful effect of trauma, as for the patient, who is not aware of the occurrence of primary trauma, remembering is blocked. In the classical Freudian theory, “the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten or repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as memory, but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (150). Few critical evaluations recall that the trip planned by the members of the party is *the repetition* of the same journey they made to the south of France: “They had all, except Angela Crevy, been in the same party twelve months ago to the same place, so fantastically different from this” (421). At the end of the novel Amabel and Max have a very similar scene to what Max and Julia had a couple of pages earlier (“‘No, go on, how much, tell me, you must, how much,’ she said, as Julia had about her top” [507]). One description of the repetition with variation pattern sheds light on its significance: it is evoked by the narrator that years ago, on a similar occasion, the management of the hotel ordered the steel doors to be shut

because when once before another fog had come as this hundreds and hundreds of the crowd, unable to get home by train or bus, had pushed into the hotel [...] and had smashed everything, furniture, lounges, reception offices, the two bars, doors. Fifty-two had been injured and compensated and one of them was a little Tommy Tucker, now in school for cripples, only fourteen years of age, and to be supported all his life at the railway company’s expense (437).

Thus, this pattern serves to set up a barrier to further damage, calling attention to the fragility of frontiers and the lasting effects of injury. Yet, as has become evident, boundaries cannot be erected against the intrusion of the past. Robert, while forcing his way through the crowd, has an experience similar to one he had in childhood. The gap between the nostalgically imagined past and the traumatised present has an anticlimactic effect:

When small he had found patches of bamboo in his parents’ garden and it was his romance *at that time* to force through them; they grew so thick you could not see what *temple* might lie in ruins just beyond. *It was so now*, these bodies so thick they might have been a store of

tailors' dummies, water heated. They were so stiff they might as well have been soft, swollen bamboos in groves *only because* he had once pushed through these, damp and warm.

His ruined *temple then* appeared, still keeping to whisky [Max] (406–7, emphasis mine).

On the one hand, this passage illustrates how the memory of the past is corrupted by the present, using a metaphor of the temple that leaks into the next passage, not respecting the boundaries of the paragraphs, nor those between the past and the present, and, on the other hand, more importantly, is a perfect example of thwarting meaning. The past occurrence (“at that time”) is connected to the present (“it was so now”) with the gesture of repetition, the past comes back in a different form, but the link that connects “then” and “now” does not explain why and how the past returns, for what could explain cause and effect (“only because”) does not resolve the epistemological confusion surrounding Robert’s strange experience in the present moment. Robert, not aware of the significance of his experience, and perfectly acting out an event that becomes traumatic only respectively, repeats pushing through bamboos, “without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it”.

3.3 “The fidelity to trauma”: The strange case of Miss Fellowes

Finally, one of the main characters, Miss Fellowes shall be examined who illustrates best the insistence of the past in the present and the mechanism of trauma, regarding its epistemological and ontological aspects. All critical evaluations agree that the founding moment, the primal scene, establishing the mood of the whole novel, is the first sentence: “Fog was so dense, bird that had been disturbed went flat into a balustrade and slowly fell, dead, at her feet” (384). There are at least four aspects from which this sentence may be approached. The enigmatic lack of articles has a powerful effect, as if the sentence – just as in the case of trauma – were not able to refer back to any point of origin, any past and could not be interpreted with reference to the outside world. Secondly, “a structure of secrecy” is created, for following this scene, Miss Fellowes wonders what could have happened, picks up the bird, washes it and wraps it in brown paper parcel, an act that baffles and confuses everyone around. Thirdly, the motif of birds is introduced, which is omnipresent in Green’s fiction; and finally, together with the previous one, the motif of falling and death appears.

According to Mengham, the image of the bird is displaced from somewhere else, probably from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, where the Albatross also appears suddenly out of the fog (*Idiom* 32, see also Odom 60). Another point of contact with Coleridge’s poem may be the traumatic event, the death of the bird determining the life of the mariner and the subsequent “talking cure”,

which however, is markedly in contrast with the reticence of Miss Fellowes. The dead pigeon, right from the beginning, represents some kind of threat, for it cannot be placed, it “is robbed of its interpretational value and returns the narrative to an impasse” (Mengham, *Idiom* 33), becomes a dead weight, a nuisance that hinders progress just like the fog it comes from. According to North, the dead pigeon stands for stopped progress and also for stopped explanation (84). MacKay gives a social meaning to the death of the bird, relating to Max and his company who is not willing to listen to the crowd outside, shutting the window, maintaining that to be rich is to be looked after, “not as any bird tumbling dead from its branch for the foxes” (96). The common feature of most interpretations is that they focus on the hermeneutic difficulty posed by the fall of the bird (“everything unexplained”) and Miss Fellowes’s treatment of it (equally unexplained), and that they deem this hermeneutical puzzle to be valid for the whole novel. The only difference between Miss Fellowes and the rest of the characters is that only she is capable of building a *willed* relationship with the past, performing an act of mourning, a ritual, even if she does not fully understand why and what she mourns. The quotation, however, which places the bird’s death in the context of hunting, is equally revealing. Two paragraphs after the opening sentence, we learn why she washes it:

She thought it must be dirty with all that fog and wondered if it might not be, now it was dead, that it had fleas and they would not come out on the feathers of its head but she did not like to look as there might have been blood. She remembered she had seen that with rabbits’ ears when they had been shot and she remembered that swallows were the most verminous of all birds – how could it have died she wondered and then decided it must be washed. (384)

Thus the appearance of the bird is not totally without context, not fully unexplained since, for Miss Fellowes, it conjures up memories of hunting when she was a child. After washing and appropriating the bird, she feels ill, orders whisky, which is again an act of repetition (and besides refers to the fluidity of borders, among them, those between the past and the present):

It had been a fancy to order whisky and she was trying to remember what her father’s brand had been called which was always laid out for them years ago when they got back from hunting. [...] And there was that poor bird. One had seen so many killed out in shooting, but any dead animal shocked one in London, even birds, though of course they had easy living in towns. She remembered how her father had shot his dog when she was small and how much they had cried. (393–4)

The nature of traumatic responses is, again, brilliantly illuminated by this passage: the first, original events (shooting birds and the dog) did not work in themselves as traumatising and are only belatedly evoked as a result of the

second event, and even at that instant the "patient", Miss Fellowes, does not fully know why she remembers what she remembers, being unconscious of the link that is established retrospectively between the two occurrences.

Later, the motif of drinking whisky is again connected with her childhood: "she argued why shouldn't she order whisky if they always had it when they were children" (453). The connection between remembering and hunting is all the more interesting here for Green uses precisely this metaphor in his autobiography. In a revealing passage of *Pack My Bag* he compares recalling memories to a foxhunt:

As we listen to what we remember, to the echoes, there is no question but the notes are muted, that those long introductions to the theme life is to be, so strident so piercing at the time are now no louder than the cry of a huntsman on the hill a mile or more away when he views the fox. We who must die soon, or so it seems to me, should chase our memories back, standing, where they are found, enough apart not to be too near what they once meant. Like the huntsman, on a hill and when he blows his horn, like him some way away from us (96).

In this passage he emphasises the difficulty of retrieving memories and at the same time points to the violence of recalling them. In the same chapter of the autobiography, he also remembers the traumatising episode when he got to know that his parents were dying, following an accident in Mexico (97). Green recalls that he had never had a similar experience before, when "a shock blankets the mind and when I got back to my room I walked up and down a long time" (97). However, he did not think of the experience of this event as necessarily traumatic, for "I began to dramatize the shock I knew I had had into what I thought it ought to feel like" (97). He remembers the isolation he had to suffer among his schoolmates due to this dramatic piece of news, "I had wounds to lick", as he puts it (100). He recalls that he "was given a push further down this hill about five weeks later" (98) when his parents got better and sent him photos with bandages around their heads" (98). "This gave me a return of hysteria," he claims. This is a classical traumatic situation when the second event recalls and re-interprets the first one as traumatic. By a fine metonymic link, the narrator begins to talk about his parents' visit to Mexico every other year. Once, when the parents were on leave, there was a girl in the house who seemed reluctant to show Green her private garden, her little kingdom. In the end she agreed, but the child Green grabbed a spade and wanted to dig up the garden. "Rightly she would have none of this and tried to stop me. She was the stronger and was succeeding when in a last attempt to get my way I swung the spade with all my strength against her leg and cut her to the bone" (101). Similarly to the episode in school, this also leads to isolation, "as though I had been cut off forever" (101). The only solution to the shock, he thinks, is a similar wound on inflicted upon himself, *repeating the wound*: "I saw nothing for it but to cut my own leg

open and was carried to bed screaming for a knife” (101). What connects the three episodes, the foxhunt, the news of the parents’ accident and the spade scene is the motif of wounds, that is, traumas. At the beginning of the section, Green talks about the metaphor of foxhunt in which presumably it is the rememberer who, “like the huntsman, on a hill” “blows his horn” (97) to evoke memories. By the end, however, it is the fox that he identifies with: “They say the fox enjoys the hunt but the sound of the horn as he breaks covert must set great loneliness on him” (101); “Later, when the accident I have described disrupted me, I felt, and it is hard to explain, as though the feelings I thought I ought to have were hunting me. I was as much alone as any hunted fox” (102). Thus, instead of the rememberer hunting, retrieving, recalling memories, he becomes the hunted – or perhaps more appropriately, haunted – , inflicting wounds on himself, and what remains is “shame remembered” (102).

If we examine Miss Fellowes’s reaction to the dead bird in the context of the metaphor of hunting, we can say she follows a similar strategy of repetition and identification. She picks up the dead bird, the prey standing for memories, and she instantly appropriates it, incorporates it in her world, “carrying *her* dead pigeon” (384, emphasis mine). But instead of treating it as a mere object, she attaches to it some transcendental significance, she “decided it must be washed” (384). “Descending underground”, she enters a lavatory, and cleans the bird with hot water, causing pain to herself, too, which is an act of unconscious identification with the prey: “Air just above it was dizzy with a little steam, for she was doing what she felt must be done with hot water, *turning her fingers to the colour of its legs and blood*” (385, emphasis mine). After she comes up from below, she begins to feel ill, so she asks Robin Adams (significantly, having a bird’s name) to dispose of the parcel with the bird. By this time she is connected even more closely with the bird, she “said to herself that it was coming over her now and when it did come would she fall over backwards and down those stairs” (386), like “a prey falling for the foxes.” When Robin throws it in a wastepaper basket, she immediately feels relieved. When she is better, however, she *retrieves* her dead pigeon (387). It continues to possess and haunt her, instead of her possessing it and hunting it, illustrating what LaCapra termed “the fidelity to trauma” (22); she dares not break her promise, and remains engaged within the haunting presence of memory. As the bird is gradually becoming a nuisance (394) she is also becoming a nuisance, a dead weight on the party (North 85). It is for this reason that the members of the party would like to “dispose of her”, suppress her; as Max informs Julia, “Just arranged for three men to carry her up the back way where she won’t be seen” (413), later Claire decidedly declares, “I don’t want a soul to know” (414). In her worst state, Miss Fellowes has a vision of a dark sea, menacing to engulf her: “Lying inanimate where they had laid her she waged war with storms of darkness which rolled up over her in a series” (421); she “felt she was on a shore wedged between two rocks, soft and hard [...] she would notice small clouds where sea joined sky and these clouds coming far away together into a greater

mass would rush across from that horizon towards where she was held down” (422). The dark sea and the masses recall the masses of people outside threatening to engulf the members of the party. However they would like to deny their attachment to Miss Fellowes, and exclude her from consciousness, their bond is evidently represented by Robert, who, sent out to find Angela and Max, finds him: “the first thing I asked him whether he had seen Claire’s aunt although no one had ever asked me to find her” (422). When Miss Fellowes feels a little better, she keeps returning to a scene of hunting: “She was having a perfectly serene dream that she was riding home, on an evening after hunting, on an antelope between rows of giant cabbages” (440). She is not able to get rid of images of her childhood, which now appear as the age of shame, guilt and reproach: “It might have been an argument with death. And so it went on, reproaches, insults, threats to report and curiously enough it was mixed up in her mind with thoughts of dying and she asked herself whom she could report death to. And another voice asked her why she had brought the pigeon, was it right to order whisky [...] the voice asked why she had washed it and she felt like when she was very small and had a dirty dress” (452–3). She arrives to a point where she is not able to order her memories that break up into isolated fragments or appear as undistinguishable dark masses, denying her the ability to tell a story: “her lips moved, only she had no voice to speak with” (452). She unconsciously seeks death, the vantage point to be able to tell her story; and she evidently identifies herself with the dead bird, meaning that in the company she is the sole figure being able to accept her own death. In the novel, hers is a narrow escape, but it sheds light on the others’ story as well. When the train arrives, they also escape, not knowing what they risked in entering the station. Mengham is right when he claims that “the only travelling is done by Miss Fellowes” (*Idiom* 37); Max and his companions only delude themselves with crossing a bridge (504), and going past frontiers into “that smiling country” (510), not recognising that they became engaged in a traumatic situation.

Henry Green’s *Party Going* uses language in a masterfully unorthodox way to reveal a post-traumatic situation, that of being suspended, encapsulated, bracketed in the symbolic space of the railway station and thus becomes, on the one hand, a brilliant piece illustrating the anxious, “waiting room” atmosphere of the late 1930s (a decade also isolated by two world wars), and on the other, illuminates the general (temporal, ontological and epistemological) mechanism of trauma, especially through the example of Miss Fellowes, who cannot help being bound, engaged by the uncanny presence of the past in the transitional space of the station.

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