

# Bridging Gulfs in Life and Literature: Henry Green and the Process of “Going Over”

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## ABSTRACT

*Henry Green, a writer whose works were published between 1926 and 1952, has been traditionally regarded as standing between the two traditions that dominated in the literary landscape of the 1930s and 1940s in Britain, namely modernism and (new) realism. The debate on Green as either an experimental modernist or socially-engaged leftist realist has led to the production of an image of a artist (writer) whose position in the canon of British literature of this period is fascinating, yet highly problematic. Focusing on selected prose of Henry Green, namely *Living* (1929), *Party Going* (1939) and *Pack My Bag: A Self-Portrait* (1940), this paper discusses the ways the subject of an a writer is negotiated through on the one hand the subversion of established literary traditions, and on the other through the active engagement in the social problems performed in the act of “going over”.*

## KEYWORDS

Henry Green, *Living*, *Party Going*, *Pack My Bag: A Self-Portrait*, modernism, realism, “going over,” artistic identity

Henry Green, a writer whose works were published between 1926 and 1952, has been traditionally regarded as standing in-between the two traditions that dominated the literary landscape of the 1930s and 1940s in Britain, namely modernism and (new) realism. The debate on Green as either an experimental modernist or socially-engaged leftist realist has led to the production of an image of a writer whose position in the canon of British literature of this period is fascinating, yet highly problematic, the situation being complicated by the scarcity of statements about art offered by the writer, as well as by the uncertainty as to his personal opinions and ambitions – even his closest friends considered him highly secretive and reserved. This primary concern of this paper is not to conduct a thorough analysis of the above mentioned debate; I shall instead concentrate on selected prose works of Henry Green, namely *Living* (1929), *Party Going* (1939) and *Pack My Bag: A Self-Portrait* (1940), and specifically on the ways the subject of an artist (writer) is negotiated through on the one hand the subversion of established literary traditions, and on the other through active engagement in the social problems performed in the act of “going over”. The two are intermingled: “going over” takes place in the writer’s personal life, but is also paralleled by a similar transition in the field of literature. In Green’s prose this transition takes place with the simultaneous negotiation of the writer’s own artistic identity.

## Green as modernist

Green has been traditionally deemed a modernist, experimentalist or symbolist. Much attention has been paid to his “eccentric style” which succeeds especially in achieving the effects of “verisimilitude” and “psychological insight”, values for which he was

grouped with such writers as William Faulkner, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.<sup>1</sup> His attempts at achieving psychological realism were considered close to these of Woolf, and the comparison between him and Woolf led to a focus on the new form of his prose, as it has been interpreted, for the purpose of a better (than a more traditionally realist) expression of reality. Automatically critical attention and analytical tools were directed at the “surface” of Green’s prose, which was viewed as pointing to some psychological “depth”. Critics such as Giorgio Melchiori emphasized the formal aspect of Green’s novels, and even accused him of “sacrificing content to form, eschewing humanism in favour of aestheticism”.<sup>2</sup> Melchiori’s analysis was actually very limited, focusing exclusively on formal aspects. One is led to suspect that his prejudiced view was imposed by a preconceived notion of “mannerism”, which is the subject of his book.

Thomas C. Foster also compared Green’s fiction to that of Woolf’s. This led him, however, to a decisively different conclusion. He wrote that “Green’s novels may be the closest thing to pure narrative. [...] Settings make only marginal efforts at verisimilitude; rather, they are barely flashed out evocations suggestive of the parable or the fairy tale. [...] They achieve their effects quietly, as do the novels of Virginia Woolf, whom he resembles in his restless experimentation and in his coolly dispassionate approach to craft”.<sup>3</sup> There is, however, one striking difference between the two writers: while Woolf concerned herself primarily with the problems of cognition, Green is more interested in being as such. As Foster noticed, Green’s “novels concern themselves primarily with the issues of ontology rather than epistemology”.<sup>4</sup> According to Foster, this concern is manifested by Green’s characters, usually “partial creatures” – both physically disabled as well as spiritually or psychologically deficient – and whose aspiration is to overcome their shortcomings and create themselves.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the characters are constantly “in progress”, that is continually in the process of becoming, is very significant. This is suggested by the titles of Green’s novels, most of which are in the active participle: *Living*, *Loving*, *Party Going*, etc. These are all narratives dealing with the being and becoming of characters, but also – as I will try to prove in this paper – with the artist’s subjectivity.

In *The Genesis of Secrecy* Frank Kermode conducts a hermeneutical analysis of Green’s novel *Party Going*, stating first of all that the novel means something more than a first reading might suggest: “My account of Green’s novel, however defective, may at least serve to suggest that it belongs to a class of narratives which *have* to mean more or other than they manifestly say”.<sup>6</sup> Kermode, however, places most emphasis on a mythology-oriented analysis of some of the themes which make Green’s writing comparable to that of T.S. Eliot. According to Kermode, although certain formal oddities of *Party Going* and *Living* hamper such an interpretation and make it difficult for a commentator to relate the text to some larger whole (e.g. mythology), such an effort is worthwhile. On the other hand, Kermode asserts that any interpretation of a literary work must inevitably meet certain restrictions – one of them is genre. “Of course”, as Kermode writes, “we can say that these constraints are disagreeably ideological. We can even pretend they aren’t

there”,<sup>7</sup> but that would not take into account what Green himself strove to achieve. Kermode sees Green’s fiction as standing in opposition to traditional forms, indeed as an “advanced attempt to break up the old-fashioned type of novel”.<sup>8</sup> Green’s transgressions include experiments in form and genre, including norms of uniformity and diversity that partly govern traditional fiction<sup>9</sup> as well as other formal aspects that have been focused on by other commentators. But these transgressions must also be viewed in a political context. The text in Green’s novels are broken up using common techniques applied in fiction, for instance narrative voice undergoes shifts that are completely unexpected and seem inexplicable. Such experiments, however, cannot be analysed in isolation; if such unexpected shifts are examined in terms of political context a new aspect of Green’s novels emerges.

### “Going over”

“Going over” was one of the key metaphors of the 1930s; certain authors thought of themselves as travellers, making some literal or metaphorical journey. Valentine Cunningham describes it as “a pilgrimage to socialism and Moscow [...] or to Christ and the Church. In other words, the sense of being in transit or in transition, particularly into new poetic and political country.”<sup>10</sup> “Going over” to the other side meant, among other things, giving up one’s way of life and way of thinking in the name of the professed leftist ideas. As Carol A. Wipf-Miller explains, “in the 1930s, ‘going over’ was a standard trope among left-leaning artists and intellectuals who used it to articulate their position in the social crisis precipitated by the collapse of British industry in the late 20s and the rise of fascism in Europe”.<sup>11</sup> Exemplified by authors such as George Orwell, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis and John Cornford, it was necessary to reconfigure one’s own self, to make an attempt to get rid of one’s bourgeois identity by means of making art/literature overtly political. The end result of “going over” was imagined as the “discovery of new capacities for accelerated and rhythmic group movement, for running and dancing in time with the [...] movement of the social process.”<sup>12</sup>

But “going over” was not so easy, for England at that time was still to a great extent divided. Members of each of the classes lived apart and bridging this distance was difficult both literally and mentally. One of the elements of “going over” was changing one’s name. Of course, assuming a pen name is common enough among writers of any affiliation; in some of these cases an attempt to hide an upper class identity is obvious. This is most apparent in cases of dropping a too sophisticated part of the name, or a strikingly non-proletarian hyphen that linked two surnames: thus Stephen Harold Spender turned into Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis became C. Day Lewis without a hyphen, Rupert John Cornford changed into John Cornford, Eric Arthur Blair made himself George Orwell and last but not least, Henry Vincent Yorke transformed into

1 Andrew Gibson, “Henry Green as Experimental Novelist,” *Studies in the Novel* 2 (1984): 197.

2 Giorgio Melchiori, *The Tightrope Walkers: Studies of Mannerism in Modern English Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), 208-209.

3 Thomas C. Foster, “Henry Green,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 20 (2000): 7.

4 Foster, “Henry Green,” 7.

5 Foster, “Henry Green,” 7. A detailed study of Green’s novels in terms of characters’ “self-creation” can be found in: A. Kingsley Weatherhead, *A Reading of Henry Green* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961).

6 Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (London: Harvard University Press, 1979), 7.

7 Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, 18.

8 Henry Green, quoted in Nigel Dennis, “The Double Life of Henry Green,” *Life*, 4 August 1952, 85.

9 Gibson, “Henry Green as Experimental Novelist,” 198.

10 Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 211.

11 Carol A. Wipf-Miller, “Fictions of ‘Going Over’: Henry Green and the New Realism,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 44 (1998): 135.

12 André Malraux, “The Path to Humanism,” *New Writing* 1 (Autumn 1938); quoted in Cunningham, *British Writers*, 220.

Henry Green. However, a change of name was often not enough; one had to change one's appearance and, most of all, one's pronunciation. While putting on slightly worn, proletarian clothes was quite easy, the so-called "Oxbridge" accent used by most of the discussed writers presented a significant problem. As graduates of Eton, Rugby or other prestigious schools, and later students at Oxford, they were unable to speak in a different way, and very often the worker's talk was incomprehensible to them. Thus, "going over" was also a process that happened on the level of everyday speech. Usually the trick was to drop the initial letter "h", but this did not work in most cases. Some writers who did field research in the proletarian community told their interlocutors from the workers that their strange pronunciation was just a different working class dialect used in a town a few miles away<sup>13</sup>. Green also experienced some problems with language, making it difficult for him to assimilate. He wrote in his autobiography, *Pack My Bag*, "At the time I went there when hardly anyone had more than a crystal set, the announcers of the BBC had not got going with their BBC English so that I sometimes had trouble to make my accent understood or to understand theirs".<sup>14</sup>

At the same time "going over" was necessary on the level of literary language. The new generation of writers favoured a "materialist" vision that would, in the words of W.H. Auden, make "the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear".<sup>15</sup> The authors felt the need to formulate and use new language which would be adequate to express the experience of workers. It was crucial to have a language that would no longer belong to the upper classes. Many of the writers of this period stated explicitly that their prose would set up a new form of realism, one which would finally be able to express the real experience of the proletarian way of life. These objectives were on the whole not realized. As Valentine Cunningham suggests in *British Writers of the Thirties*, most of the works by Edward Upward, Christopher Isherwood and others are not formally different from the ones written in the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cunningham continues: "Socialist Realism [...] helped to slow down literary experiment and to smash up modernism especially in the novel, thus pushing the novel back beyond Henry James into the arms of nineteenth-century bourgeois naturalism".<sup>16</sup> Reality was not inside the author's mind; it was "out there", in the streets, in the experience of the working classes. Yet, for most of these writers this experience was unattainable. Unable to make a "destructive analysis and synthesis of bourgeois culture", Auden, Day Lewis and Spender tried "to skip this essential transition and therefore" fell "back into the dying world"<sup>17</sup>.

Although the writers in question wanted to see their employment of realist techniques as a move towards a true engagement in the social issues they were describing, and tried to make their language as transparent as possible to achieve the most "faithful" representation possible, their endeavours led them away from literature, towards the direction of pure documentary. The reduced and transparent style of most of these writers is akin to journalism, the reportage meant to adapt to the kind of issues they were addressing in their works. This approach was accompanied by the assumption that "making up situations and characters" meant a kind of resignation from the important mission

of representing reality.<sup>18</sup> In his 1938 work *Enemies of Promise*, Cyril Connolly compared three fragments of prose, one taken from Christopher Isherwood's *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, the second from Orwell's *A Road to Wigan Pier* and the third from Ernest Hemingway's *To Have And Have Not*. Connolly claims that all three are examples of a "colloquial style".<sup>19</sup> This apparent aesthetic shift was in the 1930s meant to accompany a political shift, a "going over" from an aesthetic model of formal autonomy to the ideal of the active political engagement of art in life. This "going over" must be questioned if we take into consideration the lack of real engagement in the life of the workers, and a lack of understanding of their fate. This was described by George Orwell, for whom it became obvious that workers would never accept him as one of them.<sup>20</sup> The same applies to Christopher Isherwood, whose stay with the Nowak family in Berlin was merely an experience which enabled him to write about the situation of which he would never really become a part. Thus, the "going over" of these writers may be seen as a somewhat hollow gesture, the temporariness of this state always having been assumed. It was a "going over" which already projected the process of "going back".

As Wipf-Miller has noted, Green's stay in the factory was the longest of such excursions; he "outlasted most, remaining a worker on the shop floor for a little less than two years before moving up to management. Orwell's expeditions were never so extended, nor was he above writing home when his cash ran low".<sup>21</sup> In the context of the literary climate I have just described we might view Henry Green's achievement as exceptional. In his case "going over" took place both in the sphere of literature as well as in private life. However, as I shall try to prove in this paper this is not a one-time event of "going over"; it is a continually repeated process, the word "going" must be interpreted here as never really achieving completion; one cannot have "gone" – the condition of "going" must be constantly re-enacted.

Wipf-Miller, analysing Green's "going over" with reference to Foucauldian terms, regarded Green's achievement as exceptional. For most writers of the time "going over" and abandoning their class identity impaired their creative potential, as if being cut off from their roots meant being cut off from one's artistic sensitivity. In contrast:

[b]y discriminating between a bourgeois class identity that he represents as synthetic and working-class identity that he sees as authentic, Green seems better able to sustain the convictions of his generation. In his work 'going over' is not an artificial identification with the Other; rather, it recovers the *real* self he felt he had lost to the conformity and mass-produced tastes of his own class. [...] The world of labour is, for him, a kind of primordial swamp, the origin of identity that money and leisure pervert.<sup>22</sup>

Green, a student of the elite Eton school, left Oxford University before completing his studies and took up work at his father's factory in Birmingham. His work there was described in his early novel *Living*, a work based to a large extent on autobiographical themes. The realism of this novel earned it a name of the "best proletarian novel ever

13 Cunningham, *British Writers*, 251.

14 Henry Green, *Pack My Bag: A Self-Portrait* (London: Vintage, 2000), 154.

15 W.H. Auden and John Garrett, "Introduction," in *The Poet's Tongue*, ed. W.H. Auden, J. Garrett (London: Bell, 1935), ix; quoted in Wipf-Miller, "Fictions of 'Going Over'," 136.

16 Cunningham, *British Writers*, 299.

17 Christopher Caudwell, *Romance and Realism. A Study in English Bourgeois Literature*, ed. Samuel Hynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), quoted in Cunningham, *British Writers*, 212.

18 "The demand of this kind of realism would tug continually away from fiction towards documentary," Cunningham, *British Writers*, 304.

19 Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (London: Routledge, 1938) quoted in Cunningham, *British Writers*, 302.

20 "But though I was among them ... I was not one of them, and they knew it even better than I did," George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Left Book Club, 1937), 156; quoted in Cunningham, *British Writers*, 250.

21 Wipf-Miller, "Fictions of 'Going Over'," 141.

22 Wipf-Miller, "Fictions of 'Going Over'," 144-145.

written", as it was praised by Christopher Isherwood in 1929, the year of its publication.<sup>23</sup> *Living* was also considered a precursor to the socialist realist novels of the 1930s; at the Second International Conference of Revolutionary and Proletarian Writers (1930) Henry Green was grouped with James Hanley and other writers who were heralding a new proletarian school.<sup>24</sup> The majority of the criticism that followed focused on his formal experiments and his preoccupation with the transgression of the rules of traditional fiction. Especially influential in this respect was the opinion of Walter Allen, who viewed modernism as opposed to politics and claimed that Green was "untouched, as a writer, by contemporary ideas whether political or psychological".<sup>25</sup> In her essay, Wipf-Miller questions this simplified approach and tries to relocate Green in the context of leftism and new realism.

In Green's novels, however, leftist influences are much less predictable than in most of the literary works of his time. In his autobiography, *Pack My Bag*, Green is presented as a man sensitive to different "gulfs" (between classes, for instance) that need to be bridged. Gibson suggests that his fiction served precisely that purpose, however without a direct translation to politics which, as he asserted himself, did not particularly interest him.<sup>26</sup> It is, of course, quite legitimate not to believe such declarations. One thing is certain: politics in Green's novels is complex and deeply connected with other issues related to an artist-subject. This attempt at bridging gulfs is at its most apparent when the author attempts to transcend his own bourgeois identity by becoming an ally of the working classes along with achieving and maintaining subjectivity. Such a dual approach was quite exceptional among left-wing writers, most of whom considered the "collapse into subjectivity" as a resignation from the ideals of the class struggle (this is the way Cornford referred to Eliot, Joyce and Pound)<sup>27</sup>. In Green's novels the attempt at formulating a new subjectivity takes place on the level of language. Green set himself a number of tasks that were to improve the way prose writing expresses reality. He aimed at unifying the language of the characters with the language of the commentary, the language that describes the setting in which the act of speech takes place. The goal is to reduce the dissonance which appears once the form of the novel (a product of the bourgeoisie) is used to draw a portrait of the working classes. Green tried to solve this dilemma by getting rid of nearly all articles as well as with the use of an extraordinary syntax and a set of rhetorical devices.

### *Living*: "going over" by means of language

*Living* is a novel that describes the life of factory workers in Birmingham, along with the son of the factory owner who, as a result of a broken heart and his father's illness, decides to leave London and work in the factory. The novel starts with the sentences "Bridesley. Birmingham. Thousands came back from dinner along streets. 'what we want is go, push' said works manager to son of Mr Dupret. 'What I say to them is – let's get on with

it, let's get the stuff out'. Thousands came back to factories they worked in from their dinners. Hundreds went along road outside, men and girls. Some turned in to Dupret factory".<sup>28</sup> In this short passage one might already notice the specificity of the language used consistently throughout the whole novel. There is a lack of definite articles in sentences such as "thousands came back from dinner along streets", when it would be conventional to use "the streets". A non-traditional syntax is used in sentences such as "said works manager to son of Mr Dupret". Green himself said that the style in *Living* was intended to make the book "as taut and spare as possible" to fit "the proletarian life" he was then leading.<sup>29</sup> The lack of articles is meant to convey, as Foster suggests, a "compressed" moment of the life the characters of *Living* experience, reflecting the clipped thought and speech of the participants of given scenes. In a scene that takes place by the dinner table we read: "Dale wanted knife, but getting up from table, for himself fetched it. And Gates asked to pass bread. Lily stretched for this, but Mr. Dale leaned, he pushed bread forward over to him. When plate of meat was eaten he handed plate to her [...]"<sup>30</sup> The omission of articles before "knife", "bread", and "plate" makes this prose very compressed and limits the information in the sentence only to the most important elements of the scene, the objects become almost as important as the participants in it.

By applying this simple technique, Green managed to produce a strikingly original effect; his prose seems to reflect the very poorness of the world it describes, as well as the fact that this world is constructed of different elements and based on different rules. The language that is meant to express it is also made up of different elements and has a syntax all its own.

Green was also very innovative in conveying the speech of the workers, a result of his personal fascination with the way they pronounced words and told stories. In *Pack My Bag* he wrote about them: "They are like Americans, they may say they agree but they never listen, and this is one reason why they express themselves with an unheard of clarity. And their speech, unadulterated by literature as it is and unaffected when I was there by the BBC has something which is much more than clearness. When they describe, as everyone knows, they are literally unsurpassed in the spoken word".<sup>31</sup> The dialogues, which constitute the majority of the novel, reflect the specific phonetic qualities of the workers' language, a different pronunciation of personal pronouns, such as "you" as "yer"; all the initial "h's" are skipped, and many grammatical mistakes are included: "you is", "me is", "I are" and so on. The conversations concern issues which, as commentators living at that time emphasized, were indeed at the very centre of these people's interests: issues related to work, plans of emigration, the threat of redundancy, popular entertainments of the pre-war period such as the wireless and the cinema. Green depicts the sphere of interests of the working classes while refraining from making any moral judgements or any other comments. As Alan Ross suggests, "in his fiction [Green] stands outside his characters, a listener absorbed in their talk – on the factory floor, at the fire station, at cocktail parties – the author, however manipulative, takes no part in what is going on".<sup>32</sup> The voice of the narrator is impartial and hardly detectable at all,

23 Christopher Isherwood; quoted in Wipf-Miller, "Fictions of 'Going Over'," 137.

24 Cunningham, *British Writers*, 322.

25 Walter Allen, "An Artist of the Thirties," *Folios of New Writing* 3 (Spring 1941): 151; quoted in Wipf-Miller, "Fictions of 'Going Over'," 139.

26 Gibson, "Henry Green as Experimental Novelist," 199.

27 John Cornford, "Left?" *John Cornford: A Memoir*, ed. Pat Sloan (Dunfermline: Borderline, 1939), 123; quoted in Wipf-Miller, "Fictions of 'Going Over'," 138.

28 Henry Green, *Living* (London: Vintage, 2005), 207.

29 Henry Green, interviewed by Terry Southern, "The Art of Fiction XXXI: Henry Green," *Paris Review*, 5 (Summer 1958): 73; quoted in Gibson, "Henry Green as Experimental Novelist," 204.

30 Green, *Living*, 342.

31 Green, *Pack My Bag*, 156.

32 Alan Ross, "Introduction," in Henry Green, *Pack my Bag*, vii.

simply that of a reporter who sets the scene, while the plot is realized by means of dialogues.

The process of “going over” takes place more precisely on the level of the narrator’s language. The speech of characters influences and transforms the language of narration itself; narration may suddenly take the form of working class slang even when the plot does not focus on a representative of this class. Green was, as Gibson noted, “particularly sensitive to what he called the ‘half-tones of class’, to sociolects as both exclusive and imprisoning”.<sup>33</sup> In his novels, however, Green managed to blur the distinctness between such categories. The boundaries are crossed to such an extent that “there is, in fact, no single prose style that we can recognize as Green’s”.<sup>34</sup> Thus the language makes the novel seem devoid of any presence of an “authorial persona” or consistent narrator, consistent meaning here a narrator whose voice can be identified and distinguished from other voices of the novel. What is more, there is no sense of the language of the novel “belonging” to any of the characters. The language seems to be ownerless or displaced.

In *Living* colloquial phrases appear often in passages that refer to the Dupret family and on the contrary a literary phrase can sometimes be found in fragments that describe Lily Gates or Jim Dale, who, for example, kiss “in boskage”.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, an unexpected proletarian phrase is suddenly encountered in *Party Going*, in which the plot does not concern representatives of the working classes at all. Again the language of the narrator is mingled with that of the characters. Green used this effect to break with convention: his narrator is not “above” them, neither in terms of language nor in omniscience. As Gibson noted, “Green’s narrators assimilate the linguistic habits of others. But they do so only sporadically, and not consistently [...]. Green claimed that he wished, in Dedalite fashion, to refine himself out of his novels. ‘The writer’, he asserted, ‘has no business with the story he is writing’”.<sup>36</sup> Here Green does not, as he did in *Living*, describe the life of the workers from the position of a high-born, but suggests in a way that he is already going “on the other side”, that his going over takes place even in cases when there is, so to say, no need for it. He does not do this to sustain the plausibility of his plot, to adjust the language to the characters he is describing, but in a sense against this plausibility. As Ross suggested, “what *Living* demonstrated was that Green, apparently uninterested in politics or sociology in any conventional sense, could use proletarian and upper-class material for equally poetic purposes”.<sup>37</sup> Green is constantly re-negotiating his position: at one point he is an upper-class writer transcending his class identity by relating the workers’ life, at another he speaks with the voice of the proletariat and becomes a part of them.

### ***Pack My Bag*: an autobiographical story of “going over”**

As has been mentioned above, Green often emphasized that he was not a political activist. Yet his awareness of the deep gulfs between the social classes was an important, if not crucial, force behind his ideas about writing and the role of the writer. His literary project,

33 Gibson, “Henry Green as Experimental Novelist,” 202.

34 Gibson, “Henry Green as Experimental Novelist,” 202.

35 Green, *Living*, 216.

36 Henry Green, “A Novelist to his Readers,” *Listener*, Nov 9 (1950): 506, quoted in Gibson, “Henry Green as Experimental Novelist,” 210.

37 Ross, “Introduction,” xii.

however, was not – as was the case with many of the socialist-oriented writers of the 1930s – a practical realization of an overtly leftist worldview. His attitude and consequently his works seem to be the outcome of a deep-seated complex that dates back to Green’s childhood experiences. The first time he became fully aware of the distance between the classes was at public school (which the reader of *Pack My Bag* easily recognizes as Eton, though its name is never mentioned in the autobiography). He wrote, “At my public school I had hated every other fact for fear the owner was a lord, at the university I was to court the rich while doubting whether there should be great inequalities between incomes. I had a sense of guilt whenever I spoke to someone who did manual work. As was said in those days I had a complex and in the end it drove me to go to work in a factory with my wet podgy hands”.<sup>38</sup> Green’s discomfort at the thought of belonging to moneyed people seems to have come to him naturally; after the period at the university when he had been a snob, he realized this sense of discomfort had to be resolved by “going over” to the world of the working classes and taking up manual work in the factory. There is no overt statement about the factors that precipitated this, – as it seems – sudden decision. Yet, despite Green’s suggestions, one may suspect that the political climate was not of little importance in this process. In *Pack My Bag* Green comments on the influence of the situation in Russia on the mind-set of his contemporaries thusly:

Everyone knows what happened in Russia and in those days there were few who remained indifferent, they either admired Lenin or distrusted his views. There was less apathy then than now and it would have been difficult to find many content to regard that revolution as an interesting experiment. [...] Indeed, as hardly anyone in England had read Marx before Lenin preached, most of what we heard of Russia was entirely new and therefore more arresting.<sup>39</sup>

Green, however, does not regard Communism as having a direct effect on him and his approach to social issues; he comments on it because it had an impact on the people that interest him, although it also made him think of his own social position as undeserved and perhaps even unjust:

All this is common ground and none of my business. But it had its effects on my contemporaries and is of interest for that reason. If, owing to the lucky chance that we lived in luxury we did not experience hardship [...], even if we did not eat one bun less each day because of it all we heard about it, we were uneasy and wondered whether our parents would be allowed to keep their money and whether we really ought to inherit when they died”.<sup>40</sup>

Green’s decision to leave Oxford and go to work in a factory was precipitated by the events of the general strike of 1926. His parents being abroad, Green used the occasion to leave university to manage the family business. He described the strike and the necessity for a response to it in the following way:

The moment it happened, striking just where I had been most afraid as for some time I had been unable to look a labourer in the eye, I had to get away at once. Within three days I had learned that where this attitude lets one down is on those rare occasions when we

38 Green, *Pack My Bag*, 126-127.

39 Green, *Pack My Bag*, 126.

40 Green, *Pack My Bag*, 150.

are all caught up into action, it is then that non-cooperation or the keeping silent becomes a cross".<sup>41</sup>

The encounter with the strikers and the period in the family factory made him later leave Oxford for good. He started working on the shop-floor, then became a pattern-maker, worked in the iron foundry, and finally as a coppersmith, before moving to management. He worked in the factory for two years, each day spending eleven hours at the factory and writing at night. This period of hard work was for him the first time in his life when he felt satisfaction from what he was doing, a result of the greater simplicity and of the awareness of one's productivity.

The men themselves, the few that bother to think about it, were of the opinion I had been sent there to be punished. They can take it from me theirs is one of the best ways to live provided that one has never been spoiled by moneyed leisure which is not as they would put it, something better. [...] On top of that there is the deep, the real satisfaction of making something with his hands. This has to be experienced to be believed, it is more than sensual and is obviously the purest form of self-expression.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

Whereas in case of writers such as Spender or Isherwood "going over" was a process imposed by the writer on himself as a way of standing up to one's obligations of a socially committed writer, in Green's case this process has its source in a deeply personal need. Green did not consider it his mission to live with the workers to know their life better and to be able to describe it more truthfully. His need for writing about the life of working classes came from a strong need to speak with the voice of those who had been deprived of speech and whose perspective had been altogether excluded from official discourse. We may consider this need a driving-force behind his art and agree with Gibson who noted that "Green's desire to 'bridge gulfs' doubtless had its origin in obscure emotional needs of his own [...]. When he lost a sense of connection with the working people, his art went into decline".<sup>43</sup> Gibson's is a very radical opinion, yet it suggests a kind of writer for whom the fate and way of life of the lower classes was a constant source of inspiration, and "going over" to that world a kind of journey in search of one's real identity. It is not an encounter with the other that Green really sought, an encounter which would enable him to produce literary descriptions of the other's way of life. He wanted to identify with himself, to speak with his voice.

Gibson describes Green's novels as mixing together elements of modernism and realism thus forming a new quality. The novels "fuse some of the extravagances we associate with modernist experiment with the narrowness of focus, the ordinariness we know as that of some of the more exemplary forms of realism".<sup>44</sup> Green, however, escapes such delimitations partly because his endeavour is of a decisively personal nature. The formal experiments that he applied in his fiction need not be understood in terms of realism versus modernism; his literary project an overtly politically one. Green is concerned with form and with social issues, but, it seems, for him this comes

not from a political awareness and theoretical reflections on the role of art, but from a purely private experience. This is why his "going over" must be constantly re-enacted; the author must "bridge the gulfs" over and over again in the pursuit of a new personal and artistic identity. Thus, he is constantly in suspension, the state of which is reflected in the titles of his ten novels, most of which are in the active participle. We have *Living, Party Going, Loving, Doting, Nothing* and *Concluding*. As Andrzej Sosnowski, a Polish commentator of Green's work noticed, it is a kind of *Life. A user's Manual*<sup>45</sup>. Life, in Green's work does not last, it is lived, just as the author who describes it does not "have" any given artistic subjectivity, he must create it over and over again in the act of writing. This new subject, always in the course of being formed, must be constantly negotiated.

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41 Green, *Pack My Bag*, 151.

42 Green, *Pack My Bag*, 153-154.

43 Gibson, "Henry Green as Experimental Novelist," 199.

44 Gibson, "Henry Green as Experimental Novelist," 210.

45 Andrzej Sosnowski, "Introducing *Nothing* (Henry Green)", in Andrzej Sosnowski, *Najrzykowniej* (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2007), 153.

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