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“Everything Unexplained”

The Structure of Secrecy and Secrecy as Structure in Henry Green’s *Party Going*

[W]e have to assume that narratives capable of interesting competent readers are likely to be in some ways inexplicit and indeterminable to the extent that there is no universal agreement as to what kind of significance, if any, are to be attributed to any particular moment of a text.

Frank Kermode: The Art of Telling, 72

Party Going, Henry Green’s third novel, enigmatically refutes all attempts of interpretation. It can be read as a social allegory, unleashing bitter criticism on the members of the upper middle class; it could be seen as a Freudian attempt to present the frustration a young lady (Julia) might feel in coming to terms with sexuality; or it could be regarded an existentialist novel, showing a party, the guests of which have been deprived of personal identity, and are seeking the means of reasserting themselves. All three interpretations seem possible, but each is equally encouraged and undermined at the same time; though each is doubtlessly valid for some aspect of the novel, neither is consistently so.

There is more to this novel than a single interpretation. The text is too elaborate and over ornamented to maintain a single allegory. Events are often unexplained, characters sometimes seem to lack motivation, objects float into focus without any discernible cause or reason, though professing a provokingly powerful sense of being.

Party Going is rather like a metaphor of immense complexity, hiding some undiscoverable secret, a metaphor having a multitude of meanings, but lacking a context, so that neither of the meanings is more accentuated than the others; neither can be granted priority over the rest without the fear of losing the secrecy inherently present. Thus, the metaphor is about the secret, but at the same time the metaphor is the secret itself, and it is impossible to reveal it, since that would inevitably lead to the destruction of the secret and the destruction of the metaphor.

Secrecy is overwhelmingly and abundantly present in the novel, as an organising principle of both plot and structure, its presence playing a crucial role in making the novel such a tensely composed unity. What I would like to show, through analysing Green's method and the means by which this secrecy is achieved, is, how by the force of their integrity, secrets assume a principal importance, pointing towards the essence of fictional reality.

The plot is quite simple, almost eventless. A party of rich and less-rich members of the London upper middle class aims to go to France for three weeks. The town is beset by a thick fog, making railway traffic, and their departure, impossible. How long the fog will last is unknown. The party-goers gather on the platforms, then take up positions in the railway hotel to waiting. Drinks are ordered; conversations develop; some members of the party are in love, others are jealous, others are bored. Time passes, and as the crowd thickens below, on the platforms, tension is slowly accumulating. Steel doors are shut and bolted to prevent the fatigued crowd from occupying the hotel. After a time the party-goers finally receive the good news of the fog rising, and they prepare to leave.

Throughout the novel the fog prevails, and quite often it serves as means for creating or for hiding secrets; it is not to be forgotten that fog is in itself a secret. Its nature is difficult to determine; occasionally it might become almost transparent, giving a generous display of what is concealed behind it, or, it may, just as easily, turn into an impenetrable milky whiteness which will consume the attributes of reality, transforming it into an indefinite thickness devoid of all dimensions.

The fog is not only present physically in the novel, it is likewise present in modes of structure; some events and motivations are described in detail while others are veiled in obscurity, lacking any discernible order, just as fog would shift without any apparent pattern, its varying density driving perception in and out of focus.

Accordingly, there are many events in the text which are not explained: the characters sometimes say or do things they cannot account for. A dead bird drops

from the sky; Miss Fellowes picks it up. Max Aidey, the host of the party, is talking on the phone with his lover Amabel, then, in the middle of the conversation, pours whisky and soda on the fire, and, leaving Amabel hanging on the line, goes to mix himself another drink. Thomson, one of the manservants, is complaining because he'll have to miss his tea, when a girl he has never seen before comes out of the fog and kisses him on the mouth. Due to the fog, perception is partial or distorted, and consequently a certain amount of indeterminacy is inherently present. Events may not be seen clearly, things might turn out to remain unexplained, or explanations might lead into deception.

In his study of Henry Green, Edward Stokes says the following about these unexplained events: "Like all of Green's novels *Party Going* has a dimension of poetry and wonder, there are at least a dozen scenes, episodes and passages in which Green endeavours to fire the reader's unconscious imagination into life."¹ By not explaining them Green is creating secrets, just as he does with the symbol-like birds which keep reoccurring, and these secrets not only manage to 'fire the reader's unconscious imagination to life' but are at the same time arousing the readers suspicion and curiosity.

Turning to the text, the first paragraph of the novel illustrates the role of the fog and the intricate means of explanation, suspicion and secrecy, present on a multitude of levels:

Fog was so dense, bird that had been disturbed went flat into a balustrade and slowly fell, dead at her feet.

There it lay and Miss Fellowes looked up to where that pall of fog was twenty foot above and out of which it had fallen, turning over once. She bent down and took a wing (...) She turned and she went back to where it had fallen and again looked up to where it must have died for it was still warm and, everything unexplained, she turned once more into the tunnel back to the station.

(384)

The paragraph is very tense, the first sentence, fashioned in a compact, telegram-like way, holding as much information as possible. The text, bearing the final brunt of 'nine or ten beginnings,'² is secretive and aims to divert the reader's attention.

¹Stokes, 204

²Mengham, 31

Miss Fellowes and the bird have something in common, notably, that neither of them knows what is behind the fog. The bird is unaware of a balustrade, therefore it must die, Miss Fellowes is granted a bit more information than the bird; the body of the dead bird functions as a signal, a sign which shows her that something must be behind that pall of fog, there 'twenty foot above and out,' something which is causing birds to fall dead at her feet. The bird was completely unaware of the secret, while Miss Fellowes knows about its existence, but that is the most she will ever be able to find out. The bird is still warm, so it must have died there, in the fog. Everything else is 'unexplained'. Miss Fellowes and the bird share a secret, not knowing it, though, they share it all the same.

In the first sentence the reader is granted a glance through the fog: not only the reason for the bird's death is known, 'went flat into a balustrade,' but also that the bird had previously been 'disturbed by the fog'. The secret Miss Fellowes aims to find out, the explanation behind the bird's death, is not a secret for the reader; it never was, as the circumstances of the bird's death are clarified well before Miss Fellowes is touched by the problem.

Miss Fellowes looks up twice, once immediately after having seen the bird fall, and once after having picked it up; but she cannot see through the fog on either occasion. The secret is there, and is not there, its existence depending on the fog; but by being shown to the reader, it is actually hidden, as, led by the knowledge of what has happened, the reader is tempted to believe that Miss Fellowes does not know what happened, which is true; but it is also true that she is nevertheless aware of the fact that something happened; saying that she does not know *what is behind* the fog does not equal saying that she does not know *what it is that is behind* the fog. Not knowing about the existence or not knowing about the qualities of a thing can hardly be the same. Yet the apparent clarity of the first sentence seemingly aims to nullify this difference, which is once again the difference between the bird's ignorance and Miss Fellowes's ignorance; and by this delusive nullification it aims to call into being a secret, a secret which is hidden from the reader through this process of honest deception.

For Miss Fellowes the dead pigeon is a proof, demonstrating that there is something behind the fog. She picks it up, taking a wing, as if to secure her proof, but her motives behind the deed are not shown. Yet, once she picks it up, she won't be able to get rid of it, she will wash it³ (with warm water), wrap it up in paper, and

³While washing it, Miss Fellowes is caught in the act by two nannies, who are related to the party, being servants to one of its members. The social difference between them and Miss Fellowes makes

carry it with her for the remainder of the story.⁴ This brown parcel, secured with strings, containing the well washed body of a dead bird demonstrates the genesis of a complex secret. Having been wrapped up, the pigeon, with all the personal and impersonal secrets attached to its death, is transformed into a literal secret, the brown paper wrapping simultaneously confirming and denying its presence.⁵ From this point on, the pigeon's existence will be a mystery, the pigeon being transformed into an entity possessing the power of existence, but entirely devoid of any possibility of a definition.

After the initial act of picking it up, Miss Fellowes is unable to get rid of the bird; once she gets as far as having Robin Adams sent on the errand of dropping the parcel into a waste basket,⁶ but later on she will be careful to retrieve it and carry it along. Perhaps it is the secret Miss Fellowes shares with the pigeon which binds them together, and perhaps it is the burden of the bird which causes Miss Fellowes's illness. (This illness by the way, is also a secret which some members of the party are trying to keep from other members.)

Later on, Miss Fellowes will reflect twice on the question of picking up the pigeon, (just as she had looked up twice); once after having washed it -

she had been right she felt, she could not have left it there and besides
someone might have stepped on it and that would have been disgusting,
she was glad she had washed it

(394)

-and once in the nightmarish dreams of her illness:

It might have been an argument with death. ... And another voice asked her
why she had brought a pigeon, was it right to order whisky, did she think
... And she argued why shouldn't she order whisky ... and as for the pigeon

them keep the secret of having seen her wash a dead bird with warm water. They consider it "improper," therefore they will refuse to talk about it, aside from a few nervous whisperings here and there.

⁴This point in the plot has led to frequent comparisons to Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The Mariner was forced to tell his tale, his secret, Miss Fellowes however will keep it to herself.

⁵The bird in the parcel is very much like the Lockean concept of *substance*, or the Kantian concept of the *ding an sich*.

⁶This is the first of the many futile errands, another motive recurring all through the novel. People ask each other to carry obsolete messages, or send each other on errands which are made impossible by the circumstances.

it was saving the street-cleaner trouble, when they died they were never left out to rot in the streets nowadays.

(452-453)

Both of the explanations are unsatisfactory, because, just like the nannies, the reader also feels Miss Fellowes's actions 'improper', and, as the deed transcends the realm of everyday rationality, the explanation should likewise transcend it. It does not do so, and, consequently, it is an unsatisfactory explanation.

According to Rod Mengham, "The novel's obsession with motive is replaced by a fascination with narrative where everything is 'unexplained'."⁷ The obsession with motive, however, is present in this lack of explanation. 'Everything unexplained' may mean that there is no explanation, or it may mean that the explanation exists, only it is a secret, and therefore is not given. In the first paragraph of the novel there are only two events the reasons for which would belong in the category of 'everything,' one being the bird's death, and one being Miss Fellowes' picking it up. For Miss Fellowes apparently both are unexplained; for the reader, only the second is a mystery. Just as the bird's body worked as a proof in Miss Fellowes case, the clearly formulated explanation for the first event can be interpreted as a hint, pointing at the existence of another secret, namely some kind of reasonable explanation which could account for what Miss Fellowes did.

The first paragraph illustrates the different levels of secrecy, and the complex devices utilised for hiding them, hinting at them, or revealing them. There are four phenomena to be considered in the paragraph; the bird's death, the reason behind the bird's death, Miss Fellowes's picking it up, and the reason behind Miss Fellowes's picking it up. Out of these four three are secret to some degree; only the fact that Miss Fellowes picks up the pigeon is seen with equal clarity by Miss Fellowes and the reader alike.

The pigeon is cleaned and wrapped up, but the figure of the bird keeps recurring: it pops up in the conversations or the memories of the others. Julia remembers that once she saw swallows flying under a bridge; later she thinks they were pigeons. In the manservants' conversation the whole pigeon incident is presented, while neither of the two men may know anything about it:

'Go on if you lie and pick up some bird, alive or dead, Thomson and get yourself your cup of tea if you feel like it.'

⁷Mengham, 31.

'What do you mean alive or dead?'
 'Alive or dead? I meant nothing.'
 'Not wrapped up in brown paper you didn't?'
 'What's that?'
 'Oh, nothing.'

(472)

In a conversation about Embassy Richard, Max makes the following observation: "‘If he was a bird,’ he said, ‘he would not last long.’ Julia asked him what on earth he meant and got no answer" (417). Once again the existence of the secret is pointed at, by characters who should be, and are, perfectly ignorant of it. When forced to reflect on their utterances, neither Max nor the manservant knows what he meant. Actually, both believe that they meant ‘nothing’. The secret of the pigeon will transform the apparently meaningless remarks into surprising revelations of the truth. Thus, secrets seem to be powerful entities, which have the strength to transcend the law of ordinary communication. Nobody knows what is the secret of the dead pigeon, but on a subconscious level everybody knows about it.

The frequent reoccurrence of the bird incident is called ‘symbolic’ in almost all the studies written on *Party Going*, though no one is able to clearly state what it may symbolise. Fair enough: the dead body of a white pigeon seems to be much more than a simple object. It is packed with such powerful mythological and Biblical allusions that treating it as a symbol seems not only legitimate but almost compulsory. The evident nature of the birds’ importance is contrasted with the absolute lack of explanation concerning its presence, and it is this very contrast which leads to the pressing need of some clarification. Once again, the problem is the lack of consistency. The bird may be interpreted differently at each new occurrence. A bad omen, an apocalyptic warning, alluding to the myth of the Biblical Flood, a representation of Miss Fellowes’s soul, foreshadowing her illness, or a parallel for Amabel, the pigeon seems to be not so much a symbol as a sign, some kind of complex hint pointing toward a secret entity, which may be hiding behind the textual fog of the novel’s structure.

In *Party Going*, very often the same events reoccur. Alex keeps mixing drinks all the time, Robin, Angela Cravy’s young man, goes away and comes back three times, Julia keeps looking for her charms almost continuously, and she exploits every possibility to send Robert Hingnam on absolutely impossible errands. The

conversations are likewise repetitive, Aunt May's illness⁸ and Embassy Richard's story sooner or later will turn up in every conversation, and then the conversing parties will make their guesses and state their opinions regarding the matter. All this could be extremely boring, were it not for the steadily increasing tension.

At one point in the novel there is a remark which cannot be attributed to any of the characters and may thus be considered Green's own, casting light on the repetitive nature of the text: "People, in their relations with one another, are continually doing similar things but never for similar reasons." (446) In his book, Keith C. Odom quotes Green, saying: "people probably cannot know in real life 'what other people are really like.' even more definitely, he says 'we certainly do not know what other people are thinking and feeling.'" ⁹ Thus repetition is accounted for and acquires an aura of secrecy. People are doing similar things for different reasons, reasons which cannot be known by other people. But if the only distinction between different people resides in the difference of the reasons determining their actions, (which is a secret and cannot be known) then people will lack real distinction, and will become uniform. Evelyn Henderson, whose financial situation turns her into an outsider,¹⁰ is sufficiently detached from the party to be able to observe this uniformity: "If people vary at all then it can only be in the impressions they leave on others' minds and if their turns of phrases are similar and if their rooms are done up by the same firm and, when they are women, if they go to the same shops, what is it makes them different, Evelyn asked herself" (464). People are hopelessly standardised; if there is any difference at all, then it must reside in the 'impressions they leave on others' minds'.

At some stages of the novel not only other people's feelings and thoughts are unknowable, people are not simply uniformised, but their very existence is questioned. Once it is Robert who thinks that people are "a store of tailors' dummies, water heated" (408), and once it is the man whose accent is constantly shifting from educated to uneducated,¹¹ running on Robert's errand, who sees the crowd as "thousands of tailors' dummies stored warm on a warehouse floor" (483)

⁸ Claire, her niece will make every effort to keep it a secret, but her attempts prove to be unsuccessful.

⁹ Odom, 25; Odom quotes Green and the source he is referring to is Henry Green: *A novelist to his readers*, *The Listener*, XLIV (Nov. 9, 1950), pp. 505-506

¹⁰ Everybody is careful to mention that it is Max who finances the party, for the sake of 'poor Evelyn Henderson' who could not afford it.

¹¹ This is a recurring figure in Henry Green's novels, the character, who is puzzling everybody else by the constant technique of shifting his accent through different ranges, thus defying placement in any social class.

On the surface nobody seems to care, and only common secrets are discussed, such as the Embassy Richard affair. The apparent casualness is not genuine however; a touch of frustration is present, everyone is eager to find out what the others are thinking and why. Alex Alexander gives a clear but superficial definition of this practice:

if you were girls and went out to a party then it seemed to him you thought only of how you were doing, of how much it looked to others you were enjoying yourself and worse than that of how much whoever might be with you could give you reasons for enjoying it.

(494)

Alex fails to show how important all this really is, but seen together with Evelyn Henderson's already quoted remark that people vary "only ... in the impressions they leave on others' minds" it becomes evident that this practice is the only possible means of self-assertion.

In the constant communication demanded by this practice of self-assertion (which is partying), secrets play a central part. All members of the party have their own secrets and suspicions, and make every effort to keep the secrets and find good enough reasons for suspicion. Some secrets are short lived, some suspicions are unconfirmed, some secrets are not even secrets but only pretensions, yet secrecy seems able to transform the commonest everyday practices into affairs of mysterious significance.

On a surface level, secrets may simply serve as means for intrigue -for instance, when Amabel arrives,¹² only she and Max know that her arrival had been unexpected. Everybody else believes she was only late. She feels her position insecure, and therefore she starts whispering with Angela. "She began to make secrets which was her way when she did not know how things would turn out." (480) True secrets though, just like the secret behind the pigeon incident, are entities on their own, and possess the power of bestowing significance on everything else.

The story of the artichoke bamboo patch, to which I shall immediately turn, will illustrate the way such secrets define the structure of communication in the novel, and will show how apparently unimportant events may assume personal significance when touched by a secret.

¹²Her arrival is mysterious in itself, because we know that the hotel is separated from the outside by the steel door well before she arrives. Nobody seems to notice this though, and how she managed to get in will remain secret.

There are four people involved, Julia, Robert, Claire, Robert's wife and Max. Julia, Claire and Robert have been brought up together. In Robert's garden there was a patch of overgrown artichokes which they as children playfully considered a bamboo patch. What Robert remembers is that;

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.

(407-408)

Thus, what he knows is that the 'bamboo patch' held the possibility of a secret. Something might have been there. Later he talks about it with Julia:

when we were small there was a bamboo patch in the kitchen garden ... we used to imagine there was something out of the way in the middle of it ... Claire was practically brought up with us, wasn't she ... we never told her about those bamboos. Curious, wasn't it?

(415)

Robert believes that he and Julia have been sharing a secret ever since their childhood. They have never told about it to Claire, whom in the meantime Robert had married, and this fact gives a further touch of intimacy to their friendship. When Julia is telling Max about her charms, she also tells him about the bamboo patch, revealing the secret Robert believed to know, but actually did not, namely that there really was something in the middle of the bamboo patch.

She went on to say what Robert had never known was that one of her charms, the wooden pistol, had been buried plumb in the middle of the bamboo patch. In consequence, and no one had ever known of it, these bamboos, or probably they had been overgrown artichokes, had taken on a great importance in her mind because of this secret buried in them

(442)

Julia tells Max what no one has ever known that the suspected secret was really there in the middle of the bamboo patch. Robert does not know what gives the patch such a tremendous importance, he can only guess that it must have been some secret. By not telling Claire he is attempting to appropriate the secret he does not know. Julia is sharing her secret with Max, which is an act of intimacy, but it is

possible that she only does this to avoid other, definitely less verbal acts of intimacy:

Again he came over as if to sit on the arm of her chair.
 'If you do that, 'she said getting up, 'I shan't be able to tell you about my top.'
 He thought bother her top.

(445)

Max is apparently not interested in the story of Julia's charms,¹³ but she is determined to tell him everything.

She explained that each time they went through those artichokes pretending they were explorers in jungles, she was excited because she knew she had buried her pistol there and because the others did not know. She felt her experiment had made their game more secret, and that it was this secrecy which was what Robert remembered of it. 'So that it was my having hidden the pistol there which made the whole thing for him. He'll never know.' she said.

(442- 443)

Julia's secret is like a stone thrown in a pond, which is, through Julia's excitement, emitting waves, waves serving as signals, telling about its existence. When the man with the shifting accent, whom Robert had hired, is pushing through the crowd, he only knows that he is to search for Miss Julia Wray's luggage, and is unaware of the fact that the real motive of his being sent is Julia's collection of her charms. Just like Robert in the childhood bamboo patch, the shifting accent man is on an unconscious quest for Julia's pistol. And, as he is pushing through the crowd, he mysteriously shares Robert's experience of pushing through the patch: "To push through this crowd was like trying to get through bamboo or artichokes grown thick together or thousands of tailors' dummies stored warm on a warehouse floor." (483)

Thus, Julia's pistol, or the secret behind Julia's pistol, made the artichoke patch become an entity of its own, capable of intruding in the thoughts of all who are associated with the pistol. The relation, however, is twofold, and saying that the artichoke patch turned the pistol into a 'charm' would be equally legitimate. The two

¹³ According to Edward Stokes Julia's 'charms' can be interpreted as Freudian symbols of her sexual organs. In this case Max would certainly be much more interested in the 'charms' themselves than in the story of the 'charms'.

are united in a secret, and the significance they seem to possess originates from there.

Just as Miss Fellowes's parcel would lose its essence after the pigeon was taken out of it, bereft of their secrets Green's character's would scarcely amount to more than tailor's dummies. The fog only allows casual glances, but these moments of clarity accumulate, and inductively convince us, that though our perception is merely temporal, the presence behind the fog is permanent. "The evidence points in many ways,"¹⁴ though it seems that the subtle network of secrecy and secret association constituting the core of Henry Green's novel serves as a model demonstrating the transcendental nature of fictional existence. By showing the secret behind certain objects Green may in fact suggest that perhaps all things are fashioned in such a way, and on these grounds secrecy may evolve into the ultimate structure sustaining the whole construction of a fictional reality.

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¹⁴Kermode (1979), 89.