

**Henry Green and War: am I going to be killed soon? His work from
the perspective of a modal grammar of point of view**

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As my title indicates there is a twofold aim in this essay. On the one hand I want to analyse the concept of point of view (psychological as well as ideological) because of Henry Green's shift from third to first person narration in two of his works. For this purpose the model devised by Paul Simpson in *Language, Ideology and Point of View* presents itself as the perfect tool to accomplish such a task. He sets up a modal grammar of point of view around a series of categories of narratives. My intention is to study how Green's work fits into these categories as well as to examine the consequences of such classification. Additionally, I intend to highlight the underlining theme that runs through certain works of Green's, namely *Pack my Bag* (1940), his autobiography, *Caught* (1943) and *Back* (1946)¹, by illustrating how strongly the presence of war influenced Green's life, from the Anglo-Boer War to the Second World War.

Henry Vincent Yorke, his real name, was born in 1905 near Tewkesbury in the South West of England. He was the son of a prosperous Midlands industrialist, which enabled him to be educated in the most distinguished circles of Eton and Oxford University. During the Second World War he participated as an Auxiliary in the London Fire Service, which put him in touch with the real consequences and effects of the turmoil of the war. He also combined his literary career with work in his father's factory in Birmingham, making a point of starting at the very bottom and working his way up until he became a manager of the foundry. These biographical details are significant in view of the use Green makes of them in his work, which includes nine novels and an autobiography, together with a large number of short stories, articles and interviews.

¹ As explained later, *Blindness* (1926) is included in the counting carried out on the novels due to two reasons. First because together with *Pack my Bag* is the only novel that displays use of first person narration. Secondly because it acts as a contrastive but complementary element in the depiction of the other three.

If Green's work has a particular distinguishing trait it is its very special stylistic characteristics. The author himself devoted some space in his interviews and articles to explaining his own concept of art. The following is worth quoting at length, bringing together as it does Green's concerns with non-representation in art, the role of the reader, the importance of dialogue and the distancing of the author from his text:

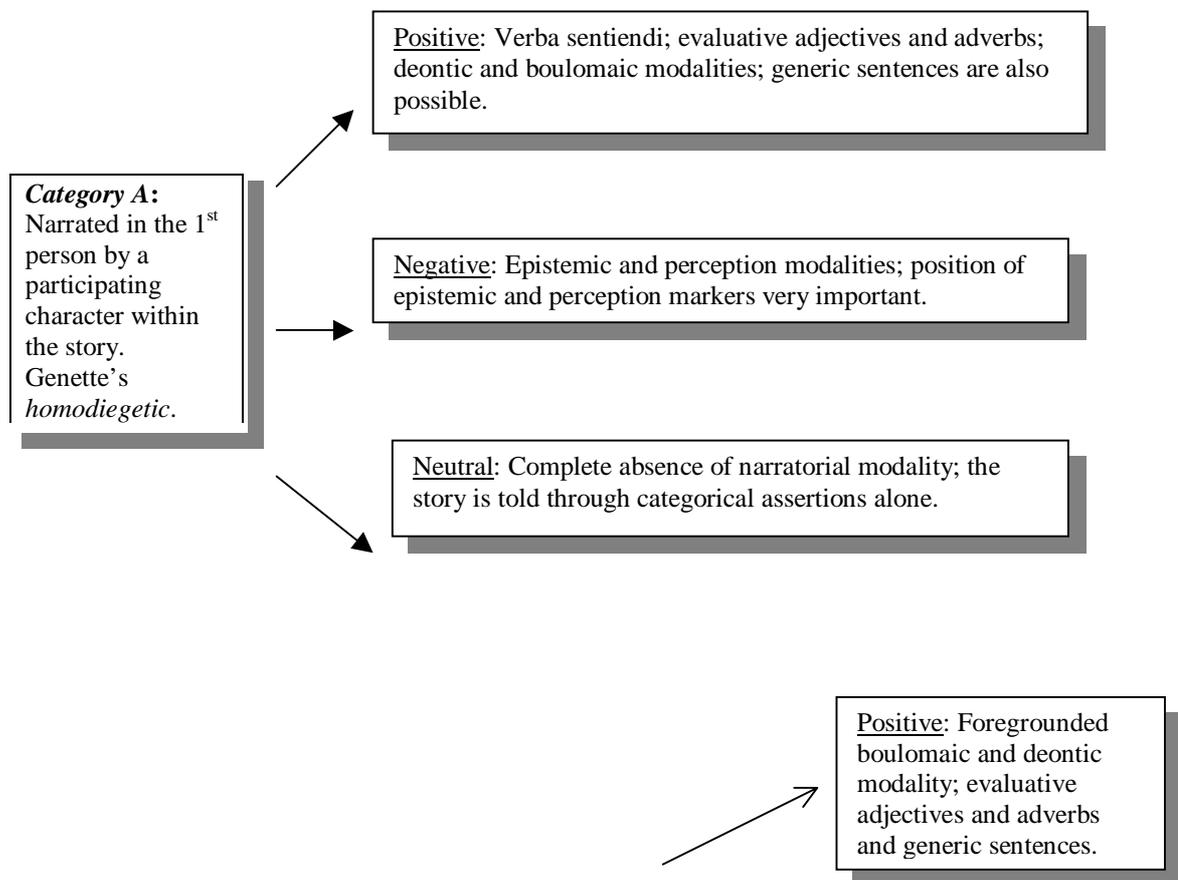
We may now, by leave, cast a glance on painting and sculpture, both of which have close analogies with writing. For the past several years painting has tended to avoid representation, that is to say, a direct exposition of the objects seen, and has tended to look below the surface [...] Thereby painters produce something which isn't, that is to say, the result is non-representational, and yet if and when the painting is successful, it has a life of its own. This is also true of a good novel. Sculpture on the face of it is easier to define. The main bulk of sculpture is based on the body, human or animal [...] Where non-representational, that is to say sculpture with holes - sculpture where the artist gives the outline of shapes inside which we have to imagine a content - where this happens such work is literary, that is to say, it has to be argued by the viewer, and if and when it is successful it therefore grows into a work of conscious imagination on the part of the viewer. It is also more likely to mean something different on the part of each person who sees it and therefore becomes, if it comes off, all things to all men, as a good novel also should [...] And if the materials of narrative, and by materials we mean here the means of communication, are a series of sound symbols which create words of no precise meaning outside their context, surely the means of communication between writer and reader in narrative should be dialogue [...] This project presupposes of course that the writer will keep any direct statement from himself out of his narrative because anything of the kind has an inhibiting effect on the magic which has to be created between writer and reader (Green 1950a, 21-23).

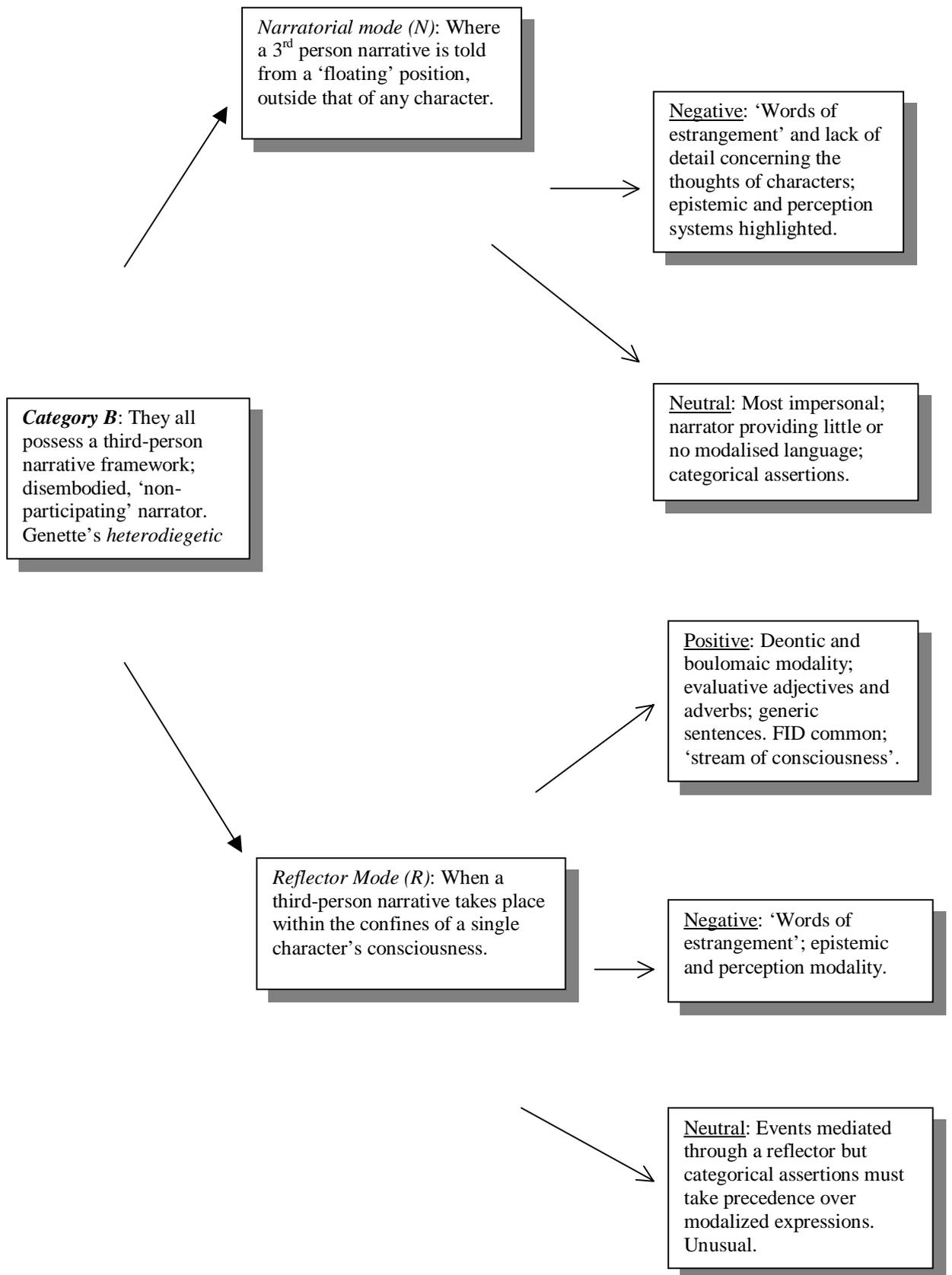
Of special interest are his statements concerning the role of the reader and the use of dialogue, intended to avoid the oppressive presence of the author, as mentioned in the quote above. The results, in terms of his practice, are a fascinating combination of linguistic games that have gained him the title of "experimental novelist"². As I wish

² These 'games' are especially obvious in *Living* (1929), his second novel, where a series of non-standard uses of linguistic elements is the norm. For instance, some determiners (especially the definite article 'the') are dropped, even though the nature of the nouns they follow would have required their presence; dialectal varieties of English are incorporated too alongside features typical of spoken English. On their own these non-standard uses would not be striking, but what makes *Living* special is the characteristic combination of all of them within a single novel.

to make clear, Green did not restrict his novels to a single linguistic technique, rather it is his combination of various modes of ‘speech and thought’ presentation with his negotiation of different modalities, which this essay will explore. Consequently I will focus on *Blindness*, *Caught and Back*, as narrative fiction, alongside *Pack my Bag*, his autobiography, the latter showing stylistic features that can fairly be considered in the same light as the rest.

By applying Paul Simpson’s linguistic model we can make use of his categorisation of narratives from the perspective of whose voice is being put forward in each case. Simpson’s notion of point of view is complemented by the concepts of modality alongside that of speech and thought presentation, as devised by Leech and Short (1981). All this takes as its basis the prior classification of narratives carried out by Fowler in *Linguistic Criticism* (1986). As a result we are presented with nine different possible types of narrative distinguished as follows:



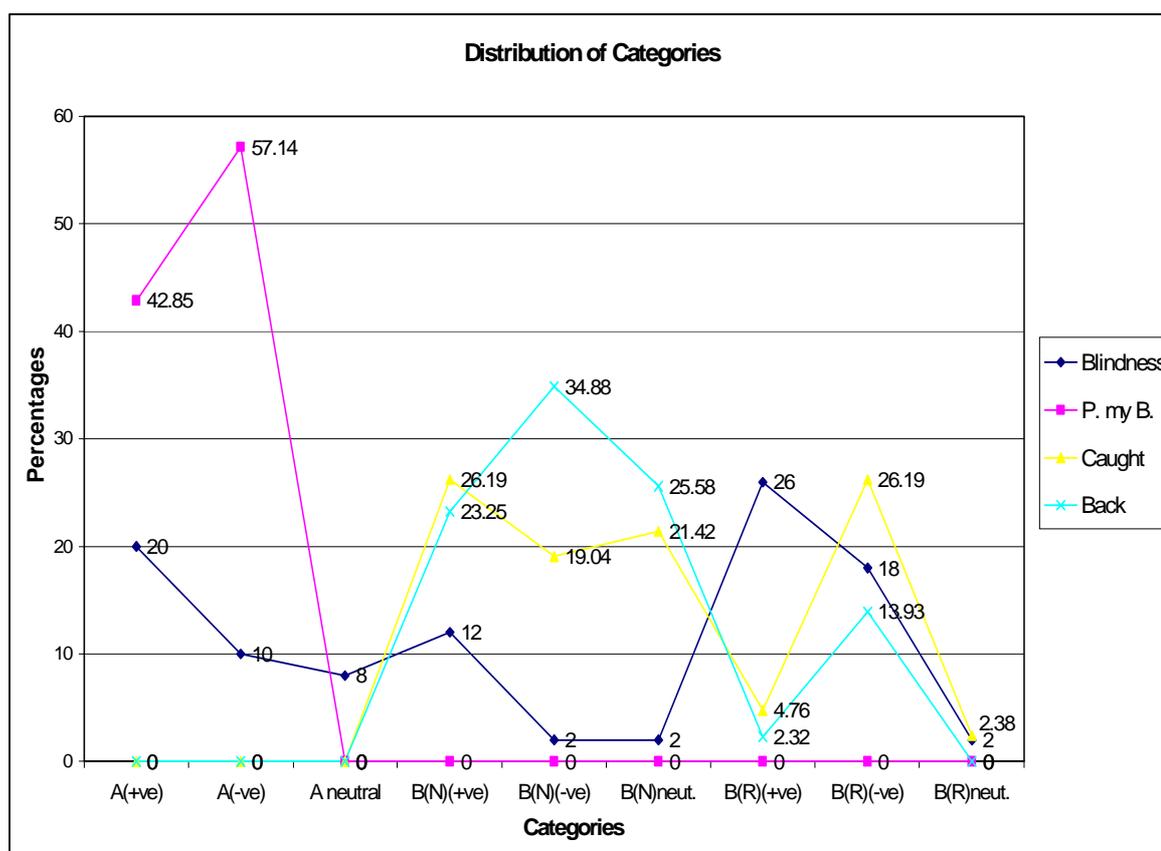


The first distinction lies on the primary division ‘first’ versus ‘third’ person narrator, or Genette’s homodiegetic against heterodiegetic narrator, classed as *Category A* and *B* by Simpson. Whereas the former appears in those narratives whose narrator is a character from within the story the latter has an external teller relating that story. The significant aspect of Simpson’s categories is that both the homodiegetic and heterodiegetic raconteurs are capable of showing their attitude towards the truth or not of what is being reported, namely through different modalities. After defining this concept studied by logicians and linguists alike, Simpson reaches the conclusion that the so-called ‘deontic’ (or ‘duty’) modality as well as ‘boulomaic’ (expressing ‘wish’ or ‘desire’) tend to occur together, alongside ‘evaluative adjectives and adverbs’, ‘generic sentences’ and ‘verba sentiendi’³. Similarly ‘epistemic’ and ‘perception’ modalities generally recur in those narratives in which ‘words of estrangement’ and the absence of all the elements mentioned before are the norm. ‘Epistemic’ modality is used when we want to show confidence or lack of it concerning the possibility of something happening, whereas the ‘perception’ variety is a sub-type of the former and makes explicit reference to human perception. Finally a narrator can opt out and not show any modality whatsoever, by employing ‘categorical assertions’ deprived of any evaluation by the entity relating. These three possibilities realise three different ‘shadings’, as Simpson calls them, namely ‘positive’, ‘negative’ and ‘neutral’ and work alongside the various points of view of narratives. The positive shading normally manifests a narrator that is very sympathetic and co-operative towards his/her readers; also a narrator prone to express his/her wishes, feelings, or thoughts in an attempt to exert some sort of evaluation. Against this the negative shading tends to be employed when there is some sort of bewilderment or detachment on the part of the teller. The confusion that war times are causing this writer is perfectly exemplified by negative shading. The neutral shading pictures a narrator that does not want to evaluate his/her text, with the result of a flat style with a near journalistic feel to it. Finally within *Category B* there is a further possible subdivision for sometimes third person narration can relate from outside the consciousness of a character or from within. As a result we can be presented with third person narratives told in a Narratorial mode, if there is no intrusion, or in a Reflector mode, when it is one of the

³ Term borrowed from Fowler’s *Linguistic Criticism*, which in turn is taken from Uspensky’s *A Poetics of Composition* (1973).

characters' angle being put forward. The combination of all these factors results in a model containing nine distinct types of narratives which can help elucidate the peculiar stylistic variations of Green's works.

The previous graph is the result of my analysis carried out on four works by Henry Green. The figures come from the study of random sample work (roughly every five pages) in all the books, a total of 30 texts from each. From each text the different linguistic markers identified by Simpson have been noted. The results stem from a counting of the different markers and a further classification of how they fit into the different categories. For instance, each text has undergone the test of first/third person narration; deontic/boulomaic versus epistemic/perception modalities, etc. *Blindness* has been included as a further explanatory factor and also because, together with *Pack my Bag*, it is the only novel in which *Category A* of narratives is present. Thus



Blindness is, after all the counting, the only book where all the nine categories are represented. In fact this novel can be described as the only book of the four where Green is implementing a type of experimental view on his narrative. *Blindness* seems

to manifest Green's eagerness as a young writer to incorporate as many varieties of style as possible within the same book.

Pack my Bag, on the other hand, breaks in an extreme way the trend started in *Blindness*, since only two different shadings within the *A Category* are employed. The motivations behind this book, however, are utterly different from those that prompted a young Green to write *Blindness*. From the outset Green acknowledges to his audience the very grim auspices that moved him to embark upon his autobiography, a fact which explains his abandonment of the experimental direction previously taken and that lasted, at least in its most severe form, for his first two works (*Blindness* and *Living*). Thus it is not surprising that the distribution of categories *A(+ve)* and *A(-ve)* shows a higher percentage of the latter than the former: 42.85% versus 57.14%. *A(-ve)* is foregrounded from the very beginning:

I was born a mouthbreather with a silver spoon in 1905, three years after one war and nine before another, too late for both. But not too late for the war which seems to be coming upon us now and that is a reason to put down what comes to mind before one is killed, and surely it would be asking much to pretend one had a chance to live. That is my excuse, that we who may not have time to write anything else must do what we now can (Green 1940, 1).

The conviction that his death is imminent clouds any view of the future for this writer. The turbulent historic moments that Green was witnessing are exerting a powerful influence on his considerations on life in general, and his writing career in particular. Such is the state of mind this creates that the very beginning of his autobiography could not start with a more highly modalised paragraph, abundant in epistemic and perception indicators: 'seems to be', 'surely', 'it would be asking', 'may'. This mood, which pervades the whole book, seems to taint his memories too, with the result of a rather bemused and bewildered version of what his childhood and youth were like:

There was a boy who, when called by the maid in the morning, was found propped up in bed half-way through a cigarette. She had to report him, we each had to do five hundred lines. [...] He said he did not know, that he could not think, that the whole thing was beyond him. He even refused to say whether or no he had been smoking. We did not enjoy beating as probably many prefects did

but we beat him in relays as hard as we knew how. It may well be this new rule was to make us pay for our authority [...] Our trouble was that if we came to think of it at school we could not understand. We could not make out why we did such silly things, we did not see why so much that was absurd should be done to us. When as juniors we kicked someone it was safe to kick, it was not only that we liked to give pain. It was the expression of something as altogether out of my reach then as it is now. I could not imagine then any more than I can at this moment why he chose to smoke when he must be caught. I was always confused and everything seemed pointless (Green 1940, 110-112).

This passage exemplifies very well Green's perceptions concerning his time at school. Every time this issue arises the same confusion crops up, linguistically realised by A(-ve) category. Both the first-person perspective and the negative shading are highly marked in this excerpt through plenty of epistemic and perception indicators: 'it may well be', 'everything seemed pointless', 'probably'. Therefore what *Pack my Bag* is presenting is not simply an account of its author's life but a very clearly biased report influenced by the historical events the writer was living at that moment.

Following this trend we must identify a new indicator, not mentioned by Simpson, but that plays an important role in administering the sense of confusion Green is trying to communicate. Together with all the other markers typical of this type of modality we find a great number of rhetorical questions:

Is it presumptuous to write about oneself and is that why it is easier to write about what one has been told when it has no bearing on what one has experienced? Is it fair to expect people to be interested if it is boring and hard work to put down and probably so dull to read. [...] How unattractive is one now, and was one more or less so then? [...] Or is this the sort of thing they tell children to please them? (Green 1940 7-9).

Instances like the above keep recurring in Green's autobiography, as if the author himself was looking for the answers in the audience, even though he is asking questions that only he can retort to. There are two issues at stake in these occurrences: on the one hand Green's confused state of mind keeps interfering with the portrayal of his own life; on the other there is a refusal to assert himself in front of the readers in case such a movement was considered an imposition of his ideas upon them. The importance Green places on letting the reader make his own judgements without the dictatorial guidance of the author has been mentioned before. Even in his

autobiography, where Green certainly could exercise a higher degree of control over the readers as he is reporting his own life, he invites them to make their own assessments and evaluations. This issue is connected with the notion of ‘incompleteness’ that all his works end with, and which I will comment on in my conclusion.

Having said this the A(+ve) category is present in *Pack my Bag* too, with a relatively high percentage (42.85%). Therefore *Pack my Bag*, although only containing two varieties of narrative, still appears stylistically challenging enough to justify its inclusion in an analysis of this kind. In fact as can be inferred from the reading of both *Blindness* and *Caught* there are many autobiographical elements in his fictional work. In *Blindness* he is enacting his life as a student in Eton, whereas *Caught* captures images of his time as an Auxiliary in the Fire Service in the London of the Second World War. *Pack my Bag* acts as the connecting factor clarifying some of the issues raised in his literary production.

Since the previous two works, *Blindness* and *Pack my Bag*, are the only ones in which a homodiegetic narrator is present it is worth comparing how a heterodiegetic teller portrays his narrative in other novels. *Caught* is the first one employed in this analysis to provide a more extensive view of the general stylistic features of Green’s oeuvre. A first look already proves that all the shadings of *Category B* are present in this work, but also that the Reflector mode is replaced by the Narratorial mode in the following proportion, 33.33% for the former versus 66.65% for the latter. This points towards a significantly different type of narrative from what we have been presented with so far, especially as far as the speech and thought presentation techniques are concerned.

One of the main differences that needs pointing out from the very beginning in *Caught*, and indeed *Back* too, is the greater significance given to the role that dialogue plays. The concepts of ‘speech and thought presentation’ as depicted in *Style in Fiction* by Leech and Short, were embraced as part of the linguistic markers used by Simpson in the establishment of his model. Characterising different excerpts as one category or another is sometimes determined by the different techniques to present either speech or thought. The fact that dialogue is used far more often in *Caught* than

in *Pack my Bag* or *Blindness* accounts for some of the variations introduced here. This is the reason why the neutral shading recurs in *Caught* with more frequency than in the previous two, although not so much as in *Back*. *B(R) neutral* is especially relevant, with a higher percentage than in any other work. Nonetheless this neutrality runs parallel with the lack of narratorial intervention in the frequently used dialogue technique, rather than with the absence of any modalisation by the narrator in narrative passages. Green's use of this variety of speech presentation develops like a constant pattern when he is in need of a narrative deprived of any modality. Rather than going for the flatter version of the neutral shading in which categorical assertions, free from modalisation, remain the main linguistic element to make that narrative evolve, Green prefers the narrator to, temporarily, disappear altogether letting the characters speak by themselves.

“I heard all about that,” she said, “you went to the flat, and then sent Peewee up.”

“So is that what you girls call him?” [...]

“Look,” he said, laughing, “I know I sent your sweet Peewee up, but what about it? I didn't stay, did I?”

“You can't fool me,” she said. [...]

“No, they're no use.”

“But you thought they might be to our precious Peewee, and when we've been taking so much trouble.”

“Of course, if you girls can't hold Pye, I can't do much for you”

(Green 1943, 70).

Direct Speech (DS) alongside Free Direct Speech (FDS) (here realising a case of *B(N) neutral*) fulfil the part required to make the narrator vanish and allow the participants of the story to express themselves. In this extract FDS is realised by dropping the reporting clause but keeping the orthographic markers. Other instances of FDS resort to the opposite technique instead, maintaining the introductory element and not using the inverted commas.

Oh, oh Piper cried out beneath his breath, posh is what you are now, then, you old bastard, doing 'is dirty ceiling what'll take four hours for 'alf a bloody dollar if you're lucky (Green 1943, 105).

The inclusion of dialogue in *Caught* brings with it the incorporation of the various ways of representing speech and the abolition of such a concentration on Free Indirect Thought (FIT), as is the case in *Blindness*. Even the reproduction of thought is made through its freer variety Free Direct Thought (FDT), avoiding allowing the narrator in

more than is strictly necessary (for obvious reasons the type of *Category* at work in this example is *B(R)(-ve)*):

“Darling,” said Richard, “I thought it would kill me,” while she thought well anyway I never snored or did I, it was such heaven I shan’t know unless he tells; or would he have noticed, but it certainly didn’t seem as if he could (Green 1943, 119).

Having stated this we should not forget that the total percentages still show a very clear margin of difference in favour of the *B Category* in Narratorial mode. Basically it is not until Green’s last two novels that dialogue becomes the product of an utterly conscious decision to discard any narratorial comments whatsoever.

Of the *B(N)* variety the positive shading dominates *Caught* (26.19%), closely followed by the neutral (21.42%), with the negative modality in third place (19.04%). The very start of the novel highlights the presence of a heterodiegetic voice relating the story from an external perspective:

When war broke out in September we were told to expect air raids. Christopher, who was five, had been visiting his grandparents in the country. His father, a widower, decided that he must stay down there with his aunt, and not come back to London until the war was over. The father, Richard Roe, had joined the Fire Service as an Auxiliary. He was allowed one day’s leave in three. That is, throughout forty-eight hours he stood by in case there should be a fire, and then had twenty-four in which he could do as he pleased. There were no week-ends off. Public holidays were not recognised. The trains at once became so slow that there was no way he could get down to see Christopher in a day (Green 1943, 1)

Deontic modality is especially foregrounded (‘he must stay’ [‘he must] not come back’, ‘he was allowed’) but *verba sentiendi* (‘as he pleased’) contribute to make this a *B(N)(+ve)* variety too. This extract, however, has also been quoted for another important reason linked to its classification within the *B Category*. After the close analysis of this work no instances have been found that could remotely convert this novel into the *A* version. And yet, the very first line forces us to think differently. The use of first person in line one (‘we were told’) does not comply with the rest of the novel, as it shows signs of a homodiegetic narrator. To provide a plausible explanation for such phenomenon it is necessary to appeal to the ideological level of point of view. Ideologically speaking, that ‘we’ does not represent either the narrator or the characters but rather the author himself, letting his own impressions about the

war filter through. *Pack my Bag*, his autobiography, registers Green's days as an Auxiliary in the Fire Service as well as his lack of expectations concerning any possibility of surviving the war. And yet three years after completing his autobiography where he admitted he did not think he would be able to master another book (*Pack my Bag* 1940, 1) he has been able to publish his fourth novel. That first person pronoun thus reads as a contamination from his autobiography where a homodiegetic narrator was the norm. This is substantiated by the fact that 'we' only appears at the very beginning of the novel. Alternatively, 'we' could be viewed as a normal example of a *B(R)* narrative in which Green is using the main character, Roe, as reflector to express his own fears. Yet its presence in the very first line, and what is more, shifting into *B(N)* immediately after, renders this last option, at the very least, unlikely since the audience is left with no other linguistic markers to relate to in order to identify who that reflector really is. My interpretation leans towards accepting 'we' as a representative of Green himself, dragged along from his previous book, especially in view of the fact that this is not the only occasion in which Green has performed such a task.

Living (1929) and *Party Going* (1939) also share similarities that, as in the case of *Caught*, only last for a few lines at the beginning of the novel:

Fog was so dense, bird that had been disturbed went flat into a balustrade and slowly fell, dead, at her feet (Green 1939, 1).

One of the features that sets *Living* apart from the rest of Green's work is the special utilisation of the definite article. Even though the reference to some nouns is definite Green drops the form 'the' without any apparent reason for doing so. That trend is carried out briefly in his following book as the quotation above shows, since both 'fog' and 'bird' would necessitate the meaning of definiteness realised by the definite article (although due to different reasons), but they are not provided with it. Hence a parallel can be drawn between these two novels and *Caught* and *Pack my Bag*. I would argue for a combination of all the factors mentioned for interpreting such a peculiar use of the first person pronoun. Green's fear of war is certainly still pervasive, as if the author himself needed to let his persona manifest itself in a narrative format that normally does not take personal authorial comments, especially

in the light of Green's special concern to distance himself from his narrative. The fact that it is not the first occasion in which such a situation occurs suggests a more stylistic and conscious effort on the part of the author.

The final issue concerning *Caught* is to stress the prevalence of the negative shading over the other two: 30.95% (+ve), 45.23% (-ve) and 23.80% *neutral*. Both the Narratorial and Reflector modes with negative shading respond to a type of uncertainty on the part of either the narrator or one of the characters.

Lastly *Back* represents the ultimate step in the journey through war Green initiated with *Pack my Bag*. Unlike it, *Back* is told primarily by a heterodiegetic narrator completely outside his narrative. Yet, this novel is only primarily and not completely related in a third person format since it contains an insert, a story within the story, that requires classifying as an *A category*.

“From the Souvenirs of Madame DE CREQUY (1710-1800) to her infant grandson Tancred Raoul de Créquy, Prince de Montlaur. I must tell you about Sophie Septimanie de Richelieu who was the only daughter of Marshal de Richelieu and the Princess Elizabeth of Lorraine” (Green 1946, 87-88).

The above is an extract from the strange story that one of the characters sends to the main one in an attempt to help him clarify the state of confusion he finds himself in. This tale carries on for ten pages, framed within a first-person pattern but with very frequent slips into third. The general counting on *Back*, however, does not include the existence of such instances mainly because the new homodiegetic teller is not a participant from the main story but an external interpolation that does not alter the general feeling of the rest of the novel.

Caught and *Back* show similarities too in so far as dialogue plays a very significant part, although now the Direct Speech variety seems to predominate. Nevertheless there are some differences between the two novels for the former allowed the characters more freedom from the narrator. In *Back* reporting clauses include more comment, although still without a great deal of modalisation.

“Come along,” Mrs Grant waved him into the living room, “sit down, do, and make yourself at home.”

“I wouldn’t wish to interrupt ...” he brought out.
“Why, he’s resting,” the older woman explained. “He’s got a bell right by his hand, on the good side, that he can thump away at when he needs. He’s getting ever so expert, isn’t he, Nancy?”
“Half the time he bangs the thing just to see us run,” Miss Whitmore said.
“Oh he’s very good, so patient really,” Mrs Grant protested, and smiled.
“Of course he is. He’s a marvel,” Miss Whitmore agreed. (Green 1946, 168).

There are a greater variety of introductory reporting verbs alongside slight observations from the narrator (‘Mrs Grant waved him into the living room’). These remarks act as stage directions, enabling the teller to introduce his comments if necessary, without making his presence too oppressive. All of which accounts for the higher percentage of the *B(N)* variety in *Back* than in any other novel: 83.71% of the total distribution in comparison with 66.65% in *Caught* and 14% in *Blindness*. Furthermore, the lack of modalisation included in those reporting introductory clauses causes the *B(N) neutral* category to score higher than any other of the four works too: 25.58% (versus 21.24% in *Caught* and 2% in *Blindness*). As far as the shading is concerned the negative type, with all the typical markers, is the norm: 48.81% versus 25.57% and 25.58% for positive and neutral respectively.

Now he wanted to sit down. Then his guilt made him listen to what James was saying, in case the man had noticed. But James was going on just the same. Finally Charles was altogether taken up by a need to see the child a second time, to search in the shape of the bones of its face for an echo of Rose, to drag this out from the line of its full cheeks to see if he could find a memory of Rose laughing there, and even to look deep in Ridley’s eyes as though into a mirror, and catch the small image of himself by which to detect, if he could, a likeness, a something, however false, to tell him he was a father, that Rose lived again, by his agency in their son (Green 1946, 10).

The above is an example from *Back* in which the negative shading prevails. Indeed *Back* uses the negative variety as a post-war purging exercise⁴, whereby even though there are no clear references to the traumas of the war it is the consequences of such an ordeal that provoke that state. It is interesting to note that the mental state of the

⁴ The plot of the novel focuses on the confused state of mind that the main character suffers after returning from fighting in the Second World War.

main character is mostly depicted by the external narrator, avoiding the character's mediating consciousness in such a process. Consequently techniques such as Free Indirect Thought are not required in this novel.

To conclude it is only necessary to point out the one factor which the four works studied here are all linked by, as indeed they are with the rest of Green's novels. I am referring to the sense of inconclusiveness that these books leave their audience with at the end. Green purposely refuses to finish with a clear dénouement, tying all the different ends together. Furthermore, the four books also coincide as far as the manner in which this is achieved, namely via the negative shading widely discussed in my essay. My argument is that Green does not want to impose his own judgement on the audience. Instead he consistently lets the readership reach their own conclusions, especially when dealing with such issues as the effects of war. This is why the theme of war is not presented as a binary event in which there are good and bad sides. Instead Green reflects the human side of the conflict, the effect of such a horrible experience on people. Moreover, Green's treatment of the theme of war evolves from *Pack my Bag* through to *Back*. Whereas in the autobiography, a very negative sense of desperation is looming, *Caught* depicts the sense of relief and usefulness felt by the protagonist at being involved in some activities connected with the war itself. The narrator here seems to finally find some justification for his role during the war. The final step is realised by the ghostly state portrayed in *Back*, representing the incredulity of many soldiers returning from a life of death and fear. Green's depiction of war, thus, represents a pilgrimage within life for those lucky enough to have survived the deadly prospects of a life without future. As a summary Simpson's modal grammar of point of view can be adjudged to be a very useful tool in giving linguistic justification to the view of Green as a writer seriously concerned, through his experimentation, to express feelings of alienation, fear and doubt in the face of the social upheaval of war.

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