



**A Real Phoney:
Wartime London in Henry Green's *Caught***

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Abstract: At the outset of Henry Green's *Caught*, what would seem a standard disclaimer assures the reader that the novel's characters are 'imaginary' while its setting – '1940 in London' – is 'real'. This apparent formality presents a covert declaration of the text's central concerns. Its characters are 'imaginary' not only because they are constituents of a work of fiction, but because the very nature of Phoney-War London forces them to enact roles – and family roles in particular – which feel as inauthentic as parts in a film. This specific form of playacting enables not only the family unit but the very notion of familiarity to become compatible with the strangeness and hostility which are its opposites. In turn, this uncanny blurring of boundaries enables wartime London to adapt to the oxymoronic experience of the 'Home-Front'. While the city's inhabitants consistently struggle to locate the 'reality' of this peculiar setting, this essay argues that the authentic '1940 in London' consists in a version of the Death-Drive encoded within the parenthetical descriptions of colour which interrupt the account of 'Black Saturday' with which the novel closes.

Keywords: Henry Green, London, Phoney-War, Blitz, Home-Front, Imaginary, Real, Uncanny, Death Drive.

In 1943, the English writer Henry Green published *Caught*.¹ Drawing on the author's experience as a volunteer in London's Auxiliary Fire Service, the novel traces the internal workings (or, perhaps, non-workings) of a central fire station during the Phoney-War – the eight or so months after the Outbreak during which,

to the surprise of many, precisely *no* bombs fell on Britain. *Caught* opens with the following disclaimer:

This book is about the Auxiliary Fire Service which saved London in her night blitzes, and bears no relation, or resemblance, to the National Fire Service, which took over when the raids on London had ended.

The characters, while founded on the reality of that time, are not drawn from life. They are all *imaginary* men and women (emphasis added). In this book only 1940 in London is real. It is the effect of that time that I have written into the fiction of *Caught*. (Green 1943: xv)

What would seem a mere formality can also be taken as a declaration of *Caught's* central concerns. Throughout the novel, Green is at pains to locate the 'reality' of a London defined by its very 'phoniness', to track the uniquely 'imaginary' aspect of its real-time inhabitants, and to represent their 'reality' within a work of fiction. Only in light of the preamble do these paradoxical undertakings become properly apparent.

Jeremy Treglown is quite right to accuse the frontispiece of 'more than usual implausibility' (Treglown 2000:136).² Nevertheless, if *Caught* had been prefaced with a claim like 'the characters in this novel are accurate representations of actual Londoners', the assertion that 'They are all imaginary men and women' would still be valid. While any unitary notion of 'character' is, in some sense, an 'imaginary' construct,³ this appears to have been particularly true for those who, as Green puts it in 'Before the Great Fire', 'volunteered convinced that the [Auxiliary Fire Service] must be a suicide squad' (Green 1992:269). Stephen Spender, also a London Auxiliary, describes being a member of the same squad:

Living together in one recreation room for forty-eight hours on end out of every seventy-two, our lives became like a documentary play, in which each of us played a role allotted to him. And yet no-one was consciously acting...The station created a character for each of us, based largely on what we really were. (Spender 1951:245)

The firemen in *Caught* are subject to this same process of fictionalisation. Each of them is 'imaginary' not only in that he is a constituent of a work of fiction, but also in that he is turned, as Michael North has argued, 'into a caricature that exists only in terms of the public life of the station...a simplified version of himself, purposely distorted and reformed to fit the odd dimensionless context of the war' (North 1984: 105).

Caught's central protagonist, a widower named Richard Roe, proves the epitome of this phenomenon. Having joined the fire service 'three days before the outbreak', and 'certain of death in the immediate raid he expected to raze London to the ground' (Green 1943:25), Roe hardly knows what to make of things when he finds that he is alive and with no fires to extinguish stands some weeks later:

when there were no raids, and he was happy at the substation because it was a complete change of scene, he forgot Christopher until, on his first leave, he found he was still terrified of dying, perhaps because his son was older, but almost entirely because, now that he had been parted by life as well as death, he could not bear to leave for ever, never to share life with what was left just when he had discovered how it had been shared. (Green 1943: 25)

The phrasing here is important: 'parted by...death' refers to the fact that Roe has been separated from his wife by her death some years prior; 'parted by life,' meanwhile, suggests that he feels similarly separated from their boy, Christopher, by the fact that the boy has remained – and, as an evacuee, is due to remain – alive and well in the countryside. In a literal sense, Roe is alive and a regular Londoner; but, with this distance between him and his son, he imagines himself as an inhabitant of some un-dead inter-space, 'caught' between the realms of the living and the deceased, and alienated from both. In this way, the novel illustrates the distinctly 'phoney' space which the members of the AFS, having prepared for a fate which was not bestowed upon them, were forced to inhabit.

The fire-station has a similar effect on those within its wider radius. Roe's sister-in-law, Dy, for example, finds herself inhabiting a particularly alien role – that of her deceased sibling, Roe's wife. At the beginning of the novel, the firemen simply confuse the two women. When Dy and Christopher visit the station, for example, we are told that 'Piper considered the visit paid by this lady he thought was the mother, with her son, had been pre-arranged' (Green 1943:50). Similarly, the station officer, Arthur Pye, later mistakes Dy's relation to Roe when he says to the latter, 'Now a woman I was born and bred up with has wronged your wife' (Green 1943:157). The text explains, 'Pye did not know [Richard's] wife was dead' (Green 1943:157). As the confusion spreads, Roe finds himself making the same mistake as his co-workers. When he is recounting to Dy his experience of a fire at the docks, we are told, 'He had begun talking to her as though she was her dead sister' (Green 1943:175). Before long, Christopher also begins to confuse the two women. In conversation with Richard, Dy exclaims, 'Isn't it terrible...he calls me mum' (Green 1943:186). Nevertheless, Dy herself ultimately complies, repeatedly referring to herself as Christopher's 'Mummy' whilst in his presence (Green 1943:148-149). Contained within this self-misidentification is the suggestion that, like those who work within the fire-station, those on its periphery are engaged in unconscious performances of foreign personae. Dy's 'character' – her being identified as a maternal figure to Christopher – is also notable for the fact that it does not seem to be entirely 'real' – that is, founded in her biological relation to the boy.

By performing in this way, Dy forms part of a larger pattern in Green's London wherein non-maternal figures play maternal roles. It appears, for example, that Pye's sister had abducted Christopher out of some attempt to enact the part of the boy's mother. This is confirmed by the comments which she makes

when Pye visits her in a mental hospital: as Pye describes, 'She had talked sensible at first, said the food was good and all that, and then, towards the end, she went a bit wandering, asking when he was going to bring her child' (Green 1943:86). Pye's sister does not really have a child; her question implies that, within her imagination, she, like Dy, has come to identify as Christopher's mother. In a similar vein, a fireman called Piper, also a widower, addresses the memory of his deceased wife as 'mother' before going to bed each night (Green 1943: 40), and he applies the same appellation both to an outburst of laughter which 'brought the house down' (Green 1943: 75), and, ultimately, to 'a blaze on the bridge' (Green 1943: 178). Significant about the phenomena which Piper addresses in this way is that they are all, to a greater or lesser extent, morbid: first, he applies the term to his dead wife as he is going to sleep – an activity which itself resembles death; then, to the metaphorical destruction of 'bringing the house down'; and lastly, to the actual destruction of the Blitz. Motherhood, it seems, is being gradually reduced to an imaginary play-role best enacted by some image of the devastation which is expected to befall the urban landscape.

That this is the case is confirmed by the only actual mother to appear in *Caught*. On learning that her daughter, Brid, is being abused by her husband, the station's 'highly dramatic' cook (Green 1943: 82), Mary Howells, imagines that she will perform her role as Brid's mother by means of a quasi-militaristic demonstration of maternal retribution:

She pictured at the back of her eye the descent she was going to make on this camp the rotten, good-for-nothing, lying 'ound her son-in-law hung out in... Great whited monuments, like the tomb in Whitehall, began to line the roadway. From under the first a sentry challenged her...'Who goes there?' he would say. And then she could tell him a mother. 'A mother,' was all she would reply. Yes, he must know, that had a mother of his own. 'Pass mother.' And the next. 'Who goes there?' 'A mother, like you have of your own.' 'Pass. 'Who goes there?' 'A mother,' right until she was at the gates where that miserable twister would be waiting, froze with his conscience, wiping his white hands, the ponce. (Green 1943: 82-83)

This imaginary drama is the only instance in *Caught* wherein Mary explicitly identifies as a mother. Even though she is literally a mother to Brid, it is clear nevertheless that this too is something of a misidentification. When Mary learns that she has been robbed by her daughter, she cries aloud, 'Children, they say, is the salt of life, our parents looked on their children to 'elp at the end. But nowadays, its wars every generation, so it's not as if a woman, rich or poor, can call a child her own' (Green 1943:116). Significant in this lament is that 'wars' is plural: Mary evidently sees the First and Second World Wars as repeated instances of a single phenomenon. That the horrors of the First are still fresh in her memory is signified by the fact that the backdrop to her imaginary 'descent' consists of 'Great whited monuments, like the tomb in Whitehall'– that is, Edward Lutyen's

Cenotaph on Whitehall Road, erected to commemorate the Great War's victims. A repetition of that war's horrors, it seems, is somehow substituting itself in lieu of normative relations between mothers and children into the human cycle of regeneration. War, in other words, is threatening to terminate entire lineages once more.

Green's London also contains a number of instances in which paternal roles are played by non-paternal figures. Pye, for example, abducts a young boy at the end of the novel out of what appears to be a misplaced desire (which, of course, parallels his sister's) to act as a father. This is suggested by Pye's idea of his role within the fire station: prior to the abduction scene, we are told that he 'had imagined himself as a father to the [fire]men, knowing about their children, even settling differences between husband and wife' (Green 1943:88). It seems, then, that Pye seeks to demonstrate some imaginary paternal authority over his colleagues by transporting a son-figure back to their place of work. Notably, this mode of impersonation appears to be something of a norm within *Caught*. When the firemen describe their families to one another, the text claims, 'Everyman jack was full of his little woman and the Edies, the Joans, and the little Maries in their pinnies, he had left behind, sleeping in their little cots (most likely watching mum in bed with a stranger), in what each man was proud to call home' (Green 1943:40). The firemen's places within their respective homes are being enacted by strangers who, by definition, have no place within them, and their pride, therefore, is deeply ironic.

An alternative reading of the sentence 'Every man jack...' is hinted at within one of the few episodes in *Caught* which does not take place during the Phoney-War. Towards the middle of the novel, a prolepsis describes an unspecified location 'at which two heavy bombs had fallen within a hundred yards of each other' (Green 1943:94). Stumbling through the ruined streetscape, Roe bears witness to the following scene:

There was a surface shelter close by. Richard went inside, making the excuse that he wanted to find out how many regulars were hiding. The structure seemed to shake, the one light to flicker with that percussion, concussion of gun fire up above. And in the near corner a girl stood between a soldier's legs. He had been kissing her mouth, so that it was now a blotch of red. He held on to her hips, had leant his head back against the white painted brick. Hair came down and trembled over his closed eyes with the trembling in the wall. (Green 1943: 95)

Suggested here, in the way that the soldier 'held' onto her body, in the way that her hair shields his eyes, and in the way that its 'trembling' mirrors the wall's, is that the girl herself constitutes an extension of this man's 'shelter'. If the Home-Front, as Marina Mackay describes, 'by oxymoronic definition effaces the distinction between the site of battle and a place of safety', then this street-side shelter, a domestic sanctuary firmly within the firing line, is the sole location at

which these two terrains converge (Mackay 2007: 101). Only in the intimate embrace of a 'stranger', Green suggests, can one find the same consistency between homely and hostile forces.

A more radical interpretation of the sentence 'Everyman jack...', and one more consistent with the scene that Roe witnesses in the surface shelter, would take the firemen's pride at face value. This would not be to claim outright that any fireman knows for a fact that he is being usurped by a stranger in his bed and is proud nevertheless. It would be to suggest, rather, that the oxymoronic 'Home-Front' is defined not only by the literal destruction of houses, but by a remapping of the very concept of 'home': family relations are no longer plotted according to sanguineous or even legal ties, but can be legitimately enacted by a total 'stranger'. Like the 'characters' of the station's firemen, kinship roles have become 'phoney' so as to enable the same consistency between homely and hostile forces which, when the bombs begin to fall, the soldier will find in the loving embrace of an unknown woman in a street-side shelter during an aerial raid.

Only in light of this interpretation does Roe's equivocal relationship with his son begin to make sense. That he 'forgot Christopher' (Green 1943: 25) at one instance, and 'loved his son fiercely' (Green 1943: 25) at another seems a symptom of an awareness that the Phoney-War has made his role within his own family unit as 'imaginary' as a part in a film, a 'character' that he can slip into and out of at his own willing.

In lieu of normative paternal authority, Roe demonstrates an often worrying complicity with the impending destruction. To begin with, Christopher wins his father's attention by throwing snowballs and claiming excitedly, 'Look...I'm a German airman, I'm bombing' (Green 1943: 174). Instead of reprimanding his son for sympathising with the enemy however, Roe encourages this sadistic play:

'Look,' his father interrupted, 'haven't you knocked those branches about enough? There's hardly a bird left in the garden since you've been out. You'd do better to put food for them. They starve in this weather you know.' 'They're Polish people,' Christopher said, 'and I'm a German policeman rootling them about.'

'Well, if that's so, hadn't you better carry on the good work where it's drier? Why not go back to the stables and see if you can't kill some more mice with a spoon? You could think they were Czechs,' his father said.

'Oh thanks. I say. That's a lovely idea,' and he ran off, stumbling in the snow, diminutive. (Green 1943: 190)

For Rod Mengham, 'The roots of this behaviour are almost certainly in Christopher's experience of abduction at the hands of Pye's sister' (Mengham 2009:30). However, a similar attitude is said to have been demonstrated by the lost boy, whom Pye kidnaps at the end of *Caught*, well in advance of his abduction. As Roe tells Dy, 'Old Piper made out he'd got to know the parents afterwards, that they'd told him the boy was so mad to see a raid he often stayed out all night in case there was one at last' (Green 1943:197). Given that this boy's admiration for

Nazi aggression is *not* the effect of his being kidnapped, we need not conclude that Christopher's must be. An alternative explanation for his behaviour might be found in the way in which that aggression is experienced by London's civilian population. When Roe attempts to describe the bombing to Dy he claims:

The extraordinary thing is... that one's imagination is so literary. What will go on up there to-night in London, every night, is more like a film, or that's what it seems like at the time. Then afterwards, when you go over it, everything seems unreal, probably because you were so tired, as you begin building again to describe some experience you've had. It's so difficult... (Green 1943: 175)

Here, it is clear that Roe is unable to distinguish the reality of the War from artificial modes of representation such as literature and film. Perhaps it is little wonder, then, that he entertains such a blasé attitude toward the destruction, or, for that matter, that the characters in *Caught* are 'imaginary': the cinematic-ness of the prospect of sudden-death-from-above, the sheer spectacle of an entire city eliminated in a series of lightning attacks, feels, to adult and child alike, like an exercise in make-believe.

Perhaps surprising, then, is the preamble's claim that '1940 in London is real'— such an assertion ought to be impossible to make at the outset of a novel in which 'everything seems unreal'. Whilst Roe is still trying to describe his Blitz experience to Dy, the two argue over the exact whereabouts, the specific locale, of the city's unlikely realness:

'Everything is so different always from what you expect, and this was fantastic...Yet I suppose it was not like that at all really. One changes everything by going over it.'

'But the real thing,' she said ... 'the real thing is the picture you carry in your eye afterwards, surely? It can't be what you can't remember, can it?'

'I don't know,' he said, 'only the point about a blitz is this, there's always something you can't describe... (180-181)

Here Dy wants, as Lyndsey Stonebridge phrases it, 'a referential theory of experience...[she] clings to the idea that the 'real thing' is the perceptual photographic picture 'that you carry in your eye' after the event' (Stonebridge 2007:59). However, Roe's complaint 'that one's imagination is so literary...' has effectively pre-empted Dy's argument: even if a 'perceptual photographic picture' were to give an accurate representation of his experience of the Blitz, it could not hold any sort of exclusive claim to 'the real thing' when that experience is itself indistinguishable from artificial modes of representation. Hence, for Roe, the 'real thing' consists in something which is entirely removed from any such system of representation: it is, literally, 'something you can't describe'. This, however, raises a pressing question: if the realness of '1940 in London' cannot be described, how

is 'the effect of that time' 'written into the fiction of *Caught*'? How, in other words, does one write the indescribable, map the *terra incognita* of wartime London's collective psyche?

Caught concludes with a peculiar coda: Roe attempts to describe to Dy the first bombings at the docks – presumably those which took place on 'Black Saturday', September 7th, 1940 – but his representation of the scene is littered with parentheses which contain more exciting versions of events, and which often contradict the account in which they are enclosed. Often starting with 'It had not been like that at all' (Green 1943:177, 181), these parentheses purport to contain the aspects of Roe's Blitz experience which he cannot describe; as such, they would appear to contain the otherwise elusive realness of 'London in 1940'.

There is, however, some debate over the exact authority. For Edward Stokes, they contain 'omniscient comments, indicating the inadequacy of the character's reactions, or the imperfectness of his knowledge. Thus Richard's description of the dock-fire is halting, tame, prosaic; Green's own, side by side with it, is vividly impressionistic' (Stokes 1959: 89). Mengham concurs, also describing this voice as that of an 'omniscient author' (Mengham 1982: 105). For Michael North, by contrast, these parentheses 'do not necessarily have to be authorial rejoinders, since Roe himself has long since learned to distrust his own memory and his own capacity for dramatizing and sentimentalizing events' (North 1984:116). Furthering this line of thought, North concludes in a later essay that these parentheses contain 'Roe's own half suppressed recollections' (North 2004:451). Though these two views seem mutually opposed, each, in its own way, affirms an absolute distinction between an objective, authorial voice, on the one hand, and the imperfect thoughts of the protagonist, on the other. Neither concedes that there might be any overlap – that the parentheses could, for example, contain an authorial voice which is itself imperfect.

The authority of the set of parentheses at which we have already looked seems to belong somewhere between the respective estimations of Stokes and Mengham, on the one hand, and North, on the other. When the text claims, 'Everyman jack was full of his little woman and the Edies, the Joans, and the little Maries in their pinnies, he had left behind, sleeping in their little cots (most likely watching mum in bed with a stranger), in what each man was proud to call home', it seems, on one hand, that the parentheses do contain what North calls an 'authorial rejoinder'. The notion that one's wife might be in bed with stranger is not likely to be one of Roe's 'half suppressed recollections', given that his wife is dead. Nor is that notion likely to be something to which the other firemen can be giving very much conscious thought: on the contrary, their excessive displays of pride appear to provide a means of banishing this otherwise pressing notion from consciousness. On the other hand, it is clear that this rejoinder does not express an omniscient comment. While it is well-known that wartime London was rife with extra-marital affairs,⁴ the words 'most likely' introduce a probability statement which, in this instance, reads like the kind of jealous suspicion which the firemen ought to be harbouring. Accordingly, the parentheses in question appear to contain an authorial rejoinder which is itself affected by the 'half suppressed'

jealousy of the firemen whose innocence it undermines. It seems that we have, then, an example of the stylistic feature, common in Green's writing, where, as James Wood puts it, 'the third person narrative is so heavily inflected by the characters it is describing that the very images themselves seem to have been produced by those characters'— in other words, an instance of free indirect discourse (Wood 2007: 54).

An earlier set of parentheses, also concerned with the difficulty of recalling a traumatic occurrence, functions similarly. When Pye is reminiscing about his sister's return from what he suspects to be a night 'out whoring maybe' (Green 1943:39), an interjection informs us, '(What [Pye] did not know was the year after year after year of entanglement before [his sister], the senseless nightingale, the whining dog, repeating the same phrase over and over in the twining briars of her senses)' (Green 1943: 39). Though this comment certainly indicates the 'imperfectness' of Pye's knowledge, it is by no means issued by an 'omniscient' narrator. On the contrary, the phrases 'year after year after year', and 'over and over' make it clear that the author of this passage is victim to the very 'repeating' here described. Likewise, the ungrammatical insertion of 'the senseless nightingale, the whining dog' suggest that the author is victim to something of this same 'senseless[ness]'. One conclusion to be drawn from this is that the implied author is, indeed, Pye's sister. However, Pye himself is also thought to be 'insane' (Green 1943: 163), and he too is victim to a repetitive mindset: images of the night in question regularly recur in his mind, and, when he abducts a boy at the end of the novel, he essentially replicates his sister's earlier abduction of Christopher. Moreover, it is to Pye that 'briars' suggest themselves as a symbol of his sister's mental state. Later in the novel we are told of 'the present he had bought his sister, a comb with rose briars painted on the top' (Green 1943: 86). Significant, here, is that the comb is a tool for disentangling. In light of the parentheses quoted above its symbolic purpose becomes clear: Pye's gift is intended to disentangle symbolically the mental knot signified by the decoration painted along its top. As earlier, the parentheses in question appear to contain an authorial voice which is inflected with the psychological profile of the character whose ignorance it purports to remedy.

The parentheses which interrupt Roe's speech at the end of the novel are no exception to this pattern. Though they cannot be the products of Roe's own psyche, their significance becomes evident only when we treat them as though they are. Stokes' claim that these parentheses are 'impressionistic' is quite right: of the five which interrupt Roe's account, the first four are fascinated with colour, describing the scene in terms such as 'orange', 'rose', 'pink', 'dirty yellow', 'pretty rose', 'red gold', 'trembling green', 'blood red', 'dark mosaic aglow with rose', 'black and rosy', 'rainbow coloured', 'black green', and 'fox dyed'(Green 1943: 177-183). In this, they are virtually identical to the parentheses which, at the start of the novel, interrupt Roe's attempt to imagine his son's abduction from a toy store, and which describe that scene in terms such as 'scarlet-painted', 'sloe', 'mahogany', 'blue', 'sapphire', 'rose', 'pink neon', 'pillar-box red', 'silver', 'wine coloured', 'reddish', 'dark rose', and 'dull red' (Green 1943: 10-13). For

Stonebridge, this mode of description is 'less Rilke colour-musing with Cezanne than Green giving a literary reply to the thick brushstrokes, the rich build-up of oil on canvas, of his friend, and at the time his rival in love, the painter Matthew Smith' (Stonebridge 2007:60). Stonebridge might be right, but Green's 'reply' also has a specific resonance within his own text. Roe has very particular feelings towards these saturations of colour. These are first introduced whilst he is reminiscing about an experience he underwent as a teenager, tottering along a raised ledge beneath the stained windows of Tewkesbury Abbey:

As they went round, each one in turn had to take hold of a cord with his right hand to step over left leg first, and then, in his own case, as he faced right to bring his right leg over, he had that terror of the urge to leap, his back to deep violet and yellow Bible stories on the glass, his eyes reluctant over the whole grey stretch of the Abbey until they were drawn, abruptly as to a chasm, inevitably, and so far beneath, down to that floor hemmed with pews, that height calling on the pulses and he did not know why to his ears, down to dropped stone flags over which sunlight had cast the colour in each window, the colour it seemed his blood had turned. (Green 1943: 8).

The common hue of Roe's blood and the filtered sunlight suggest that, for Roe, colour provides an external correlative to the 'urge to leap'. Furthermore, it appears to have been for a similar reason that he had allowed his son to be abducted. When Roe 'went to see for himself the store out of which Christopher had been abducted', he found that the interior had this effect on him:

The walls of this store being covered with stained glass windows...it follows that the body of the shop was inundated with colour, brimming; and this colour...was a permanence of sapphire in shopping hours. Pink neon lights on the high ceiling wore down this blue to some extent...but enhanced, or deepened that fire brigade scarlet to carmine, and, in so doing, drugged Richard's consciousness. (Green 1943: 9)

For both father and son, we are told, 'it was the deep colour spilled over these objects that, by evoking memories they would not name, and which they could not place, held them, and then led both to a loch-deep unconsciousness of all else' (Green 1943:9). It is while both are gripped by this 'unconsciousness' that Roe allows Christopher to be abducted from under his nose. It seems, then, that the colours in the toy store serve a similar function to those which fill the Abbey: they 'evok[e]' Roe's complicity in Pye's sister's attempt to rob him of his son – the figure in whom he has perpetuated his own lineage. Colour, as Mengham puts it, enables both father and son to 'empty themselves of all personal history, all co-ordinates' (Mengham 1982: 82).

It is worth noting that the desire to overcome these urges lay behind Roe's decision to join the Fire Service in the first place. Roe's train journey to the countryside causes him to remember his former curiosity:

He signed on because he had for years wanted to see the inside of one of those turreted buildings, and also because he had always been afraid of heights. He did not know there was such a thing as a public night each week, when anyone is allowed to wander round, and he had not the energy to run up a ladder thirteen times to find out if he could lose the feeling that he must throw himself off. (Green 1943: 24).

A little later, we are told that, upon completing his training, Roe 'lost his fear of heights' (Green 1943:24). Here, however, Green's language is clearly deceptive, given that the object of Roe's 'terror' was never heights *per se*, but, rather, 'the urge to leap' from them. Thus, Green suggests that Roe's fear has only been 'lost' insofar as it has been relocated. He might no longer be scared of heights themselves, but his desire to 'throw himself off' them cannot be so easily cured. It seems that the colours cast over London during the Blitz have the same effect upon Roe as those which fill the Abbey and the toy store.

Only with this in mind does the relation between all five interjections in Roe's account of the dock fire become clear. Where the first four focus on colour, and so articulate Roe's destructive tendencies, the last begins with Shiner shouting from the destruction of the Blitz, 'Hi, cock. Boy am I enjoying this' (Green 1943:186). Just as Pye is 'physically excited' by 'the imminence of war action'(Green 1943: 37), Shiner here articulates a perverse enjoyment in the proximity of his own death. In all sets of parentheses, then, something corresponds with what appears to be Roe's complicity in his own end. Roe is unable to describe this complicity precisely because its object – his death – is the very thing which his account of the Blitz, as a tale of the survival of the 'I' which narrates it, means to deny. Furthermore, this complicity is radically at odds with the 'imaginary' aspects of the novel's characters: as Freud puts it in 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', 'It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death, and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact present as spectators' (Freud 1957: 289). It would appear to be in this indescribable, unimaginable, prospect that the 'realness' of '1940 in London' resides.

What, then, is 'the effect of that time', referred to in the frontispiece? To be 'certain of death' is to burden one's imagination with an unbearable tax: it is to consciously accept something of which one cannot conceive. In London during the Phoney-War, that tax was endured by an entire citizen body for all of eight months. In the period between the Outbreak and the first raids, then, the unimaginable constituted an integral part of the familiar, the boundaries between the two falling well before the Luftwaffe brought down their brick and mortar counterparts. It is

in light of this that we should read the play-acting which pervades the family unit in *Caught*: the denaturalising of family roles is appropriate to a setting in which the very notion of *familiarity* is a contested concept.

It is in this estrangement of everyday normality that the majority of the novel's commentators have located the general mood of *Caught*. Philip Toynbee, for example, found in the novel a 'perpetual intrusion of the abnormal on the normal' (Toynbee 1943:422). Similarly Margery Allingham saw it as the story of Roe's 'escape to the normal almost literally through fire' (Allingham 1943: 528). A little later, Edward Stokes wrote that the novel 'revealed a greater depth of psychological insight, and an ability to make the abnormal and the bizarre as authentic as the mundane' (Stokes 1959: 15). Similarly, Treglown writes: 'It was [Green's] achievement to have conveyed, with all their discomfort and awkwardness and outright pain, the strange normalities in which, one way or another, people of all kinds, 'rolled in his or her own mystery,' find themselves caught' (Treglown 2000: 138). According to the critical consensus, then, the foremost 'effect' of '1940 in London' consists in something akin to the uncanny: an effacing of the borders between the familiar and the strange.⁵

'War', thinks Dy toward the end of the novel, 'is sex' (Green 1943: 119); but what, in this regard, is the Phoney-War? The sexual relations in Green's London are an extension of this same phenomenon – modes of play-acting which denaturalise the both family unit and familiarity more generally. The capital is pervaded by what initially appear to be two contrasting modes of sexuality. The first is quite exterior to the nuclear family unit. It consists in an attraction toward strangers, and is first portrayed thus:

This was a time when girls, taken out to night clubs by men in uniform, if he was a pilot she died in his arms that would soon, so she thought, be dead. In the hard idiom of the drum these women seemed already given up to the male in uniform so soon to go away, these girls, as they felt, soon to be killed themselves, so little left, moth deathly gay, in a daze of giving. (Green 1943: 46)

The second mode of sexuality practiced throughout Phoney-War London is quite the opposite. It consists in a desperate will to preserve the family unit, and is first portrayed in the paragraph which immediately succeeds that quoted above:

That same afternoon, the train to Portsmouth had wives dragged along the platform hanging limp to door handles and snatched off by porters in the way a man, standing aside, will pick bulrushes out of a harvest waggon load of oats. (Green 1943: 46)

Before long, however, it is made clear that these two modes of sexuality are complementary. Affairs with strangers appear to function as a means by which traditional marriage vows are fulfilled, albeit literally:

As they were driven to create memories to compare, and thus to compensate for the loss each had suffered, he saw them hungrily seeking another man with whom they could spend last hours, to whom they could murmur darling, darling, darling it will be you always; the phrase till death do us part being, for them, the short ride the next morning to a railway station; the active death, for them, to be left alone on a platform; the I-have-given-all-before-we-die, their dying breath (Green 1943: 61)

Thus, to the couples involved, the fact that they expect to be parted by death – that they are fulfilling to the letter the vow ‘till death do us part’ – imbues their affairs with the legitimacy of a traditional marriage. Thus, total strangers are able to enact spouses. Clearly, then, an additional ‘effect’ of ‘1940 in London’ is the reconfiguring of the boundaries of normative sexuality: when ‘home’ can comfortably accommodate the sexual desire of a ‘stranger’, sexual relations with strangers acquire, in turn, a peculiarly domestic feel.

Pye’s sexuality epitomises this aspect of this ‘effect’. His libido thrives where the strange and the familiar converge. Pye himself provides the first clue to interpreting his sexuality when he claims, ‘I’ve remarked there’s a lot to do with the first a lad has’ (Green 1943:159). For the first part of the novel, he is confident that his ‘first’ was a local girl from his childhood village, the daughter of one Mrs Lane. The experience is described in detail within the following sentence:

In the grass lane, and Pye groaned as he lay on the floor, his head by a telephone, that winding lane between high banks, in moonlight, in colour blue, leaning back against the pale wild flowers whose names he had forgotten, her face, wildly cool, to his touch, turned away from him and the underside of her jaw which went soft into her throat that was a colour of junket, oh my God he said to himself as he remembered how she panted through her nose and the feel of her true roughened hands as they came to repel him and then, at the warmth of his skin, had stayed irresolute at the surface while, all lost, she murmured, ‘Will it hurt?’ Oh God she had been so white and this bloody black-out brought you in mind of it with the moon, this blue colour, and with the creeping home. (Green 1943: 38)

However, this experience is overshadowed by its immediate aftermath, described in another long sentence:

And as he came along in shadow, up the sides of hedges, to get back home unheard, unseen, because his old man must not know he was out, as he came slinking like any other creature out at night, and there was that dog whimpering near, chained up on account of a bitch, he had seen another shadow moving in front towards their bit of garden at the back, creeping as he was but lower, more like a wild animal, heavier

in shame because a woman, and, as he saw with a deep tremor, his own sister, out whoring maybe as he had been, up now from off her back no doubt, out of a low shadow cast by the moon. (Green 1943: 39)

When Pye is asked by his sister's psychiatrist about their youth, it occurs to him that the two experiences might not be so distinct:

Without any warning, and with a shock that took all his breath, Pye saw the dry wood shaving creep, bent in the moonlight, the way back to their cottage. He saw it again as though it was before his eyes, which he now tried to draw away from the doctor's. He had never before thought of his sister's creeping separate from his own with Mrs Lane's little girl. In a surge of blood, it was made clear, false, that it might have been his own sister he was with that night. So it might have been her voice, thick with excitement and fright and disgust, that said, 'Will it hurt?' So in the blind moonlight, eyes warped by his need, he must have forced his own sister. (Green 1943: 140)

Pye's first sexual encounter, then, might have estranged the familiar. If it was shared with his own sister, it would have placed between siblings a relation which ought to be wholly alien to consanguineous family.

As Pye's remark suggests, his first sexual experience does seem to have some role in determining his sexual preferences in later life. He appears to be attracted to a girl named Prudence, for example, because she reminds him of his sister. When she reaches for Pye's hand inside his pocket, the scene is described:

With all her other warmth [Prudence's hands] set a glow about him just as, in childhood, when, watching the impossible brilliance climb slowly high then burst into fired dust so far away, so long ago, over that hill the time his sister put her hand inside his boy's coat because he was cold, to warm his heart. (Green 1943: 121)

Another girl, Ilse, also bears a close resemblance to Pye's sister:

It might have been the same day, but just before the black-out, that Ilse lay naked on her bed. Declining light, in which there was no sun, reduced her body. She lay dim, like a worm with a thin skeleton, back from a window, pallid, rasher thin, her breasts, as she lay on her back, pointing different ways. (Green 1943: 142)

The chiaroscuro effect of the thin woman's white body against the darkness of the evening has a clear parallel in an earlier description of 'the sight of his sister, like a white wood shaving...across the last still stretch of moonlight' (Green 1943: 39). Thus, Pye's relationships with strangers from all over London allow him to replay

his relation to his own sibling. He experiences legitimate, albeit promiscuous, sexual relations as a repeat of his former act of incest.

There is, however, some debate over whether or not Pye actually committed incest in the first place. On one hand, John Russell claims of the scene in which Pye first conceives that he might have 'forced his sister' that, 'The word 'false,'...implies that Pye did *not* commit incest.'(Russell 1960:154). On the other hand, Stokes argues that the interpolation which reads '(What he did not know was the year after year after year of entanglement before her...)' constitutes 'clear evidence that Pye's suspicion of his incest was justified' (Stokes 1959:89). Crucial to note is that the novel itself does not provide confirmation either way: the scene in which he first conceives that 'it might have been his own sister he was with that night' is crucially different from the *anagnorises* of classical tragedy. When Sophocles' Oedipus recognises that he has committed incest, for example, he cries:

O,O,O, they will all come,
all come out clearly! Light of the sun, let me
look upon you no more after today!
I who first saw the light bred of a match
accursed, and accursed in my living
with them I lived with, cursed in my killing.
(1183-5 Trans. David Greene)

In contrast to Oedipus' moment of recognition, Pye's memories do not 'come out clearly', but are, 'clear, false'. Nor is his situation clarified by the all-revealing 'Light of the sun', but blurred by a 'moonlight' which is itself 'blind'. Thus, as Stonebridge writes, 'Nothing is illuminated. It is misperception, not perception, that prevails in the blackout' (Stonebridge 2007: 63-64). Pye himself never reaches a conclusion on the matter, but equivocates between the two possibilities. When he is leaving the psychiatrist's, for example, we are told, 'Pye recollected his sister. What with believing, then disbelieving, he could not remember afterwards how he got out' (Green 1943: 142). Similarly, the text claims a few pages later:

And Pye of course was no longer sure that he had forced his sister that night long ago. He told himself it had been so bright out he must have known who he was with. But in an attempt to make certain he began experiments. Once he went up to shiner when this man was on guard, peered right in his eyes. And there were moments, always at night, that Pye could not get away from it that it might have been. (Green 1943: 144)

Green, it seems, is at pains to stress that Pye's memory will not yield any explanation of his history. In the blackout not only is the 'reality' of the present obscured, but that of the past as well.⁶ Perhaps it is little surprise, then, that Pye

is unable to endure the length of the *Sitzkrieg*, gassing himself in an oven before the Blitz has even begun: the Phoney-War has instilled in him too a craving for the 'real' located in 'death in a matter of days', a desire to 'empty himself', in Mengham's phrase, of 'all co-ordinates'. It is here, Green implies, that the *real* 'London in 1940' resides: not in some physical locale which might be represented on a map, but in the drive to be removed from any such map altogether.

To conclude, the preamble with which *Caught* begins is not just a legal disclaimer, but a covert declaration of the text's central concerns. When it assures the reader that the novel's characters are 'imaginary', this refers not only to the fact that they are constituents in a work of fiction, but to the distinct *phoniness* of the personae imposed upon them by pre-Blitz London. Strangers and family members are forced into one another's roles in such a way that estranges the very notion of familiarity. Hence, 'The effect of that time' proves to be a particular version of the uncanny, a blurring of homely and strange or hostile forces which is consistent with London's experience of the 'Home-Front'. The elusive 'reality' of this setting, meanwhile, proves to reside in a version of the Death-Drive which motivates Pye's suicide and which, though indescribable by definition, is 'written into the fiction of *Caught*' by being encrypted within the colour descriptions which litter Roe's account of the beginning of the Blitz.

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¹ During his life, Henry Green (1905-1973) was one of the most highly regarded figures in English literature. For accounts of the esteem in which he was formerly held, see North (1984) 1-14; Hentea 1-9; Treglown 4-5. For an explanation of the decline in his, and his contemporaries', readership see Mackay and Stonebridge 1.

² Green himself admitted that Mary Howells, the cook, for example, was based upon a housekeeper he knew 'whose daughter went mad'. Additionally, at one point in the manuscript, Green has tellingly written 'Sebastian' – the name of his own son, to whom the novel is dedicated – in place of 'Christopher' – the name of his protagonist's son. See Treglown 136; 290 n.102; Mengham (1982) 222 n.11.

³ See, for example, Brooks, 1-9.

⁴ For more on the erotic charge of Green's London, see Feigel 37-38, 94-100, 196-197.

⁵ See Freud, 'The 'Uncanny' (1919)'.

⁶ For more on the problems which *Caught*'s characters face in historicising the war, see Stonebridge; Hentea 76-77.

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