

Castles in the Air: Vision and Narrativity
in Julien Green's *Minuit*

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Reintroducing the *topos* of the dark, symbolic castle first used in the author's immediately preceding novel, *Le Visionnaire*, and expanding on the theme of self-discovery, of the insights afforded by a withdrawal from the sun-flooded world of superficial evidence, Julien Green's 1936 novel, *Minuit*, articulates a familiar conflict between the attraction of a spiritual life and the dark pull of desire. A contemporary novelist, member of the *Académie française*, Green, whose literary output spans virtually the whole of the present century, often dealt elliptically in his early works with the painfully deferred admission of his own homosexuality, a fact that underscores his interest in the function of storytelling, the explicitness of narrative, and the importance of what it does and does not disclose.

Beginning with the suicide of Blanche, the heroine's mother, the story follows the orphaned Elisabeth's transition from the happiness of a secure family life to her anxiety-plagued existence as the charge of her insensitive, irresponsible aunts. One night, having been forced to sleep in a disused storage room, Elisabeth awakens from disturbing nightmares and sets off into the darkness. After having wandered for hours alone through the empty, silent city and having fallen asleep in a deserted open-air market, she is rescued by the benevolent M Lerat, who then takes the child into his own home. Years later, her aunt Marie reappears unexpectedly, again bringing upheaval into the young woman's seemingly settled life. At her aunt's insistence, Elisabeth is taken to live at Fontfroide, a vast, disorienting estate, whose owner and host, M Edme, arises in the night to preach his message of hope, offering the consolations of the invisible to those given shelter under his roof. Torn between her nascent attraction to the impetuous Serge and her fascination with Edme's teachings, Elisabeth is a witness to an outbreak of violence which ends in her own death, occurring when, in a final ambiguous scene, she falls or perhaps throws herself out a window overlooking a precipice.

Described by Jacques Petit as denouncing the illusion generated

by fiction (1428), Green's novel may be his most self-reflexive work. In addition to exploring the often mentioned opposition between nocturnal vision and diurnal reality, the book also casts light on the problematical relationship between narrative and its audience.¹ Various characters in the course of the work are given the function of narrator, as they order and assign a temporal structure to real or fictive events, rely on a narratee's receptivity to discover the meaning intended, and present their discourse, in the words of Genette, as a "story of events" or a "story of words" (186,189). Given the attention paid to the role of storytelling in the novel, one might conclude that the text is designed to interrogate the nature of its own narrativity.

In Green's fiction, there is often a tension existing between the artist as visionary and the facile manipulator of language, whose eloquence is conducive to self-repetition. Yet contradicting the conventional view that the supernatural, once intuited, remains inexpressible, "that mysticism kills discourse while estheticism permits its delivery" (Pinguet 23), Green's character, the reclusive and enigmatic Edme, is a mystic by reason of language, as he provokes with speech in himself and in others a glimpse of ineffable "truths."² For him esoteric knowledge does not seem to degenerate into simple, agreeable chatter. Rather, it is his narrating that engenders such knowledge, making it accessible and useful to listeners. In him is resolved the apparently insoluble conflict between religious seeker and narrator-esthete, thus legitimizing the work of the novelist Green, "a mystic who never stops repressing the language of the poet" (Tamuly 127). What remains to be answered is whether Edme emerges as a simple illusionist-charlatan or whether he is given the role of a narrator who can speak a metaphysical language. The argument of this essay is that rehabilitating what for Green is the epistemological function of narrative does not depend on designating as real or unreal the world to which narrative alludes, but on establishing a pact between the receiver and sender of a message the truth of which is irrelevant. Conflating the narrator's need to convince with the narratee's will to believe, Green's text examines the collaborative bond that exists between writer and audience. Indeed, with the threat of foreclosure on the castle Fontfroide, with power and telephone cut, Edme's discourse is the sole useful currency by which the residents are redeemed from despair, illustrating why narrative, as Gerald Prince says, "acts as a unit of exchange" and why narrating itself is "a mercantile act" emphasizing "the contract between a narrator and his

narratee" (Prince 160).

From the opening chapter, the embedded narratives seem to stress how an audience receives them, the manner in which an addressee is affected by a message he may not even receive. The original communicative act in the story is, in fact, not a narrative at all, but the sending of a signal which, by virtue of its non-reciprocity, is the pretext for subsequent narrative. Having climbed to the top of a hill swept by the wind to watch the train she believes is carrying her lover, Blanche waves her handkerchief and then in vain awaits a reply: "The lighted cars allowed the passengers to be seen at the window; some lifted the pane; others took their places in a corner, but there was not one who waved a handkerchief" (401). From the perspective of the disappointed message-receiver, the non-transmission of the visual signal extends the recognition of its insignificance to the whole of her meaningless life. And so, when Blanche stabs herself in the chest with a knife, she is metonymically reduced to her medium: "the handkerchief which had escaped from her hand fluttered in the wind like the wing of a big wounded bird" (461).

Preceding the suicide, the only language exchange had taken place between Blanche and her cousin, yet the disabusing speech of the cynical Marie could not effectively bring disillusionment, nor verbally substitute for Blanche's desire to *see* what she knows is not there. Marie's real-world observations about how women are victimized by their exploitative, cowardly lovers are drowned out by the wind, since its noise is more congenial to Blanche than the words of her cousin: "It seemed to her that the freezing wind was closer to her than that human being whose chattering voice still resounded in her ears" (400).

This passage anticipates others in which the characters make efforts not to decipher a message, as they insist on incomprehension by fainting, forgetting, or blocking their ears with their fingers. On the one hand, tragedy can be averted only if one agrees to transmit a message, if one waves the handkerchief, utters the comforting lies that the listener desperately awaits. Thus, Marie, who had felt "a thin, pointed object" concealed in her cousin's dress pocket, had not verbally interceded and carried the weight of a crime "because she had remained silent when she should have spoken" (420). On the other, the listener attends to the message only if it confirms an illusion she holds to, and so, despite the shrillness of the argument occurring in the room adjacent to hers, Elisabeth, while knowing her mother is dead,

"heard nothing of what was said in the living room" (422). There is a closing of the communicative channel when news is perceived as upsetting, unusable, so that corresponding to the requirement to speak is the listener's tendency to decipher selectively. This defensive strategy is explicitly endorsed by the nun who stays up with the body, as she encourages the child to disregard any rumors that might impugn her dead mother's honor: "And if anyone ever tries to talk to you about your mother, you should be quiet as if you haven't heard" (424). In accordance with Norman Holland's transactive paradigm of the interpretive practice of readers, narratees "take in" from the narratives they hear that which their "adaptive strategies permit," deriving from them "fantasies of the kind that give [them] pleasure," as Freund has remarked (124). As the referential function of discourse is subordinated to the addressee's receptivity, the reliability of a narrator is measured against what an audience is willing to hear. In *Minuit* providing an accurate account is a sign of the speaker's intrusiveness; it distances narratees from the message's content, kills the narrative and its receivers with truth.

In Green's novel, the model of the aggressive narrator who does not adjust her account to an audience is Marie, whom Green's narrator himself satirizes for her failure to heed certain "rules." In her verbal reconstruction of the scene of the suicide, she avoids the use of the preterit, preferring the present which, in the tradition of storytelling, affords a greater sense of immediacy. But as she exaggerates her narrative with explanatory asides, histrionic gestures, pauses and mimicry, she deflects attention away from the events she describes and towards her pretensions to narrative virtuosity. Existing in the present is the speaker as spectacle, not the vision of what she evokes; yet at one point when she lapses into the imperfect tense, she tries to re-present that which she designates. Laboriously proceeding with her telling of how she discovered the corpse on the hilltop—her gloomy presentiments, the lonely ascent with the icy wind lashing her face—she stops, hold her arms out "with a gesture of horror. 'Dear God, friends! There she was, on the ground!' With her finger she indicated a point on the carpet toward which Clementine's and Rose's gaze was immediately directed, but noticing nothing extraordinary there, they fixed their eyes again on the narrator" (403). Marie's intention to suppress the temporal distance between the *récit* and what it alludes to only focuses attention on the narrated's absence, the "extraordinary nothingness" of what is related. Significantly, her

painfully detailed account of a tragedy that had just unfolded shows a physical reality that is no longer there, made invisible by the words that recall it, while the elusive words used in Edme's enchantments reveal a "reality" that had never been there to begin with. In both cases, the audience's reaction is shown superseding the skill of the narrator, and the message's impact takes precedence over the meaning of the message itself, suggesting Green's awareness that readers have a certain control over what he conveys.

When Elisabeth takes hold of the scissors her aunt plans to offer as a gift of appeasement and slashes away at the old woman's dress, she may be exacting symbolic revenge, re-directing the blade as a suicide weapon at the one who had killed with indifference. But she also expresses a wish to replace violent speech with passionate action, to sever the narrative thread others spin that binds her to a truth she fears hearing. The knife motif also explains her attraction to brutal, inarticulate men, among them the *remouleur* to whom she is drawn by a desire to flee others' speech, the cruel innuendoes by Lerat's ugly daughter about Elisabeth's mother's dark past.³

Once Elisabeth escapes from her Aunt Rose's house, "where silence speaks and shadows see" (429), Green's narrator discharges his function of illuminating the unspoken and unseen with his narrative.⁴ Refusing to act as message-receiver, Elisabeth withdraws into recessed enclosures and has a nightmare of being buried alive in a coffin on which "angry words" pound down like rain (433). As a child incapable of ordering experience through retrospective analysis, of developing a sense of continuity in time through the action of self-narration, Elisabeth wanders through deserted night streets, whose dark quiet is felt to be liberating.⁵ The unspeaking city is perceived as a haven, a timeless place like Edme's Fontfroide: "The sound of a bell, it seemed, would have shattered the night like a palace of glass" (437). The hermeneutic code of the text of the night prescribes a particular reading, like fairy tales whose spells, once explained, are then broken, leaving seekers awake and disoriented. When she pauses before an iron fence beyond which an immense lawn stretches out in the shadows, she is filled with the anticipatory pleasure of withholding explanations of that which is hidden. She shuns the reductiveness of interpretive acts, avoids impoverishing the darkness with vision, and surrenders to the "nostalgic appeal of a mystery" (437), preferring wondering to seeing and knowing. Her sense of involvement in "old stories," of being a character in an anonymous narrative, signals

proleptically the part she will play in the strange verbal sanctuary of Edme.

Green's narrator traces the child's itinerary as she walks alone through the town, assuming a kind of positional superiority that still does not imply his omniscience. Converging on the abandoned municipal market where the exhausted Elisabeth lies sleeping, Lerat and Edme make their way toward the girl, each unsuspecting of the other's presence: "An observer placed at that minute over the city in such a way as to be able to embrace it all in a glance . . . , would have noticed that the two men were then moving in opposite directions" (441). Although exercising his ability to read others' thoughts—Edme "was again assailed by doubts"—Green's self-limiting narrator imitates Elisabeth's wish not to dispel a mystery with his insights. While Edme embarks on a promising route that leads him far from the market, Lerat, whose role in Elisabeth's drama is unknown and seemingly trivial, finally comes on the child and later offers to take her to live with his family. Noting that "the one who is seeking Elisabeth is not the one who will find her," Jacques Petit further comments: "This distance taken by the novelist gives an awareness of the intervention of destiny" (Notes 1439). Yet it is Green through his narrator, not the "infernal divinities" (the three Fates who are played by her aunts), who determines the quality and length of the life that Elisabeth leads in the novel.⁶ The illusory impression that the narrator respects the audience's interpretive prerogatives, the suggestion that the narrative shows the working of fate and is not the instrument of its own teleology, reconfirms the text's reader-oriented focus on the pleasures of inconclusive conjecture.

Like the movement of eyes across the lines on a page, the character's direction and path are determined, as she progresses inexorably toward a goal that she feels she is unable to choose for herself. What Petit describes as "the illusion of fiction" is the contrary sense of autonomy—of characters who believe that they lead their own lives, readers convinced they complete their own readings, unguided by the invisible hand of the narrator, along a course that is laid out before them. Indeed, the narrator specifies that, as Holland affirms, "interpretation is a function of identity" (Holland 816), and that readers react to a fictional work as reiterating the text of the self: "Who has not watched the movements of an insect in the dust of a country road? Between the pebbles and blades of grass it opens up a secret path, guided by a design about which we know almost nothing,

but there is a temptation to ascribe to that minute being a goal and desires in which we recognize our own" (442). Yet attending to the information the narrator gives makes more legible the writing of destiny: "The gait and gestures of the man with the scarf would have presented writing easier to decipher" (442). The novel's implied reader is encouraged to show more perceptiveness than the uninquisitive Lerat, who is qualified as one "who crosses through life without seeing in it anything unexplainable" (443). Therefore, chance or coincidence cannot be interpreted as such, and Elisabeth's trip with Lerat on the train—her glimpsing before she subsides into sleep "a wood on the top of a hill" (449)—is implicitly linked to the other scene with a train, to the site where Elisabeth's mother had died. The narrative's referentiality is to itself, not to events that take place in the world it images, like the window Elisabeth tries in vain to look out of, since "the night changed the glass to a mirror" (449).

The ellipsis marking the installation of Elisabeth in the middle-class home of Lerat—"Some years later, on a beautiful winter morning, Elisabeth was seated at the piano" (458)—not only signals the character's transition from childhood to adolescence, but also suggests that an account of her stay in this setting is unworthy of inclusion or mention. When not impressed into playing the role of involuntary narratee, Elisabeth reverts to acting as reader, assigning meaning to what seems to lack it. Understimulated by the emptiness of the speech that she hears, she interprets the language of nature, creating a mystery where none is implied, leaving suspended her own explanations. The thematic privileging of night in the novel may be motivated by various factors, in particular the eclipsing of illusory diurnal evidence that affords a better visualization of dreams and the suppression of textual clarity that elicits a pleasurable subjective response. Therefore, even the dazzling whiteness of snow, reflecting the light of the sun that shines on it, to Elisabeth "had something impenetrable about it, like the deep darkness of night, for behind that whiteness there were still other abysses of whiteness that her gaze could not reach" (458). The poetic language of music, referring to no reality other than itself, also triggers a reverie filled with the imprecise images that reveal the psychic state of the listener: a premonitory vision of the guilt-stricken Edme walking alone down a dark country road, the view of a ballroom that dissolves to a cemetery where waltzers whirl past the grave of her childhood (462). The narrative's evocative reticence therefore compels the narratee to do her own writing, filling in the

lacunae with an oneirical text dictated during her "lethargic sleep" (462).

Recalling the fact that interpretive vitality is destroyed by an explicit narrative is the "fateful" reappearance of Marie Ladouet, whose speech sets the action in motion. Reassuming her role as intrusive narrator whose message is always disruptive, she not only relates how Edme discovered the truth of his mistress's suicide, but also reports his wish to adopt Elisabeth, to transfer custody from Lerat to himself. As she elaborates in excruciatingly superfluous detail on the description of Edme's arrival, her listeners are physically affected again by her overdramatized rendering: 'All this is extremely painful' said Mme Lerat. 'Might there not be a way to be briefer?' (485). But her obstinacy in providing an exact account, with the gestures parenthetically noted, literally stifles the response that her listener prepares, kills Lerat with the news that she carries: "his lips, which had turned purple, moved imperceptibly as if he were having difficulty articulating a word" (487).

Once Elisabeth is taken away to Fontfroide, her disorientation is shared by the reader, as the peculiar behavior of the other inhabitants is revealed and explained only slowly. It is nonetheless clear that Edme's "guests" tend to operate in the manner of hypnotized subjects, as they arise in the dark to hear the mesmerizing discourse of the guru who holds them enthralled. As audience, they fail to impart any message, causing Elisabeth's confusion to deepen, forcing the girl to make clandestine sorties by night to reconnoiter the house and its grounds. As surrogate narrator—"I am not the enemy of clarity," as Agnel insists (494)—Edme's obsequious disciple either withholds information or proves to be unreliable himself.

Repeatedly stressed during Elisabeth's sojourn is the architectural function of language, the belief that the structural stability of the castle depends on Edme's narrative buttressing. As long as she maintains her conventional schedule, sleeping in darkness, awakening in daylight, Elisabeth looks on Fontfroide as a "cathedral of silence" (523) like the vacant night city's "glass palace." But when she meets Edme's family, learns of their nocturnal assemblies, starts to orient herself in the house, she discovers the chateau is a construct of language, like Green's novel, built on audience receptivity. The foreigner Eva, whose errors in speaking disqualify her as ideal narratee, exhibits a frivolous disposition that makes her less susceptible to Edme's enchantments. The "fall" of her room, whose floor had

collapsed, plunging furniture into the cellar, leaving night tables, mattress, bedclothes and chairs to moulder in stagnating water, recalls the account of Edme's entering the castle, whose foundation was a sinister pond. Whereas Cornélie predicts that the fall of Fontfroide will be occasioned by too many lies (600), it is not the untruthfulness of narrative content that causes its edifice to crumble, but the skepticism of listeners who no longer support the castle Edme built in the air.

Indeed, the latter reiterates how symbols and messages are fugitive and quickly erased, like the trace of the crucifix on the refectory wall from the days when the house was a convent. It is not the transitoriness, the impermanence of signs that causes them to lose their effect, but the nuns' disappearance, the desertion of those whose belief must uphold any narrative: "it would be enough to believe for a moment that it did not exist for it to disappear immediately" (598). Agnel's mania for epigraphic inscriptions, for aphorisms engraved over doors and on pediments, attests to a wish, not to eternalize messages, but to perpetuate the presence of readers. As continuity of consumption takes precedence over the durability of the textual medium, it is the immortalizing of the audience, their continued investment of meaning in what they decipher, that certifies the longevity of the narrative product and makes Edme's words everlasting. Even Edme implies that his narrative constructs can never endure by themselves, but are dismantled, the better to be reassembled later by the subjective response of each listener: "In fact, it is necessary that the old house crumble so that another can be built in its place" (600).

What vanishes, then, is the functional difference that exists between speaker and audience, as the former turns into the embodiment of narratives he has heard and later internalized. As a spokesman for Green—"he speaks a little as I would speak myself" (*Journal* 392)—Edme articulates his author's syncretistic beliefs, becomes a textual composite of readings, expressing Green's interest in Buddhist philosophy and his residual Christian convictions. After Agnel is shot, Edme reverts to the citing of passages learned from the Bible: "my dear cousin, no greater love hath a man than he who gives his life for a friend" (St. John 15.13), and the dying Agnel voices the wish that these words be inscribed "on the façade. . ." (614). As readers discover "identity themes" in the various texts that they read, then restate them as narratives of a self that is transposed as a new written text in its turn, the impossible search for the original message must involve an infinite

regress which still presupposes that every narrator earlier played the narratee's role. The privileging of the part that the audience has in determining the sense of a message is stressed by the differing responses that Edme's listeners assign to his speech: Urbain describing it as "original," Eva interpreting its meaning as literal ("The house that M Edme saw was a phantom," as she maintains), and Bernard dismissing it as an airy construction of what he calls Edme's *esprit fertile* (598). Yet truth is not relative, but rather is located along the whole of the interpretive spectrum, and Edme asserts that the house of his narrative "is all that you want . . . and still more" (598). While meaning may exist in the mind of the sender or be situated in the message itself, it can only be realized at its point of reception, when it is personalized by each different listener. Like faith that is subjective in its dependence on the experience and needs of the seeker, the impact of narrative is finally controlled by the audience's disposition to believe.

Green's apparent hostility to the referentiality of language can be explained through a similar reasoning, since subscribing to an impersonal, objective reality militates against its subjective reading. Beyond waking perceptions are the visions of sleep, underneath each layer of snow there are others (458), and the unverifiable elicits the speculative work of creation that knowledge precludes. Blanchot affirms human language is born of consigning its referents to an "immense hecatomb" and says the life of the signifier is predicated only on the murder of that which is signified. With the word, he concludes, "God had created beings, but man was destined to annihilate them" (Blanchot 213). Such is the case of Marie Ladouet, whose narrative either reports or brings death. But for Green's narrator and for Edme, it is the paucity of a reality that is preliminarily subjected to doubt that allows for the emergence of another reality in the fictive world of their discourse: "it is thus the very absence of the real that establishes the fecundity of that language" (Tamuly 129). The content of messages borne by the denizens of light is what reorients one toward the darkness: "Death, sickness, the disappointments of love, ruin, nothing of that nightmare is true" (599). So when the narratee-reader falls asleep to the truth, he awakens to a lie that consoles him, since teller and listener, inverted likenesses of God, collaboratively work to destroy one reality, which then is subtilized, resurrected, transformed in language that creates a new one.

Whereas the person to whom Edme had intended to speak is not

permitted to hear what he says, Elisabeth serves as the receiver of the message that Edme first meant for her mother. This final closing of the circuit of narrative toward which the novel had progressed from the start, is accompanied by one last confrontation between physical reality and the world of discourse. Required to choose between the visible beauty of the illiterate, taciturn Serge and the impalpable castle of solacing darkness that Edme evokes in the minds of his listeners, Elisabeth elects to remain and hear the stories with which Edme promises joy to his followers. Already in childhood, she had recognized that objective reality was only a springboard, that "a nail found in a groove of the floor or a button found under a chest of drawers" (500) was the pretext for the narratives that her thoughts had become, for the stories she had told to herself. Fleeing a referential language translating the "incoherent dream of a sick man," she had sought out the deeper hypnagogic awareness that Edme's words had induced, only fearing awakening from the enchantments of fiction to the disillusioning nightmare of truth. It is the experience of doubt that shatters the spell of the narrative and causes the audience to "fall" from the text, and so the wounded Agnel is not as frightened of death as of the thought that belief might desert him: "He spoke in a strange and childish voice. 'I'm afraid of falling,' he said" (617). Yet it is he who rescues Elisabeth from plunging into the abyss outside of the narrative, his "innocent" susceptibility to the magic of language that lifts her up "with an irresistible force" (617).

Identifying with Elisabeth, who has vacillated between incredulity and willed self-delusion, the reader is focused, not on the content of narrative, but on supporting "the illusion of fiction." Having de-emphasized the message, the truth of its meaning, and the skill of the one who transmits it, Green's novel, in admitting its dependence on readers, explores the dynamics of literary reception. Since physical reality is shown as being a subjective construct of language, Green's text, its euphemized fictional counterpart, is an illusion that refers to itself, and in this way it resembles Edme's invisible castle "which is nowhere but inside of ourselves" (597).

Notes

1. See, for example, Jacques Petit, Julien Green: *"l'homme qui venait d'ailleurs"* 154-66, and Ziegler *passim*.

2. All translations from the French texts are mine.
3. Dunaway attributes Elisabeth's interest in the knife grinder to a desire to flee "the confinement of the adolescent within the family," and says her attempt to follow him is "an abortive escape that is described in sexual terms." Like Petit, Dunaway also sees Elisabeth as the plaything of "destiny," adding that the "failure of the escape foreshadows the fatality to which her quest as a whole is doomed" (68-69).
4. This description of Rose's house, in which silence is noisy and darkness indiscreet, is to be contrasted with Edme's nocturnal domain, where "everything sleeps and everything listens" (604).
5. "Although narrative structure cannot wholly account for the experience of a continuous self, it does make an essential contribution to the sense of being a legitimate person. Without some adequate telling about one's development and place in time, a person will necessarily feel excluded or disoriented, experiencing . . . social isolation . . ." (Young-Eisendrath and Hall 453).
6. The mysterious force of destiny, or fate," is linked, according to Dunaway, "to the significance of the scissors image. . . . For Elisabeth, the scissors are at once a means of severing ties with an unwanted past—of cutting the umbilical cord of adolescent confinement—and a constant reminder of the weight of fatality with which she must live. Her successive escapes will ultimately lead her to the final 'evasion' of cutting life's thread" (69).

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