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# **Julien Green and the murmur of the sea: literary histories of flotsam**

Literary history is a ‘slaughterhouse’, Franco Moretti claims. Contemplating the long lists of now forgotten books that were once held by Columbello’s Circulating Library in Derby (a nineteenth-century library ‘of the kind that wanted only successful books’), Moretti experiences a literary historian’s version of memento mori: ‘The majority of books disappear forever – and “majority” actually misses the point: if we set today’s canon of nineteenth-century British novels at two hundred titles (which is a very high figure), they would still be only about 0.5 percent of all published novels.’<sup>1</sup> So far, so nihilistic. But perhaps it’s Moretti’s metaphor which ‘misses the point’. After all it is possible to imagine literary history not in terms of the total obliteration of once popular books but in terms of the serendipitous finds that are made possible by this prior disappearance – not, that is, according to the logic of the slaughterhouse but according to patterns of loss, drift, and retrieval which recall the unexpected discovery of pieces of jetsam and flotsam.

Julien Green’s novel *Varouna* is a good candidate for an alternative, flotsamesque literary history, not because the book was never ‘successful’ by Moretti’s (commercial) standards or because it awaits a rediscovery that may never come, but because the novel itself embodies what it means for a literary work to be governed by the disjunctive logic of flotsam. Completed on the eve of the German invasion of Paris in the summer of 1940, *Varouna* marked something of a new artistic start for the Franco-American writer Green. By the 1930s, Green had built a reputation as the author of sophisticated and reliably doom-laden naturalistic novels, some of which were set in the American South (the place where Green’s American parents had been born) while others featured grimly urban settings in France (the country of Green’s birth and his parents’ chosen home). Departing from the naturalist formula that governed his earlier works, *Varouna* derives in part from Green’s study of Eastern religions in the 1930s and from his budding interest in metempsychosis.<sup>2</sup> The novel’s title invokes the Vedic god of the world-encircling ocean and the transmigration of souls, and Green’s preface to the book makes

explicit the theologico-philosophical content that structures the novel's symbolism:

Une vie humaine paraît presque toujours incomplète. Elle est comme un fragment isolé dans un long message dont elle ne nous livre qu'une faible partie, souvent indéchiffrable. [...] S'agit-il des mêmes personnes renées à de siècles de distance ou simplement d'un homme et d'une femme qui redécouvrent au fond d'eux-mêmes, comme les parcelles d'un héritage oublié, les gestes, les paroles et les cris de générations disparues? [...] Dans le clair-obscur de sa conscience, pourquoi l'individu ne retrouverait-il pas quelque souvenir d'une existence primitive qui est l'existence de la race?<sup>3</sup>

A human life appears almost always incomplete. It is like an isolated fragment in a long message of which individual lives convey to us only a small and frequently incomprehensible part. [...] Is it a matter of the same people being reborn centuries apart, or simply of a man or a woman discovering within themselves, like small parts of a forgotten heritage, gestures, words and cries of vanished generations? [...] Why does the individual, in the half-shade of its conscience, not rediscover some memory of a primitive existence that is existence of its entire race?

Green's preface studiously minimises the novel's strictly novelistic interest by drawing attention to the symbolic weight carried by the book's characters and plot. In the passage above, Green's fascination with the transmigration of souls combines with an interest in Carl Gustav Jung's new psychoanalytic theories about symbols and archetypes.<sup>4</sup> Green here presents individuality as an aspect of a larger collective unconscious – as a function of universal and archaic patterns ('archetypes') which enter human consciousness as images and which also manifest in human behaviour. In *Varouna* Green introduces a small piece of flotsam – a necklace made of black metal rings – to indicate the possibility of archetypal connection across centuries: 'What is called metempsychosis', Green explains, 'is maybe only a metaphor for a timeless collective memory, [...] for the group is reincarnated in the individual' (p.iii). However, the piece of flotsam that features in *Varouna* is not merely a symbol for the restoration of individuality to an invisible community, or for the integration of isolated fragments into a meaningful whole. Instead, the necklace works as a

narrative conceit that allows Green to reflect on the pressures exerted on literary form by the destructive forces of history as well as on the position of his own novel in relation to these forces. In what follows I want to use *Varouna* as the starting point for an exploration of these broader questions.

*Varouna* is a transitional text in Green's work insofar as it dramatises his artistic shift from a form of naturalism in which the lives of individual characters seem completely determined by outside forces, towards a mode of archetypal symbolism in which disconnected world-fragments are successfully recuperated into narrative significance. While Green's earlier novels, such as *Adrienne Mesurat* (1927) and *Leviathan* (1929), engaged in naturalism's 'brutal reduction of meaning and value to mere matter',<sup>5</sup> his later novels evince a new-found belief in the redemptive qualities of literary form. It is part of the appeal of *Varouna* that the novel's use of symbolism also invites a metapoetic reading which extends to the novel's own position in (literary) history: composed in the early months of World War II, *Varouna* resembles nothing so much as a stray piece of literary flotsam, an anachronistic hold-over from the mythologising modernism of the earlier inter-war period.

*Varouna* is a strange book. It consists of three distinct stories, set in different centuries, which are symbolically connected by way of the necklace. The first part of the novel is set in Wales around the sixth century AD. The narrative revolves around the boy Hoël who discovers a necklace that has been washed up on the beach near his parents' house. Hoël comes across the necklace in the middle of the night while he is restlessly pacing up and down the beach. He decides to take the necklace, ignoring what he believes to be the voices of sea spirits that are warning him not to touch the object. As we learn a good forty pages later, the laments which Hoël heard that night were not in fact the indistinct voices of ocean spirits but the cries of drowning sailors. We discover that the young Hoël is regularly instructed by his parents to walk up and down the beach at night holding a lantern that is intended to lure ships onto the rocks near the shore. Once the foundering ships have surrendered their cargo to the ocean, Hoël's parents collect the washed-up goods on the beach, leaving the bodies of the dead sailors to the mercy of the elements. The plot of *Varouna*'s first story jumps ahead in narrative spurts: a few pages later we see Hoël leave his parents' house, take to seafaring, and finally settle in a remote village in Scandinavia. All this time, Hoël is wearing the metal necklace around his neck, in spite of the fact that it seems to give him nightmares which create blurry telepathic connections between him and the necklace's previous owners.

Many years later, while he is fishing at sea, Hoël accidentally drops the necklace into the ocean. Almost immediately he is overcome by a sense of nostalgia and decides to return home to Wales. Arriving in the fishing village in which he grew up, Hoël discovers that his parents have died, but he also reconnects with a girl (Morgane) whom he loved all those years ago. When he visits her in her cottage, he notices that she is wearing a black metal necklace – the same one, it seems to Hoël, that he had dropped into the ocean only a few weeks earlier. Overwhelmed with emotion, he grabs a carving knife and plunges it into Morgane's heart. Hoël is immediately apprehended, tried for murder, and executed a few days later.

The novel abruptly fast-forwards some 900 years, to sixteenth-century France. The second part of *Varouna* relates the story of Héléne, a pious teenage girl, who lives with her parents in a house overlooking the ocean. As in the case of Hoël, the sea's murmur forms a constant backdrop to Héléne's story. Héléne has a happy childhood until her mother dies unexpectedly. Soon after this incident, Héléne's father (Bertrand) begins to treat her as a replacement for his deceased wife: he orders her to wear her mother's clothes and he also begins to make sexual advances towards her. Around this time, Héléne happens to meet a sailor who gives her a talisman that will protect her from harm – the item is a black metal necklace, apparently the very same piece of flotsam that Hoël had found on a beach in Wales many centuries earlier:

Tout à coup le marin plongea la main au fond d'une poche [...] et en tira une chaîne d'un métal sombre, aux anneaux si bizarrement entrelacés qu'ils semblaient vivre et remuer entre les doigts de cet homme. [...] « Acceptez ce présent, dit-il en lui tendant la chaîne. Ce sont les hommes de la mer qui vous l'offrent, » ajouta-t-il à voix basse. (p.151)

Suddenly the sailor pulled a necklace from his pocket: the necklace was made of dark metal rings that were linked so intricately that the necklace itself seemed to be alive and appeared to move between the man's fingers. [...] 'Accept this gift', said the sailor, and held the necklace towards her. 'It is given to you by the people of the sea', he added in a low voice.

Héléne wears the necklace, and it appears to protect her from harm: one night, while she is asleep, Bertrand enters her room, apparently with the intention of raping his daughter. On seeing the necklace around

Hélène's neck, he suffers a heart attack that kills him instantly. Following her father's mysterious death, Hélène is briefly arrested but she is soon discovered to be innocent.

The novel now skips ahead by another 400 years, to the early twentieth century. This part of the book consists of a series of diary entries by a writer (Jeanne) who is obsessed with an object she has discovered in a local museum – a mysterious necklace made of dark metal rings. Unlike the novel's two preceding sections, Jeanne's story does not end in gore and tragedy. In fact, *Varouna's* closing story presents the novel's only happy couple: Jeanne and her husband Louis. In this story the necklace exerts a force that is spiritual rather than physical. Jeanne feels compelled to research the history of the necklace which, as she discovers (and as the novel's readers already know), stretches back centuries. Jeanne is mysteriously drawn to the object, and she decides to write a novel about it. As the novel approaches its end, in a diegetic *mise en abîme* that recalls André Gide's 1925 book *Counterfeiters*, Jeanne's identity begins to dissolve in the process of writing: her identity progressively merges with that of her protagonist, a female character she called Hélène (the same Hélène, it appears, who is the protagonist of part two).

The novel's sprawling plots, which intermittently taper off or gather momentum, are precariously held together by the book's titular reference to the Vedic deity Varouna, the overseer of the transmigration of souls. Yet while Green's preface glosses the novel as an elaborate literary take on the idea of metempsychosis – on the idea of a 'timeless collective memory' that transcends the scale of individual human lives – it would be a mistake to read the novel primarily for its narrative interest in such moments of transcendence. Indeed, it seems that in writing *Varouna* Green took some inspiration from contemporary scholarly work on Hindu mythology, notably by the influential French mythographer and scholar of Indo-European philology Georges Dumézil. Dumézil's study had broken new ground: while the understanding of Varouna as the embodiment of metempsychosis and as the guardian of the order of the world was well established, Dumézil's 1932 study *Ouranos-Varuna: Essai de mythologie comparée indo-européenne* presented Varouna not as the allegorical personification of a religious principle but as the symbolic embodiment of the earth's hostility to human life, not as a god of spiritual transcendence but as a figure of radical material (innerworldly) immanence.<sup>6</sup> This alternative understanding of the deity seems to have informed Green's engagement with the figure of Varouna, partly because it spoke to Green's artistic concerns at the time: on the one hand, it resonated with Green's (naturalist) interest in examining the force which mere materiality exercised over human

lives; on the other, it helped him explore the intrinsic resistance which the world conceived as unsignifying matter offered up to the ordering forms of narrative and myth.

The necklace in Green's novel 'symbolises' these concerns – although, strictly speaking, a book that reckons with the fact of absolute material immanence will also be attuned to the inherent futility of such acts of symbolisation or metaphorisation.<sup>7</sup> Green's invocation of the figure of Varouna draws our attention to the limits of myth as an ordering and structuring principle: Varouna signifies the extreme instance of a myth that captures the breakdown of mythicity as such. In the same vein, the origins of the dark metal necklace remain purposefully obscure: unlike many real-life pieces of flotsam, this item does not refer us back (even imaginatively) to a meaningful whole, to a shared social world to which this object could in principle be restored and in relation to which it possesses significance. Instead, Green's novel asks us to think about the necklace as an object whose defining property is that it belongs to nobody in particular, that there is no world it can be returned to. Accordingly the discovery and rediscovery of the necklace, which *Varouna* is ostensibly 'about', is experienced by characters as an existential disruption – as a threat to the self and to the bond between individual and community – rather than as a serendipitous encounter that is to be welcomed. The necklace simultaneously elicits and thwarts the desire for 'form over formlessness, and artifice or construct over that which cannot be contained or structured'.<sup>8</sup>

We can shed further light on the function of the necklace in *Varouna* by turning to the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg, whose studies of the nature of myth offer a way of thinking about the form and content of Green's novel. Unlike Dumézil, whose works are for the most part philological, Blumenberg is specifically interested in myth's self-reflexive potential, that is, in myth's ability to reflect on the limitations of mythical signification as such. Blumenberg's two key works in this context are *Work on Myth* (1979) and *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (1979). In *Work on Myth* Blumenberg identifies what he considers the basic functions of myth. The opening chapter of the book describes myth as a method of distantiation: in Blumenberg's account, myth figures as a complex tool by which humans respond to the threatening, alienating, unsignifying aspects of the material world. Narrative and myth act 'as a security against the absolutism of reality': without their protection, Blumenberg argues, humans would be exposed to unstructured experiences of sheer materiality.<sup>9</sup> *Work on Myth* variously describes such experiences as the

'feeling of being overpowered' (*Übermachtserfahrung*)<sup>10</sup> as the world's 'unfamiliarity' (*Unvertrautheit*),<sup>11</sup> and as 'the world's alienating quality' (*Weltqualität der Befremdlichkeit*).<sup>12</sup>

While *Work on Myth* pays particular attention to the ordering functions of myth, the book also comments on myth's ability to reflect on its own limits:

Kaum zufällig hat der griechische Mythos die Weltqualität der Befremdlichkeit auf gestaltete Konzentrate zu bringen gesucht. [Es sind] die Gorgonen, die dem gestaltfeindlichen Meere und seinen ungeheuerlichen Göttern noch vor dem Poseidon entstammen und jenseits des Okeanos den vagen Weltrand bewohnen.<sup>13</sup>

It is hardly an accident that Greek myth tried to concentrate the world's alienating quality into forms. [These forms are] the Gorgons, who are descended from the sea that is hostile to form [*das gestaltfeindliche Meer*], and from its monstrous gods (predating even Poseidon) who inhabit the vague edge of the world [*den vagen Weltrand*].<sup>14</sup>

Like the Vedic god Varouna, the myth of the Gorgons dramatises the intrusion of unformed materiality into the realm of narrative and metaphor: it conveys the material world's 'sheer adversity and intractability' (*die schiere Lebenswidrigkeit und Dienstunwilligkeit*),<sup>15</sup> and it reminds us that 'humans have little control of the conditions of their existence'.<sup>16</sup> If the Gorgons, much like the Hindu deity Varouna, can still be said to belong to the realm of myth, of meaningful human-made forms, they also point us to myth's inchoate outside, to the unsignifying materiality of the world-encircling ocean. In their paradoxical attempt to give form to 'the sea that is hostile to form', to signify 'the vague edge of the world', these myths dramatise the limits of myth itself.

Blumenberg develops these observations more fully in *Shipwreck with Spectator*, a short book on the 'nautical metaphors of existence' that can be read as a supplement to the gargantuan *Work on Myth*.<sup>17</sup> A key work of topos history, *Shipwreck with Spectator* explores a set of recurring metaphors in the Western literary, philosophical, and artistic tradition. All of these scenes involve a similar configuration: an individual who watches a shipwreck from the presumed safety of the shoreline. As Blumenberg notes, instantiations of this scene can be found in texts



ranging from Lucretius to Michel de Montaigne, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Friedrich Nietzsche – and of course one version of this scene also opens *Varouna*, as Hoël paces along the beach, his ears ringing with the cries of the sailors.

*Shipwreck with Spectator* begins by recalling the association of the ocean with formlessness, materiality, and the non-human – its status as the ‘vague edge of the world’:

einmal [ist] das Meer naturgegebene Grenze des Raumes menschlicher Unternehmungen; und zum anderen [die] Dämonisierung [der] Sphäre der Unberechenbarkeit, Gesetzlosigkeit, Orientierungswidrigkeit. Bis in die christliche Ikonographie hinein ist das Meer Erscheinungsort des Bösen, auch mit dem gnostischen Zug, dass es für die rohe, alles verschlingende und in sich zurückholende Materie steht.<sup>18</sup>

first, the sea is a naturally given boundary of the realm of human activities and, second, a demonization of the sphere of the unreckonable and lawless, in which it is difficult to find one’s bearings. In Christian iconography as well, the sea is the place where evil appears, sometimes with the additional Gnostic suggestion that it stands for all-devouring Matter that takes everything back into itself.

Blumenberg reminds us of the basic narrative properties of ‘the shipwreck text’, namely the fact that such texts are fundamentally about ‘breakage, rupture, and disjunction’, about ‘a messy openness [that] precludes the possibility of a redemptive reading’.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, in the Western tradition, the shipwreck-with-spectator topos often doubles as a reflection on the difficulty of mastering the ‘sheer adversity’ of matter through the distancing mechanisms of narrative, symbol, and myth.

Blumenberg is not interested in the ethical questions to which scenes of shipwreck might give rise (‘Is it OK to look on while other people drown?’) but in its ontological implications (‘Is it possible to set oneself up at a safe distance from a world that is experienced as indifferent, alien, or even hostile?’). As Jennifer H. Oliver has recently observed, *Shipwreck with Spectator* is ultimately concerned with shipwreck as it ‘relate[s] to existential questions’.<sup>20</sup> Blumenberg claims to find the prototype of the topos in a passage from Lucretius’s *De rerum naturae*. Commenting on the passage, Blumenberg notes:



Nicht darin besteht die Annehmlichkeit, die dem Anblick zugeschrieben wird, dass ein Anderer Qual erleidet, sondern im Genuss des eigenen unbetroffenen Standorts. Es geht überhaupt nicht um das Verhältnis unter Menschen, leidenden und nicht-leidenden, sondern um das Verhältnis des Philosophen zur Wirklichkeit.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, the pleasantness that is said to characterize this sight [of a shipwreck] is not the result of seeing someone else suffer but of enjoying the safety of one's own standpoint. It has nothing to do with a relationship among men, between those who suffer and those who don't; instead, it describes the relationship between philosophers and reality.

It was only in later centuries, Blumenberg contends, that writers, artists, and philosophers began to cast doubt on the Lucretian belief in the possibility of complete spectatorial detachment. This distinctly modern tradition includes dramatic scenes in which the spectator herself becomes engulfed in the shipwreck or in which she is permanently scarred by the tragedy she witnesses. Similarly, Green's rewriting of the 'shipwreck-with-spectator' motif in *Varouna* is organised around the talismanic necklace, as this piece of flotsam comes to disrupt the lives not only of Hoël but also of its subsequent owners. In many passages of the novel the mere sight of the necklace is enough to induce a vertiginous sense of total disorientation and atomisation of the self. When Bertrand Lombard, Hélène's father, enters his daughter's room, his attention is spellbound by the necklace she wears around her neck:

Tantôt il lui semblait qu'une espèce de tournoiement générale s'emparait de cette pièce et des personnes qui s'y trouvaient, et que, d'une façon mystérieuse, ce tournoiement se communiquait à son esprit où les idées les plus diverses se heurtaient comme une poignée de dés qu'on secoue dans une boîte. (pp.198–9)

Soon it seemed to him as if everything around him – the room and the people in it – was being pulled down in a whirling motion. This spinning also mysteriously seemed to affect his mind, as the most diverse thoughts were jumbled together like dice rolling in a cup.

In *Varouna* such moments of disintegration are often rendered through language that likens them to experiences of drowning or being pulled under. These moments nearly always trump the more exhilarating sensations of telepathic, metempsychotic connection which the necklace occasionally enables. Again and again, moments of mystic clairvoyance, in which the self seems to be transcended in favour of some larger transhistorical community, get eclipsed in favour of intensely physical experiences of fragmentation and dissolution.

Blumenberg's wide-ranging historical analysis identifies many different variations of the shipwreck-with-spectator topos, but he is ultimately more interested in the underlying epistemological shifts which these rewrites help to foreground. One such shift, notes Blumenberg, occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century when the Lisbon earthquake (1755) and the French Revolution sent shockwaves through Europe. The gravitational pull of these events 'put an end to the metaphysical optimism of the kind represented by the German followers of Leibniz' whose elaborate theodicies had insisted that philosophical speculation was capable of reasoning away the (contingent) evils of the world by demonstrating that they were part of God's divine plan.<sup>22</sup>

Blumenberg's attempt to parse intellectual history in this way is arguably too tidy. It would be more accurate to say that even the most optimistic theorists of contemplative spectatorship reckoned with 'the world's alienating quality' (*Weltqualität der Befremdlichkeit*). Leibniz himself recognised the epistemological consequences of the world's irreducible 'unfamiliarity' (*Unvertrautheit*). In his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686) he observes that while we think that we have a 'clear concept' of the sound of the sea, it turns out on closer inspection that this concept – what 'those who approach the sea-shore' call the sea's 'murmur' – in fact denotes a highly 'confused apperception' that resists coherent conceptualisation. Leibniz's reference to the 'murmur of the sea' highlights the inability of rational contemplation to adequately (or 'clearly') render the unordered and contingent materiality of the world: the sea's murmur, writes Leibniz, is nothing but the accumulation of 'the innumerable set of breaking waves', a kind of bad infinity of the auditory sense.<sup>23</sup>

The black necklace is brought to Hoël by the ocean. It arrives from the 'vague edge of the world', and its repeated appearance in the novel gives rise (in ways Blumenberg would have appreciated) to moments in which individual characters seem compelled by external forces and bereft of their ability for autonomous action. But the piece of flotsam also interferes with the narrative work of Green's novel itself, which rarely conforms to generic conventions of emplotment or psychological

plausibility. In one of the book's most explicitly self-reflexive moments, the writer Jeanne discards the notion of a stable self:

Je crois que, d'une façon générale, nous nous occupons beaucoup trop de ce qui se passe en nous-mêmes, dans cet univers restreint [...] où si peu de terre habitable émerge du chaos de l'inconnaissance. J'étais autrefois plus introspective, plus férue de ma personne morale. Aujourd'hui, écrire mon journal me paraît vain. A quoi bon essayer de retenir la vie ? Le présent verse dans le néant à chaque seconde. [...] Il y a trop à dire. Je ne puis parler du fauteuil où je suis assise, ni du bruit d'eau courante que font les peupliers en bordure de la grande pelouse, ni du visage que j'ai ce matin et des rides que je viens d'y découvrir à la faveur d'un rayon de soleil dans une glace de poche. (pp.227–8)

I believe that we are generally too much preoccupied with what is going on within us, in this very limited universe [...] where so little inhabitable land appears above the surface of the chaos of non-knowing. There was a time when I was more introspective, more obsessed with my own spiritual being. Today it seems pointless to keep a diary. Why should one try to hold on to life? The present moment disintegrates into nothingness in every moment. [...] There is too much to say. I cannot write about the fireside chair, in which I am sitting, or about the sound of rushing water that is being created by the rustling leaves of the poplar trees, or indeed about the way my face looks and the wrinkles that I discovered on my face as I looked at it in the pocket mirror in the morning sunlight.

The passage begins by renouncing the artistic preoccupation with the inner life in favour of a dogged attention to the outside world – an attention which immediately opens the text to a form of uncontrollable metonymic drift that threatens to overwhelm the subject's narrative capabilities ('there is too much to say'). Jeanne's 'experience of being overpowered' (*Übermachtserfahrung*) is conveyed in part by a sound like that of rushing water outside her window. By imitating the confused, inchoate murmur of the sea described by Leibniz, the sound returns us to Green's titular deity, Varouna, the destructive ocean which surrounds the sphere of human life and which figures as the embodiment of the world's 'alienating quality' (*Weltqualität der Befremdlichkeit*).<sup>24</sup>

Borrowing from Blumenberg, we could say that the sound overheard by Jeanne signifies the world's ineradicable *Unvertrautheit*.

In closing, I want to revisit a point I raised briefly at the beginning of this essay, namely the idea that *Varouna* – a novel finished in February 1940, on the brink of total war – involves an understanding of myth that is programmatically different from the one we find in many key documents of 1920s high modernism. For example, we could read Green's invocation of *Varouna* as an anti-Eliotic reminder of the inadequacy of myth and symbolism. In contrast to T.S. Eliot's influential description of James Joyce's use of myth in *Ulysses* as a means 'of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history', Green's novel emphasises the material world's *schiere Lebenswidrigkeit*, its absolute resistance to human meanings and values.<sup>25</sup> Of course, Eliot's reading of *Ulysses* conveniently ignored the fact that Joyce's novel frequently reminds us of the limitations of myth and metaphor as modes of sense-making. And yet, we can think of *Ulysses* and *Varouna* not merely as artistic appropriations of two different (Greek and Hindu) myths, but as two competing myths *about* modernism: on the one hand, modernism as the belief in the controlling and ordering power of literary symbolism; on the other, modernism as the renunciation of such hopes in the face of the world's alienating adversity.

Joyce versus Green? *Ulysses* versus *Varouna*? Needless to say, we shouldn't push such comparisons too far. No one has ever dreamt of doing for *Varouna* what Eliot did for *Ulysses*. Even so, this lopsided comparison is useful because it returns us to the question of Green's awkward literary-historical position. It suggests that Green hasn't simply fallen victim to a literary-historical slaughterhouse that indiscriminately wrecks havoc on artistic reputations which once seemed secure; instead, Green's relative obscurity as a writer seems to be due (at least in part) to his complex position in the field of inter-war and mid-century writing.

To be sure, the view of the Franco-American Green as a literary misfit has a long history. In a review published in *Time and Tide* in April 1940, George Orwell observed that Green's inter-war diaries – the work for which he is now best remembered in his native France – were the work of a writer who had been left behind by the times. In Green's diaries, Orwell writes,

one has the feeling of being all the while in Paris, the Paris of old yellow-faced houses and green plane trees, and also of first nights, private views and interminable literary conversations with Gide,

Gertrude Stein and Madame de Noailles. Everything is recorded with the restless sensitiveness of the writer who translates his experience into literature almost as automatically as a cow turns grass into milk.<sup>26</sup>

Green seamlessly transforms life into art. By the same token, 1920s modernism is magically transfigured into literary-historical myth – it is frozen into a kind of timeless permanence. This, in any case, is how Orwell liked to imagine modernism: as an anachronistic holdover, as a lifeless antiquity that was fit only for the museum (or that should be tucked away ‘inside the whale’). Somewhat unexpectedly, however, Orwell’s review concludes on a conciliatory note. Orwell concedes that Green ‘is far too intelligent to imagine that his way of life or his scheme of values will last for ever’: ‘Totally uninterested in politics, he is nevertheless able to see [...] that the age of liberalism is ending and that wars, revolutions and dictatorships are just round the corner. Everything is cracking and collapsing.’<sup>27</sup> On this reading, Green anticipated the end of modernism and with it his own literary-historical obsolescence. It is fitting, then, that in historical retrospect *Varouna* can be read as an allegory of the end of modernism and of the modernist belief in the ordering powers of myth. Published in October 1940, in a city seemingly poised for total cultural destruction, Green’s novel resembles nothing so much as a piece of literary flotsam, reaching us from that ‘alien’ and precarious ‘edge of the world’.

## Notes

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- 1 Franco Moretti, ‘The Slaughterhouse of Literature’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 61:1 (2000), 207–27 (p.207).
- 2 Green’s erratic movements between Christianity and Hinduism in the second half of the 1930s, and their impact on the writing on *Varouna*, are recorded in great detail in Green’s *Journal intégral, 1919–1940* (Paris: Bouquins, 2019).
- 3 Julien Green, *Varouna* (Paris: Plon, 1940), ii–iii. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text. Translations from the novel are my own.
- 4 The (mysticist) side of Green’s thought as well as his Jungian leanings dominated early readings of his work: e.g. Marc Eigeldinger, *Julien Green et la tentation de l’irréel* (Paris: Portes de France, 1947); Jean-Claude Joye, *Julien Green et le monde de la fatalité* (Berne: Arnaud, 1964).

- 5 David Trotter, 'Naturalism's Phobic Picturesque', *Critical Quarterly*, 51:1 (2009), 33–58 (p.34). In a related vein, Walter Benjamin noted in a review of *Adrienne Mesurat* that Green's early novels burrow deep into the 'metaphysical rock bottom of the Real' (*die metaphysische Grundschrift des Wirklichen*). See Walter Benjamin, 'Adrienne Mesurat' (1928), in Hella Tiedemann-Bartels (ed.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3: *Kritiken und Rezensionen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 153–6 (p.154).
- 6 Dumézil, *Ouranos-Varuna: Essai de mythologie comparée indo-européenne* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1934). In his diaries, Green recalled that he had first considered writing *Varouna* in 1934, the year in which Dumézil's study was published. See the entry for 28 February 1941, in *Journal, 1940–1943* (Paris: Fayard, 1946).
- 7 On the resistance of matter to symbolisation, see David Trotter, 'The New Historicism and the Psychopathology of Everyday Modern Life', in William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (eds), *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 30–48. Drawing on Heidegger's early distinction between *Erde* and *Welt* in *Being and Time* (1927) and *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935–6), Trotter seeks to reinstate the narrative significance of inanimate 'matter' (*Erde*, which exists apart from a perceiving and structuring consciousness) as distinct from subject-oriented 'things' (*Welt*).
- 8 Josiah Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition: Shipwreck Narrative and the Disruption of Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 2.
- 9 Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 9; *Work on Myth* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1985), 3.
- 10 *Work on Myth*, 23; *Arbeit am Mythos*, 30.
- 11 *Work on Myth*, 6; *Arbeit am Mythos*, 12.
- 12 *Work on Myth*, 14; *Arbeit am Mythos*, 21.
- 13 *Arbeit am Mythos*, 21.
- 14 *Work on Myth*, 14–15.
- 15 *Work on Myth*, 15; *Arbeit am Mythos*, 21.
- 16 *Work on Myth*, 3–4.
- 17 Hans Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer: Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 9; *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996), 7.
- 18 Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer*, 10; *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 8.
- 19 Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition*, xxi. Blackmore's book is excellent on the disjunctive narrative logic of shipwreck, but it has surprisingly little to say about the fact that these texts are also typically awash with pieces of jetsam and flotsam.
- 20 Jennifer H. Oliver, *Shipwreck in French Renaissance Writing: The Direful Spectacle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 10.
- 21 Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer*, 31; *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 26.
- 22 Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, 44. By contrast, nineteenth-century writers supposedly learned to reckon with the non-transcendability of this world. For Blumenberg, Nietzsche is the principal philosopher of radical worldly immanence because for him 'there is no firm and stable ground' from which we can 'pass authoritative judgement on the world; rather, we are all caught up in the flux of a stormy sea'. See Carl Thompson, Introduction, in *Shipwreck in Art*

and Literature: Images and Interpretations from Antiquity to the Present Day (London: Routledge, 2013), 1–26 (p.11).

- 23 ‘Our body’, Leibniz explains, ‘receives the impression of all other bodies [...] and, even though our senses are related to everything, it is impossible for our soul to attend to everything in particular.’ Quotations from Leibniz refer to paragraph 33 (‘Explanation of the Union of Soul and Body’) in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*. See Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 35–68 (pp.64–5). The act by which the multiplicity of the material world is brought under the authority of the unitary name is described by Deleuze in the following terms: ‘The nomadic distributions or crowned anarchies [are yoked together] in the univocal. [...] Only there does the cry resound: “Everything is equal!” and “Everything returns!” [...] A single and same voice for the whole thousand-voiced multiple, a single and same Ocean for all the drops, a single clamour of Being for all beings.’ See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 2004), 378. For a related discussion of Leibnizian philosophy: Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).
- 24 Once more, these ideas are developed in much illuminating detail in Deleuze’s immanentist philosophy. Like Nietzsche (and, to a lesser extent, Leibniz), Deleuze negates the separation of self and world, spectator and shipwreck: he proposes instead that we conceive of the ‘inside [as] merely the fold of the outside, as if the ship were a folding of the sea’ (*Foucault* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 81). James Williams has usefully glossed this inversion (or, perhaps, ‘exversion’) as follows: ‘Each pebble contemplates the sea and the tides, the currents and the storms, the mass of sister pebbles, flotsam, and broken shells. It is a passive synthesis of these events, a contemplating soul ground from repeated washes’ (*Gilles Deleuze’s Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 38). The point of view of the pebble has been shaped by the ocean it ‘contemplates’. In this sense Deleuze’s pebble and Green’s necklace are not mystical symbols which give us an all-encompassing vision of the whole – the kind of transcendent vision associated in the literary tradition with drops of dew (Andrew Marvell), grains of sand (Wallace Stevens), or hazelnuts (Julian of Norwich).
- 25 T.S. Eliot, ‘Ulysses, Order, and Myth’, *The Dial*, 75 (1923), 480–3 (p.483).
- 26 George Orwell, Review of Julien Green’s diaries (13 April 1940), in Peter Davison (ed.), *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, vol. 12, *A Patriot after All, 1940–1941* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), 144–6 (p.145).
- 27 *Ibid.*, 145.