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Strangers in the world of the Emotions Re-evaluating L.P.Hartley's *The Go-Between*

Golden summers have always had a propensity to haunt the English imagination; no doubt due to the fact that they are so few and far between. Warm days offer such an anomaly to the traditional British climate that it should surprise no one that authors who attempt to set their work against the backdrop of an England drenched in heat and consistent fine weather are writing from a position of periphery. Grey skies and rain lie at the heart of English identity. There is a strange kind of ironic pride taken in the fact that it is inclemency of climate that defines so much of the English character, grounded in a resignation to the cold that runs in its cultural veins. Golden summers real or imagined merely serve to evoke distance and memory, never the close proximity of modern life. In much the same way L.P.Hartley's *The Go-Between* extols the exiling power of a 'golden summer' to acutely define a clear historical divide between an idyllic prelapsarian 'past' and the austere post-war 'present' of the mid-twentieth century. However, it is also a novel that remains a unique and highly undervalued text in terms of how it contributes to the ongoing discourse of English cultural memory, and the polemics of national identity.

The absence of extensive academic scholarship on *The Go-Between* ironically serves to acknowledge a classic yet non canonical text whose celebrated and often misquoted opening line, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." (Hartley 5) evokes a historical moment irrevocable and definitive, suggesting with succinct poignancy an almost mystic incantation for a lost world as the narrator Leo Colston looks back from a distance of fifty years to the summer of

1900, and a disastrous chain of events that determine the bleak path of his adult life. Here Frederick J. Hoffman considers *The Go-Between* as working within a specific tradition of English literature, which he refers to as, “novels of “manners” [...] concerned with the “hum and buzz” of social acts and of their implications for and confusion with their times.” (79) In one respect Hoffman is right in that the novel portrays the social milieu of late Victorian England whose narrative is based around and orchestrated through the workings of a country house. However, Betty Jay more recently has suggested that a more useful critical perspective is to approach the novel through an analysis of Hartley’s use of ‘myth’ as an organizing principle by which to apply a more psychoanalytical reading of the novel by moving beyond the formulaic symbolism for which the author is commonly known where, “*The Go-Between* also concerns itself with those structures – primarily mythical, but also linguistic – which enable Leo to order his experience.” (Jay 2) While acknowledging both these arguments it may also be possible to ask to what extent *The Go-Between* continues to pose questions and inform contemporary ideas of nationhood through engaging and subverting the discourse of national commemoration and what many perceive as the golden myth of a pre war pastoral England.

The Language of the Unknown Solider

In *The Great War and Modern Memory* Paul Fussell argues that the Great War represented a new system of language, which was fundamentally ironic observing that:

Recourse to the pastoral is an English mode of both fully gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them. Pastoral Reference, whether to literature or to actual rural localities and objects is a way of invoking a code to hint by antithesis at the indescribable [...] The Golden Age posited by Classical and Renaissance literary pastoral now finds its counterpart in ideas of “home” and “the summer of 1914.” (235)

In his own introduction to *The Go-Between*, Douglas Brooks-Davies makes a similar claim that, “Memory often idealizes the past, and so, within the frame occupied by the older Leo as he performs his resurrection of buried memory, a pastoral idyll gleams. Shot through with summer sun, a fenland harvest, lazy waterways, a picnic and a cricket match.” (Brooks-Davies ppxx) However, if the

Great War provides a symbolic 'anti-pastoral' subtext to the landscape of *The Go-Between*, it also suggests a more complex response, with regards to how English national identity continues to stand in relation to the war as a historical event. On crossing a cornfield as he begins to explore the contiguous surroundings between Brandham Hall and Black Farm Leo notes, "It had been lately reaped; some of the swathes were lying on the ground, others had been gathered into stooks. These had a slightly different outline from our Wiltshire ones, and confirmed me in my sense of being abroad." (71) Here Hartley is doing more than simply using the English countryside, as Fussell would contend, to hint at and protect against the horrors of the Western Front. He is rather introducing the idea of what is 'foreign' so as to highlight a more problematic relationship between the Great War and how the English identify themselves in relation to a pre-war pastoral topography. This relationship is expanded on and extended in *The Go-Between* through the persistent implication of what has come to be commonly referred to as the 'lost generation.'

Nowhere is the English countryside more keenly inscribed on the English psyche than in its memorials to the dead of the Great War. In towns, villages and cities throughout England the monuments to those who died between 1914-18 carry the memory of not only those men who fought and perished, but also a specific socio-political message. As Jay Winter observes, "local war memorials arose out of the post war search for a language in which to reaffirm the values of the community for which soldiers had laid down their lives." (qtd. in Machin, Abousnnouga 83) Winter claims that the language of the war memorial represents, "[...] an act of citizenship. To remember was to affirm community, to assert its moral character, and to exclude from it those values, groups, or individuals that placed it under threat." (Machin, Abousnnouga 84) This language of 'moral character' and the affirmed values of 'community' crystallize around what for many remains enshrined in the English cultural memory of the first day of the Battle of the Somme where 60,000 men, the majority of Kitchener's Pals battalions largely comprised of volunteers were wiped out. Yet it is precisely this collective notion that an irreplaceable number of idealistic, talented men were rendered extinct during the conflict that Samuel Hynes refers to as "the myth of the war", as he notes,

A brief sketch of that collective narrative of significance would go something like this: a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked,

disillusioned and embittered [...] They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance. (2)

In *The Go-Between*, the motif of the 'lost generation' is implicit as Leo acknowledges he was himself spared from the slaughter due to his skill and ability "in marshalling facts" (265) behind the lines. It is the cultural memory of the 'lost generation' that is also earlier inferred in Leo's description of a photograph of himself and his friend Marcus, where he is wearing, "a Norfolk jacket cut very high across the chest, incised leather buttons, round as bullets, conscientiously done up, and a belt which I have drawn more tightly than I need have." (40) He goes on to refer to the way in which the picture is posed, "in the attitude of affection which, in those days, was permitted to the male sex...(undergraduates and even soldiers draped themselves about each other)." The Norfolk jacket he refers to with its military overtones of restricted movement, "drawn more tightly" and the bullet-like buttons, "conscientiously done up" is later complemented by the "green suit" that replaces it. This "green suit" which a letter from his mother later refers to as a colour similar to 'khaki', is a further means by which Leo is able to identify with the 'foreign' pastoral surroundings he encounters. In this sense Hartley suggests a more hybrid identity for Leo that allows him to indulge in a duel fantasy of himself as both Robin Hood and also Mercury, the messenger of the Gods, as he carries messages between not only Marian Maudsley and Lord Trimingham, but also her lover Ted Burgess. It is Ted whom Leo views as a personification of the pastoral landscape as he observes, "The field that had been cut looked very flat, and he was much the tallest thing in it. Standing there, the colour of the corn, between red and gold, I had the fancy that he was a sheaf the reaper had forgotten and that it would come back for him." (101) This is again suggested at their last meeting where Leo reflects that, "Once he had reminded me of a cornfield ripe for reaping; now he was like corn that had been cut and left in the sun." (215) Yet if Ted embodies the 'golden' nature of the landscape that feeds into the image of the 'lost generation', he is also himself ironically a foreign element threatening the class system that would be upheld by the intended marriage of Marian and Trimingham, and whose latent consequences culminate in the violence of his death and suicide.

Worlds Worth Dying For

Caroline Drakers in *The Countryside at War* observes how a reductive image of England as “local shire” was itself promoted during the conflict in encouraging men to join up and fight by writers and propagandists such as John Galsworthy and John Masefield, where the England that men were being inspired to kill and die for was portrayed as, “a web of who knows what memories, of misty fields and scents of clover” and “in the little villages of the land, in the old homes, in the churches, in countless old carvings, in old bridges, in old tunes and in the old acts of the English.” (Drakers iv) However, following the Battle of the Somme, Masefield wrote to his wife describing a very different scene from the England he had been evoking to inspire the troops. This was a topography whose, “main features were chunks of corpse, partly human, partly trees.” (qtd. in Todman 2) In what is considered by many critics to be the finest war novel to have come out of the conflict itself Frederic Manning in *Her Privates We* describes the landscape of the Somme at Trones Wood in similar tones as, “festering, fly-blown corruption, the pasture of rats, blackening in the heat.” (Manning 11) The implication that being witness to the complete devastation of landscape had a direct influence on the mental deterioration of combatants is borne out by both Masefield and Manning’s sense of death being literally incorporated in the ground they walked on. Moreover, the influence of environmental stress as directly contributing to the trauma experienced by combatants during the First World War, through their daily existence in the degraded and desecrated conditions of the Western Front is further supported by Fussell, where he describes the pressure of daily exposure in the trenches as, “to experience an unreal, unforgettable enclosure and constraint, as well as a sense of being unorientated and lost.” (51) What Hartley achieves in *The Go-Between* is a synthesis of both the English experience of the trenches and that of the English countryside which destabilizes not only the physical distance between them, but also the aesthetic and psychological.

In *The Go-Between* the centrality of the English countryside is manifest not only in terms of the discourse of national identity, but also in making sense of the absolute ‘foreignness’ of No Man’s Land. Yet it should also be noted that in emphasizing the same centrality of pastoral landscape as a key element of what defines English identity, Hartley is nevertheless by 1953 addressing a country whose cultural and political landscape was adjusting to the post-war infrastructure of a Great Britain absent both colonies and Empire. This adjustment is implicit in the way Hartley effectively frames his narrative with both a prologue and epilogue set in his own contemporary moment, where on returning to Brandham Hall Leo

describes the psychological distance between himself and what is by now a non-familiar English landscape where, "I did not even feel a revenant; I felt a stranger." (269) This sense of strangeness and unfamiliarity lies at the heart of understanding how Hartley's image of pastoral England paradoxically works to both support and undermine the post-war reconstruction of English identity where the idea of the 'foreign' is embedded in Leo's adult perspective, "I saw the village hall, a somber structure of smooth, dark red brick, that looked incongruous among the glittering, grey flint houses." (274) The scene as Leo describes it of his last "public triumph" where his "spirit fluttered around the peaked ceiling of the hall among the Union Jacks and paper streamers" (141) is now unrecognizable to him. With the absence of the nationalistic overtones of the Union Jack and its paean to Imperial glory the pastoral has not so much vanished as it has begun to be reframed and re-measured as "somber", "dark", "incongruous" and "grey". This paradigm shift in which the pastoral moves from the familiar center to the more alien periphery of Leo's consciousness not only acknowledges the retreat from Empire, but also points towards Harley's wider concern with how English national identity is reconfigured in the wake of the Great War.

The signifying relationship between the English pastoral landscape and that of the human abattoir of the Western Front is captured in *The Go-Between* as a crisis of language not only on the part of the main protagonist and narrator himself, but that of British society in general to recognize and address the emotional and psychological wounds of the Great War. As Douglass Brooks-Davis again points out in his own introduction to *The Go-Between*, "It is not only nostalgic, it is *about* nostalgia: about the recovery of lost memories where those memories are not only personal (and, it turns out, deeply painful) but collective and cultural." (xi) Leo Colston moves through a landscape whose language is one of both transgression and transition, "I had a curious experience, almost an illusion, as though a part of me was stationed far away, behind me, perhaps in the belt of trees beyond the river; and from there I could see myself, a bent figure, no bigger than a beetle, weaving to and fro across the ribbon of road." (170) This sense of a distant and removed perspective with its foreign overtones of being "stationed far away" as Leo looks back on himself "a bent figure, no bigger than a beetle" invokes the anonymity of soldiers in the trenches and strongly echoes Wilfred Owen's opening line to "Dulce et Decorum Est" where he describes the men as "Bent double like old beggars under sacks". (Owen 192) Combined with the notion of physical movement "weaving to and fro" so contrary to the static attrition of the Western Front the pastoral not only serves to suggest its antithesis, but also acknowledges the repressed discourse

of shell-shock by destabilizing the physical and linguistic space between Brandham Hall and Black Farm. It is here that Hartley substitutes a landscape increasingly reminiscent of or evoking the violence of the Western Front, which is manifestly expressed in the sexual inference of the letters and Leo's curiosity as to the nature of the clandestine relationship between Ted and Marian.

Pastoral Traditions and Traumatic Symptoms

L.P.Hartley in *The Go-Between* was not the first author to use a rural setting to capture the profound transformative effect of the Great War on the English psyche. Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War*, and Robert Graves's *Goodbye To All That* all employ the idea of a pastoral scene to a greater or lesser degree in recognizing how the relationship between the English countryside and the Western Front would inevitably raise questions as to how the modern novel could adequately recount the nature of an experience, which was untranslatable. What is unique about *The Go-Between* is the way it traces a post-war perspective through a pre-war topography, rendering the experience of the Great War through a landscape and narrative in which the traditional idea of English national identity is understood and transcribed through the nature of traumatic injury. By employing a narrative voice whose lyrical and elegiac overtones are foregrounded in a much more visceral sense of psychological trauma, Hartley addresses a telling deficiency on the part of English society, in acknowledging and articulating the condition of many veterans who in the wake of World War One suffered from what were still considered the 'hysterical' symptoms of war neurosis.

The diagnosis of symptoms such as amnesia, nervous tics, nightmares, and mutism (Bourke) not only officially recognized for the first time in the history of armed conflict a new medical condition, but also the telling lack of an adequate language to reflect and discuss it in the public sphere. This was self-evident in the dissatisfaction the military psychiatrist Charles Myers himself acknowledged on being the first to use the phrase "shell-shock" (Myers 316) as a diagnosis he believed was misleading given that many men who suffered from the condition had not themselves been under-fire or directly exposed to bombardments. Leo Colston is enlisted for service during the Great War, yet as previously mentioned by his own admission takes no part in the conflict due to his, "skill in marshalling facts." (265) The development of this "skill" is a direct result of the trauma he experiences at Brandham Hall, which both causes him to become temporarily mute, and also to lose his memory. It is possible to argue that Hartley in this way

is not only displacing the symptoms of shell-shock which Leo as an adult doesn't experience, but also crediting that without recognizing these symptoms as valid it is impossible for his narrative to exist. As a result Leo's survival is dependent on an experience, which deeply wounds and psychologically damages him, and directly implies a relationship between his own childhood story and the unheard narratives of traumatized veterans post 1918.

In *The Go-Between* the figure of the wounded veteran who will become so prominent through the discourse of traumatic injury during the Great War is prefigured and articulated in the character of Lord Trimingham. Badly disfigured during the Boer War Trimingham is described by Leo as a modal of "self-discipline" who "had very little to laugh about [...], and yet he laughed. His gaiety had a background of the hospital and the battlefield. I felt he had some inner reserve of strength which no reverse, however serious, would break down." (92) It is also significant to note that at the time *The Go-Between* is set the conflict in South Africa is still ongoing and that the notion that Hartley is portraying a peaceful 'pre-war' scene may be initially questioned. This is again emphasized where Leo describes the cricket match between the Hall and the village in imperial militarist terms as, "It was like trained soldiers fighting natives [...] the village team were like the Boers, who did not have much in the way of equipment by our standards, but could give a good account of themselves, none the less;" (127) Hartley positions the scene of the cricket match at the exact midpoint of the novel where Leo tellingly notes "as the game receded from my mind, the landscape filled in" (133) again highlighting the significance Hartley attaches to the relationship between Leo's memory and the language which the pastoral lends itself to. Here Leo is unsettled by the way in which his view of the landscape, "two bows: the arch of the trees beyond the cricket field, and the arch of the sky above them:" offer a perfect symmetry which is "disturbed" by "the spire of the church". It is this "distressful spire" which draws Leo's attention to an unusual cloud, "A creation of the heat [...] thick and lustrous [...] flushed with pink" which "deepened to purple" and prompts him to go so far as to ask, "Was there a menace in this purple tract? A hint of thunder?" (134) The conflict and sense of disorientation, which this landscape instills in Leo, is further grounded in the language he uses to describe his feelings as Ted Burgess and the villagers look to threaten victory over Lord Trimingham and the Hall. At this point the cricket match takes on a highly charged symbolic significance, "It was [...] the struggle between order and lawlessness, between obedience to tradition and defiance of it, between social stability and revolution, between one attitude to life and another." (135) Consequently Hartley succeeds in demonstrating how the

theme of war permeates the pastoral both through Trimmingham's own wound and Leo's own perception of the landscape as increasingly revealing the fractures in his own memory.

The Topography of English Memory

Reading the symptoms of lost memory associated with shellshock as a signifying element of the landscape Leo encounters and navigates allows for a reading of *The Go-Between* that challenges the more limited view of the novel as simple social portraiture. This is most evident in three key topographical points of reference within the text; the domestic interior of Brandham Hall, the "No-Man's Land" between Brandham Hall and Black Hall, and the 'South-West' prospect of Brandham Hall itself. Initially Leo recalls the 'domestic' interior of Brandham Hall describing his "buried memories" as having "effects of chiaroscuro, patches of light and dark: it is only with an effort that I can see them in terms of color." (28) Leo proceeds to observe the recovered nature of his own memory introducing the idea that the corridors and rooms of Brandham are in part made up of images and language which signify a symbolic absence as much as their own concrete dimensions, "There are things I know, though I don't know how I know them, and things that I remember[...] pictures unverified by any fact which recur obsessively, like the landscape of a dream." (28) Furthermore, it is largely around these 'missing' details that Leo's memory is structured and organized, "My memories are of the hinder parts of the house, invisible from the S.W., which were higgledy-piggledy and rambling, and of passages with sudden bends and confusing identical doors, where you could easily lose your way[...]They were not well lighted." (29) This description of the hall's interior as "not well lighted" in whose "rambling" and "higgledy-piggledy" corridors with "sudden bends" it was easy to get lost could be language as easily applied to describing a system of trenches and is one of the earliest indications in the novel of an unspoken geography which Hartley is looking to subtextually outline and foreground.

This 'unspoken geography' is again highlighted by what Leo perceives as the transformative 'alien' quality of the summer heat that delineates the landscape between Brandham Hall and Black Farm, and suggests a palimpsest No Man's Land through the topography of the English countryside. Here there are echoes of Manning's Somme landscape with "trees blackening in the heat" where Leo describes the sultriness of the summer of 1900, "I liked to watch it [the heat] rise shimmering from the ground and hang heavy on the tops of the darkening July trees." (49) This is also evident on the occasion of the bathing party where Leo first

meets Ted Burgess, where Leo observes, “There was a black thing ahead of us, all bars and spars and uprights, like a gallows. It gave out a sense of fear – also of intense solitude. It was like something that must not be approached, that might catch you and hurt you; I wondered why we were walking towards it so unconcernedly.” (53) As Leo delivers the messages between Ted and Marian he refers to the changes in the bathing place effected by the heat. First, “the willows shimmered in a greyish haze” where “the rusty pools beside the causeway had receded.” (77) This is followed on his next trip by an awareness of how “the stalks that had been below the water line showed a band of dirty yellow” whose “trailing weeds” create “a distressing impression of disarray.” (112) Later this becomes “a scene of mad disorder” where the river reveals “a tangled mass of water reeds” in addition to “many more boulders [...] ghostly, corpse-like, at the bottom.” (168) Leo describes “The clusters of round, thin, grey-green rushes” which suggest to him “an army of spearmen” who are now, “coated with a grey deposit – mud [...] fallen over [...] let down by their native element [...] back broken [...] all discipline gone.” (168) The progression from “a greyish haze” to “a grey deposit – mud” suggests not only encroaching shadow of the Western Front itself, but also the way in which Leo although never directly referring to the war itself instills a quite innocent and innocuous landscape with a much darker language of decay and derangement where all sense of natural order is broken down.

Hartley’s attempts to use his depiction of an English pastoral landscape to articulate the latent symptoms of shell-shock as being absorbed and repressed by English society, is further demonstrated in Leo’s inability to visualize the south-west prospect of Brandham Hall; a missing detail which remains a key motif throughout the text, “the imposing façade, which I am sure I studied from the S.W., has faded from my mind. I can see the front of the house now, but through the eyes of the directory, not my own.” (33) Leo’s inability to remember this particular angle of the Hall not only suggests a key symptom of shell-shock in identifying one of the core themes of the text, but also the way in which this comes to form a consistent feature of Leo’s ability to remember and describe the country house in general, “We were approaching the house – the S.W. prospect, I suppose, since the village lay on that side; but I still can’t remember what it looked like though I remember how bright the moonlight was.” (151/152) By extension this inability to see due to the facilitation of a fundamental detail of memory is endemic when considered in relation to the way in which for the English, the cultural memory and commemoration of the Great War remains pictured through a pastoral scene. This is later reiterated when Leo observes “Many things in and about the house

(though never its south-west prospect) became visible to me”, (200) and is already anticipated much earlier in the novel where the S.W. prospect is thrown into sharp relief when Leo describes first discovering the Deadly Nightshade, “I was alone, exploring some derelict outhouse which for me had obviously more attraction than the view of Brandham Hall from the S.W.” (33) Just as the ‘absent’ view of the S.W. prospect comes to symbolize Leo’s lost memory, the Deadly Nightshade takes root not only physically in the ‘abandoned’ and ‘derelict’ area of Brandham Hall which is the scene of Leo’s final breakdown on witnessing Ted and Marian making love, but in the wider landscape of Leo’s narrative. It is the chief symbol, which Leo comes to associate with Ted and Marian’s love affair and the destructive consequences, which accompany it. Consequently the landscape of the novel as presented through Hartley’s description of the ‘golden summer of 1900’ is no prelapsarian vision, but a worldly landscape already both deeply scarred and intensely sexualized.

In writing *The Go-Between* Hartley addressed the problematic nature of an English rural landscape that was both central to the experience and memory of the Great War while at the same time highlighting a vast gulf between the understanding of traumatic injury and the language available to adequately express and recognize the condition. In attempting to measure and quantify the long-term impact and influence on English national identity of shell-shock as a medical definition *The Go-Between* stands as a novel which continues to invoke the Great War both as the embodiment and also dissipation of the solid foundations on which that identity is constructed and judged. The social orthodoxies of class, gender and sexuality linguistically bound up in a pastoral landscape which the conflict served to challenge and redefine can be seen in *The Go-Between* as informing Hartley’s engagement of the long term implications of traumatic injury which continues to be overlooked and ignored in terms of how the Great War is conventionally portrayed, commemorated and understood as an essential component of how English national identity is defined today. The voices of those men who broke down even having survived the Great War have rarely been as poignantly amplified as in *The Go-Between*, and it is here that the novel has much to offer in its ability to raise questions regarding both the language of commemoration and English national identity itself.

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