

Foreword

Leslie Poles Hartley (1895-1972) was born into a middle-class family of Liberals and Methodists. Harry Hartley, his father, was a solicitor, who became the affluent director of the local brickworks; Bessie, his mother, was to remain overwhelmingly devoted to her only son and wedded to the idea that he would eventually return to live with her at home. Home was Fletton Tower, a Victorian businessman's castle on the outskirts of Peterborough, complete with flagpole and statuary. Hartley attended Harrow School and Balliol College, Oxford.

His schooling brought him into contact with the fringes of intellectual aristocracy. Through Aldous Huxley, whom he'd met at Oxford, he was introduced to Lady Ottoline Morrell and other members of the Bloomsbury group. In 1923 he was a house guest at Garsington Manor along with Lord David Cecil (who became a lifelong supporter and friend and with whom Hartley was hopelessly in love – he was devastated in 1932 by news that Cecil was to take the 'desperate step' of marriage), and Virginia Woolf, who noted in her diary that she'd met 'a dull fat man called Hartley'.

Despite the rise in his family's fortunes, Hartley could never quite shake off his middle class roots; their money was new money and the doors to the upper class were to remain frustratingly stiff. Hartley's complicated relationship to class, to his own sexuality, and to his sense of an irretrievable Edenic past, are the dynamos that were to drive his fictions.

The opening line to *The Go-Between* is one of the most famous in twentieth-century literature: 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.' This theme of foreignness, of the position of protagonist as outsider, is one that lies at the heart of *The Hireling*.

In a collection of his essays, *The Novelist's Responsibility*, Hartley argues forcibly that although a writer must create

something that exists ‘independently of the author’s testimony’, it must however be true to his ‘sensibility . . . his feeling for [the subject], which must be as strong as, or stronger than, the feeling he has for his own life’. A novel, he continues, ‘must, in some degree, be an extension of his own life; its fundamental problems must be his problems, its preoccupations his preoccupations . . .’ It is tempting to apply this conviction to *The Hireling*, and to feel that for Hartley, like Leadbitter, life itself was a bit of a foreign country and that he too felt himself destined to be an outsider in it.

Before the publication of his first full-length novel, *The Shrimp and the Anemone* (the first part of the trilogy *Eustace and Hilda*), when he was almost fifty, Hartley was known as a dependable literary critic and writer of short stories. In the ten years that followed – which culminated in the publication of *The Go-Between* in 1953 (on whose heels he received a CBE) – his star was in the ascendant and his literary reputation assured.

WH Auden was among the throng to tell Hartley that he was his favourite novelist. To some extent, Hartley was a victim of his early success – novels, which, coming out of his own maturity, hit the world with an accomplishment and vision rare in younger writers.

He was 62 when he published *The Hireling* (1957). His publishers – Hamish Hamilton in England and Alfred Knopf in America – were both sniffy about the manuscript. Hartley was enraged because he felt that Hamilton only wanted him to turn out more books about childhood and adolescence. Hamilton was reacting in alarm to a downward trend in sales, from 18,000 for *A Perfect Woman* (1955) to 12,000 for *The Hireling* (which, by today’s standards, would be a pretty respectable sale).

Where *The Go-Between* had appeared to ecstatic reviews (and has, along with the trilogy, been in print ever since), the later books had a more mixed reception. *The Hireling*, though, was

not without its admirers. Francis Wyndham in the *Spectator* recommended it: 'as accomplished and absorbing a novel as anyone could wish'. The story was made into a film in 1973, in the hope, no doubt, that it would replicate the triumph of Joseph Losey's version of *The Go-Between* (with a script by Harold Pinter) in 1970.

The major flaw in this film version was its 1920s setting. The novel is most definitely post-Second World War, set in the 1950s, and this setting supplies an essential heightening of the book's theme: a sense of time out-of-kilter, and the particular and peculiar nature of Leadbitter's social isolation. The period detail of the novel is scanty, but what there is contributes crucially to Hartley's theme: Leadbitter in his anonymous and meanly furnished bed-sitting room possesses a telephone, 'perhaps his greatest friend'; 'Goodbye, Mr Chips!' he says ruefully after one frustrating encounter with Lady Franklin, a reference to the hugely popular, nostalgic hero of James Hilton's book, immortalized by Robert Donat in the film of 1939; Leadbitter is described as 'master of as many degrees of coolness as a refrigerator, he could modulate from a light hoarfrost to a deep freeze'.

It is not, however, the material detail of the novel that concerns Hartley (Clifford Kitchin – a writer friend, pointed out at the time Hartley's ignorance, for instance, of motor cars). What preoccupies him is the psychological make-up of his characters, and it is this, particularly in his portrait of Leadbitter, that he achieves so unflinchingly. Lack of period detail, in fact, works in the novel's favour; it allows (by not ruling out) a contemporary relevance. We are no less susceptible now to the invisible barriers between lives, and the potential for isolation that society inflicts, not only in terms of class and education, but in terms of what Hartley perceived as the 'main danger': that the individual becomes so 'snowed under by the mass of suggestions, directions, orders and ready-

made designs for living to which he is exposed' that his 'protective colouring will make him indistinguishable from the rest'.

Leadbitter is a case in point. His decline is so pronounced that when we meet him first, he strives for invisibility and what he takes a perverse professional pride in. He is a hard nut to crack but ultimately far more vulnerable than Lady Franklin, who wears her vulnerability on her sleeve. After a breakdown she has been advised to find someone 'unlike yourself: a waiter, a porter, a taxi-driver' whom she must 'button-hole . . . victimize . . . pour your story into his ear . . .' This fluke prescription encourages her to catapult the usual social barriers and to enter into intimate conversations with Leadbitter. Leadbitter is startled into having to invent himself a life and a family for her entertainment. His ability to convince her with his story is (tellingly?) worthy of a novelist's, but it is achieved at a cost, because the more he invents, the more Leadbitter roots his story in his own feeling, his own wish-fulfilment. As he becomes further embroiled in the emotions of his fantasy, the reader is made painfully aware of the nature of what is lacking in his life.

Hartley is one of the great writers of the twentieth century. This book can be ranked among his best, and, in terms of the window it opens on its author's soul, his most telling.

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