EUSTACE AND HILDA

L. P. HARTLEY (1895–1972), the son of the director of a brickworks, attended Harrow and Balliol College, Oxford, before setting out on a career as a literary critic and writer of short stories. In 1944 he published his first novel, *The Shrimp and the Anemone*, the opening volume of *Eustace and Hilda: A Trilogy*. Hartley’s other novels include *The Go-Between*, which was made into a movie by Joseph Losey and Harold Pinter, and *The Hireling*.

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EUSTACE AND HILDA

A TRILOGY

L. P. HARTLEY

Introduction by
ANITA BROOKNER

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INTRODUCTION

The question posed by this lucid and haunting novel—in effect three novels in one—is of enduring interest. How does a person of limited capacity deal with the challenge posed by free will? Not that the matter is stated as crudely as this. We meet the protagonists, Eustace and Hilda, as children, whose destiny is inevitably circumscribed by their elders. But in the case of Eustace the agent of repression is nearer to hand. A timid, conscience-stricken boy, further disabled by a weak heart, he is almost entirely dependent on his sister, four years older than himself. Their mother is dead; they live in a small seaside town with their father, their aunt, and their younger sister. But these family members are supernumeraries, whose influence pales beside that of Hilda, the precociously stern, strong-willed guardian intent on saving Eustace from himself. This means curbing his impulses, though these are far from dangerous; it means imparting an understanding of the moral order, of the necessity of accomplishing unpleasant tasks, of disregarding the agreeable in favor of the disagreeable. That way, implies Hilda, lies self-mastery. The impressionable Eustace believes it all too willingly.

In the novel’s first part, The Shrimp and the Anemone, we see the two children growing up against a background of family decorum and rituals at the turn of the twentieth century. In fact the family hardly exists as a unit: the father is jocular, unreliable; the aunt severe and characterless. There is physical freedom of a sort, freedom to play on the beach, to build rock pools, but not to play with other children. The leading image—that of a shrimp half devoured by a sea anemone—is in place in the very first chapter, and it is one which the subtle author has no need to labor. The assault on the shrimp leads inevitably to its demise, but also to that of the
anemone, when the children intervene in an effort to save its vic-
tim. Eustace feels this loss acutely, but is in no position, as a boy
of nine, to ponder the lessons that might be drawn from it.

The children’s static situation changes with the introduction
of a third party, Miss Fothergill, an old lady disabled by a stroke
and confined to a bath chair. Urged, as always, to do something un-
pleasant for his own good, Eustace addresses this frightening per-
son and is soon persuaded to visit her in her imposing house, to
take tea and to play cards. To his surprise they become friends of a
sort; fear is displaced by fascination and familiarity. When the old
lady dies she leaves him a legacy which will enable him to dis-
cover the world, if he has a mind to do so. News of this legacy
brings other characters into prominence, notably the socially supe-
rior Staveley family. Eustace, at this young age already sensible to
the seductions of class, warms excitedly to the patronage of Dick
Staveley, the family heir, though it is the beautiful Hilda who is
Dick’s prey, a stratagem of which she is well aware. Eustace, in his
disastrous innocence, sees nothing amiss. The question repeats it-
self: How is he to discern the underlying menace of the worldly?
Hilda we can rely on; she has enough conscience for both of them.
But Eustace has a weakness for stronger, more exotic characters, as
has already been proved by the eagerness with which he suc-
cumbed to Miss Fothergill. This inclination is never to leave him.

Hartley does not insist on this point. He makes no direct inter-
vention, evinces neither sympathy nor partiality, but merely dis-
plays a tenderness towards his characters which, in the initial
chapters, has something of childlike identification about it. Rarely
can the hesitations and scruples of an unfledged mind have been so
carefully described. Nor can the reader remain unconvinced that
what binds the two children is a deep and fundamental love which
will outwit all others. This symbiosis has nothing suspect about
it: Freud’s name is mentioned, but although it is clear that the
children’s formation will influence their adult development there
is no emphasis on the dangers that might be involved. As far as the
reader is concerned we are merely in the presence of a brother and
sister: she is stern and serious; he is timorous but given to unex-
pected visitations from the wider world. It seems that he might
have a career as a writer or an academic, something involving not
too great a struggle. But in fact Miss Fothergill’s money will make it easy for him to delay the decision, while the amiable manners which have altogether escaped Hilda’s supervision will ensure some kind of success.

In the novel’s second part, *The Sixth Heaven*, Hartley picks up his story in the aftermath of World War I. The children have entered their adult lives. Eustace is a languid undergraduate at Oxford, while Hilda devotes her energies to a clinic for crippled children. At this point, Hilda is almost absent from the narrative, though her immanence is unmistakable. Her essence remains that of a mournful ghost, whose moral strength has sapped her physical existence. At home in Willesden, an unfashionable area of London to which the family has moved, Eustace tries out his new sophistication on his aunt, to no avail. Inevitably he looks further afield, rediscovering the Staveley family, whose prestigious relation, Lady Nelly Staveley, takes him in hand. Once again he gravitates in the general direction of wealth and favor, achieving a sense of freedom for which only barely understood impulses have prepared him. His fantasy of a marriage for Hilda with Dick Staveley seems improbable in light of her determined drabness.

Henry James would have appreciated the unhurried pace and the masterly certitude with which L.P. Hartley conducts his novel. Eustace and Hilda are no match for the entrenched class attitudes of the Staveleys when they are unexpectedly asked to spend a weekend at their imposing house, Anchorstone Hall. Even Lady Nelly’s invitation to Eustace to visit her in Venice might be no more than a graceful gesture. We do not know what words are exchanged between Hilda and Dick Staveley, for this novel is essentially chaste. The Edwardian amplitude of the narrative is more than substitute for any crudeness which our more superficial sensibilities have come to expect. And Eustace accepts Lady Nelly’s invitation, a temptation which a wiser head would have resisted. It is to prove fatal, in a sense to everyone involved.

James would also have appreciated the moral delicacy of Eustace’s confused reactions to the teasing which is the normal form of discourse among Lady Nelly and her friends, so very different from the bleak instructions he had been accustomed to in his youth; and he would have admired the detail of Hilda’s sartorial
indiscretion when she appears at Dick Staveley’s birthday party in a red dress. George Meredith would have appreciated the incompatibility between Dick and Hilda, separated by far more than caste. Eustace and Hilda are marked out by their blamelessness. Eustace may even have misunderstood the invitation to Venice, for which there may have been more than one motive. Being unschooled in the ways of the world, he outstays his welcome. In this fashion he is able to ignore reports of more delicate matters at home. On receipt of a blotched and incoherent letter from Hilda he responds by sending money and by ordering a Fortuny dress which, in the normal course of events, she would be unlikely to wear.

It is easy to understand Eustace’s febrile anxiety and exaltation as he takes in the glories of Venice, but a discomfort has intruded: he wears the wrong clothes, is late, misunderstands impromptu arrangements. More important, he attempts to appease his conscience with fantasies, with soliloquies that justify his dilatory behavior. He is not unaware that Hilda is in some sort of distress, for there are letters from home which he strives to ignore. It is more important to complete the book he has started, to stay on in Venice at Lady Nelly’s vague behest, than to go home as Hilda begs him to. That he has become separated from her is all too evident, but the author will reunite them in a ritual which will lead to a fateful conclusion. The third part of the trilogy is simply entitled *Eustace and Hilda*, as if all the other characters have become irrelevant. So close has been their bond that neither is quite able to survive without the other, and the reader accepts this as the only just interpretation.

The three parts of Hartley’s trilogy were originally published separately between 1944 and 1947, and were then published together, as *Eustace and Hilda*, in 1958. The novel is a product of a time in which literary traditions were still respected. Also respected, or at least acknowledged, were one’s position in society and one’s accordingly humble expectations. For this latter reason Eustace and Hilda are unable to accommodate change, let alone shock. Evenhandedly, but with a touch of wistfulness, the author describes their modest beginnings. The reader, who knows more than the protagonists, understands their various mistakes and mis-
apprehensions. The novel is so expertly written that one hardly notices the skill which informs it. This masterpiece—for it is no less than that—imposes its convictions without underlining them. The reader’s own moral sympathies are brought into review. Yet this same reader does not question the justice of Hartley’s account. Having followed the brother and sister from childhood to their bewilderment when they find themselves out of context, we recognize their fates as unavoidable. One closes the book with a feeling of profound sadness, of regret not only for Eustace and Hilda but for the beautiful literary undertaking that is now ended. Few modern novels impose high standards. This one unquestionably does.

—Anita Brookner