



**THE
GO-BETWEEN**
L. P. HARTLEY

INTRODUCTION BY
COLM TÓIBÍN

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THE GO-BETWEEN

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 the trilogy *Eustace and Hilda* (also published by New York Review Books). In the spring of 1952, Hartley began *The Go-Between*, a novel strongly rooted in his childhood. By October he had already completed the first draft, and the finished product was published in early 1953. *The Go-Between* became an immediate critical and popular success and has long been considered Hartley's finest book. His many other novels include *Facial Justice*, *The Hireling*, and *The Love-Adept*.

COLM TÓIBÍN's novels include *The Story of the Night* and *The Blackwater Lightship*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1999. He is the editor of *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* and lives in Dublin.

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INTRODUCTION

L. P. HARTLEY put everything he knew, and everything he was, into *The Go-Between*, which he published in 1953 when he was fifty-eight. He managed to dramatize his own watchful and uneasy presence in the world, his abiding concern with class and caste, and his very personal mixture of alarm and fascination at the body and the body's sexual needs and urges. It allowed him to evoke a past, a time half a century earlier, a golden age, as he saw it, of Victorian morals and manners, an age of innocence in the short time before its shattering. In *The Go-Between* he found the perfect way of making sense of his own complex relationship to class and sexuality and memory, but the novel's intensity also suggests that, working in a time when he alone seemed to possess rigid feelings about these matters, he was writing to save his life.

Leslie Poles Hartley was born in 1895 at a period when his father, who was a solicitor, was beginning to make his fortune from the brick industry. His parents were Methodists and Liberals, believing in self-improvement and good health and hard work. Hartley's early years coincided with his family's move from the middle classes to the new rich, a move best symbolized by their purchase in 1900 of a miniature castle, Fletton, on the outskirts of Peterborough, in Cambridgeshire, a building that was to haunt and repel him for all of his life. In a letter to Lord David Cecil in 1971, a year before his death, he wrote: "Fletton, for some reason, is inimical to me. Whether my father was more severe than other Victorian

parents I don't know—he certainly didn't mean to be—but I always felt at Fletton that I had done something wrong—especially in the North wing.”

At his public school, Harrow, Hartley was the only boy from a family with Liberal political sympathies in his house, and his background in Wesleyan Methodism would have made his origins very clear to both his teachers and fellow students. Thus in his early teens he was handed a great gift for a novelist, something that may have made him personally unhappy but that allowed him to study the world as an outsider with a need to watch and learn and never feel comfortable. Hartley did not, however, enjoy his outsider status. By 1911 he was going for confirmation classes, and he subsequently became a member of the established church, the religion of his fellow Harrovians, the Church of England. All his life he felt this need to join the tribe, the upper class in England, with its extraordinary rules and snobberies. He put so much energy into moving himself, his whole being, from one class to another that it seemed to leave him exhausted. Thus when the English class system came under attack in the years after the First World War, Hartley was left defenseless. He never ceased to long for a Platonic England that he was sure had existed in his childhood and early youth, and his novels and stories play out the drama between his own uncertain status and his love and longing for a time of certainty, a world waiting to be broken, uncertainty made flesh.

Although he began to publish stories in his late twenties, he was mainly known as a book reviewer until the publication of his first novel, *The Shrimp and the Anemone*, in 1944, when he was almost fifty. He wrote for *The Nation*, *Saturday Review*, *The Weekend Review*, *The Observer*, and many other periodicals, and J.B. Priestley described him as “the best reviewer of fiction in the country.” Hartley often read as many as five novels a week and reckoned that in all he must have read well over six thousand books.

Over these years he made two great discoveries. He found that he loved the company of louche aristocrats and made friends with many of them. And he discovered Venice, where he spent a great deal of time between 1922 and the beginning of the Second World War. He owned a gondola and employed a gondolier; he enjoyed, as much as any outsider could, Venetian society. *Simonetta Perkins*, his first substantial piece of fiction, published in 1925, deals with a young American woman who, having turned down offers of marriage, arrives in Venice with her sickly mother. (Hartley's own mother was a great hypochondriac.) She develops an enormous interest in a handsome gondolier called Emilio and tries to engage him for her sole use. Fellow Americans tell her that when the gondoliers have "relations" with certain tourists, "you may be sure they don't do it for nothing." Nonetheless, she decides to have relations with Emilio, and as she moves in this direction, courtesy of the gondola, one of Hartley's central preoccupations comes to be dramatized. His heroine's fascination with the possibilities of sex is mixed with fear, her longing darkened by a loathing for the very idea of coupling, a loathing that is all the more disabling for its being irrational and total. As she approaches the possibility of romantic fulfillment, "A wall of darkness, thought-proof and rigid like a fire-curtain, rattled down upon her consciousness. She was cut off from herself; a kind of fizzing, a ghastly mental effervescence, started in her head."

Hartley's early heroine has other echoes of the boy Leo in *The Go-Between*. She stands alone, quite unlike those around her, self-conscious and watchful, a subject of mockery. Hartley himself had reason to be acutely aware of his own effect on those around him. When Virginia Woolf was at Garsington, the home of Lady Ottoline Morrell, in the summer of 1923 in the company of Lord David Cecil, Puffin Asquith, and Eddy Sackville-West, she noted in her diary the presence of "a dull fat man called Hartley." Thirty years later, the writer and publisher John Calmann watched him

sitting “like a delightful old pussy listening and purring contentedly. A pleasant man but so obsequious that I could not believe he really wrote [*The Go-Between*].” Sacheverell Sitwell’s wife simply called him “Bore Hartley.” He was not, it seems, the most exciting or comfortable companion. In photographs, he appears uneasy and withdrawn.

Nonetheless, he was a great host and weekend visitor, and his work suffered as he traveled and socialized. Hartley did not know how to shut himself away, and he managed to see a great deal of people whom he did not much like or who did not much like him. In one year he entertained forty-eight groups of houseguests. His homosexuality was known to most of those close to him, but he did not have a lover or companion. His mother, who lived until 1948, longed for his company and never ceased to want him to return to live in the family home. As time went by, Hartley drank more and began to dislike the filthy modern tide. He deplored jazz and motorcycles and swans (which impeded his boating activities) and the working class. He fought a great deal with his servants (and indeed with his publishers) and wrote many stories about relationships between masters and servants.

Leo, the narrator of *The Go-Between*, arrives at Brandham Hall in the hot summer of 1900 to stay with his school friend Marcus. A cautious boy being brought up frugally by his widowed mother, he enters the brave new world of the English aristocracy as Marian, the daughter of the big house, is having a love affair with Ted Burgess, a farmer at the other end of the class system. Leo, the outsider, becomes the bearer of messages between the two lovers.

The Go-Between has obvious autobiographical origins. In August 1909, for example, Hartley, who was staying with his school friend Moxey at Bradenham Hall in Norfolk, wrote to his mother, “I sleep with Moxey...and also with a dog,

which at first reposed on the bed . . . On Saturday we had a ball, very grand indeed, at least, not very. We always have late dinner here. There is going to be a cricket-match today, the Hall against the village. I am going to score." A year later, he wrote to his mother from Hastings, where he was visiting a Mrs. Wallis, who wanted him to stay an extra day "as she wants me to go to a party . . . You know I am not very fond of parties and I do want to come home on Tuesday. However, they have asked me to write to you and ask if you would mind my staying. I am enjoying myself here but I am sure we should both prefer me to be at home. Of course if you think it would be better for me to stay, write to me and say so; it is only for a day. But still, I do want to be at home again." It is also clear from letters that the young Hartley, like Leo in *The Go-Between*, was not a good swimmer, though he was, like Leo, a good singer. Also, Hartley had worked as an army postman in the Great War and knew the thrill of delivering sought-after messages.

A novel is a thousand details, and any novelist will raid the past for moments that have resonance or ring true or may be useful, or simply come to mind easily and quickly. In his book *The Novelist's Responsibility* (1967), Hartley mused on the relationship between fiction and autobiography. He wrote that the novelist's world "must, in some degree, be an extension of his own life; its fundamental problems must be his problems, its preoccupations his preoccupations—or something allied to them." He also warned that while it is "unsafe to assume that a novelist's work is autobiographical in any direct sense," it is nonetheless "plausible to assume that his work is a transcription, an anagram of his own experience, reflecting its shape and tone and tempo."

His experience when he began *The Go-Between* in Venice in May 1952 was that of a man who remained uncomfortable in his chosen milieu, who had learned a set of rules to help him belong. Nothing was taken for granted. He had studiously

avoided intimacy. Thus he would have no difficulty describing a middle-class boy's visit to a grand house, a boy with a brittle consciousness who was wearing unsuitable clothes, open to ridicule, watching everything so he could learn and not be laughed at, a boy who would be mortally wounded by a display of intimacy. Hartley was ready to explore what he described in *The Novelist's Responsibility* as "this idea or situation" that goes on in a writer "like a kind of murmur; it is what their thoughts turn to when they are by themselves."

Hartley worked on *The Go-Between* with an intensity unique in his writing life, remaining alone in a Venice that seemed to him increasingly alien, leaving behind an England that seemed like a foreign country. In June, he wrote to a friend: "I began to write a novel: this has occupied me rather obsessively—indeed, there *was* a moment when, if I had kept the pace up, I should almost have rivaled Stendhal who . . . wrote the *Chartreuse de Parme* in about six months . . . Now I have slowed down, but still done quite a big chunk." By October, the book was finished and he began to revise it.

Later, he wrote that he "didn't choose the year 1900 for its period possibilities. I wanted to evoke the feeling of that summer, the long stretch of fine weather, and also the confidence in life, the belief that all's well with the world, which everyone enjoyed or seemed to enjoy before the First World War . . . The Boer War was a local affair, and so I was able to set my little private tragedy against a general background of security and happiness." It was vital for Hartley to believe, as his world crumbled, that he had known such an England and could evoke it quickly, simply, effortlessly. Thus the relationship of weather to landscape, of servant to master, of village to big house, of England to Empire is perfectly in place. Only two things are not, and these become the novel's subject: Leo is out of place, and Hartley can describe that feeling in sensuous detail, moment by Proustian moment, down to the meals, the voices, the newcomers, the quality of the

heat, and the quality of his own discomfort. The book's power arises from the boy's rich way of noticing, his desperate attempt to become a reliable narrator, absorbing and recounting detail and episode and sweet sensation. He is especially alert to the prospect of humiliation, on the lookout for mockery or attack.

Out of place too is the secret love affair between Marian and Ted. It is clear from letters and articles that Hartley disapproved of their affair and expected the reader to do so as well. He set out, he wrote, to produce "a story of innocence betrayed, and not only betrayed but corrupted." When he gave a talk at Leicester a few months after the book's publication, he was surprised to discover that his audience had sympathy with Marian and Ted. "I wonder," he wrote to his publisher, "what the Midlands are coming to."

The Midlands, however, had drawn their inspiration directly from Hartley himself, who had softened the character of Marian and indeed that of Ted as he worked on the book and had been too interested in the aura of uncontrolled sensuality between them to bother disapproving of them. It is fascinating to watch a novelist working against the grain of his or her own belief, finding a set of compulsions in the imagination or in the most secret and hidden parts of the self that will obliterate mere opinion.

The writing is full of sensuous detail. "And the heat was a medium which made this change of outlook possible. As a liberating power with its own laws it was outside my experience. In the heat the commonest objects changed their nature. Walls, trees, the very ground one trod on, instead of being cool were warm to the touch: and the sense of touch is the most transfiguring of all the senses." Leo, like the American in Venice twenty-five years earlier in *Simonetta Perkins*, longs for liberation and transfiguration. He carries his longing with him as he carries Marian and Ted's letters: "I carried about with me something that made me dangerous,

but what it was and why it made me dangerous, I had no idea." The pull within Hartley himself between his hidden sensuous nature and his love of cold dry order is played out in the cricket match that Leo sees as "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. I knew which side I was on; yet the traitor within my gates felt the issue differently, he backed the individual against the side, even my own side . . ."

Hartley's imagination softening his own strictures was the traitor within the gates. In an essay on Henry James, he remarked that James "would never have written a novel which seemed to mitigate the sin of adultery." Hartley sought to put everything he knew, or thought he knew, about boyhood and England and class into *The Go-Between*, and add, for good measure, the sin of adultery and its corrupting effect. Slowly, however, as he worked, he seemed to argue with himself, so that the reader is left with the love between Marian and Ted as a great fierce love, worthy of a writer who admired Emily Brontë as much as Hartley did.

He understood, like Leo, the sense of treachery that can be felt by an outsider in a group, but he also began to work with something more mysterious and powerful—a treachery within the self, a treachery conjured into existence by the power of the flesh, by a seductive strength that cannot be resisted, and that stands at the root of life itself. This was a subject that would preoccupy many English novelists of Hartley's generation, including D.H. Lawrence and E.M. Forster, the idea that the senses, in all their heat and spontaneity, were the only useful weapons to withstand the demands of strict, dull, deathly English duty. Hartley the citizen was on the side of England; Hartley working on *The Go-Between* was not so sure.

Thus in Chapter 15 when Leo finds Ted in his kitchen "with a gun between his knees, so absorbed that he didn't hear me," it is clear that he is in the presence of a powerful and ir-

resistible force. Just as he had been transformed by Marian's attention, now he is ready to bask in Ted's raw sexual power. The reader cannot resist wanting Ted and Marian to prevail because Leo cannot resist either of them. He is longing for them with all the more zeal and passion because he will be destroyed and pulled under by them and will not recover. He watches Ted, "the muscles of his forearms . . . moved in ridges and hollows from a knot above the elbow, like pistons working from a cylinder" as "he pushed the wire rod up and down" while cleaning his gun. Ted makes him hold the gun. "I got a strange thrill from the contact, from feeling the butt press against my shoulder and the steel cold against my palm."

The meeting between them is sodden with sexual charge. Hartley erased a later passage in which Ted teaches Leo to swim: "I could hardly wait to get my clothes off. The impulse towards nudity which had assailed me ever since I came to Trimingham, the longing, half physical, half spiritual, to get everything off, to feel the sun on my skin, to have nothing between me and the elements, to be at one with the summer, now had the compulsion of a passion . . . The galloping approach of fulfilment drummed in my ears; I tingled with expectancy." With Ted as his teacher, Leo comes to feel the freedom of the water, "a freedom which the touch of his hand, guiding me this way and that, keeping the soft pull of gravity at bay, did nothing to diminish."

Hartley was right to cut this passage. It made too much too clear. It is, in any case, written between the lines of the book, which turns out not to be a drama about class or about England, or a lost world mourned by Hartley; instead it is a drama about Leo's deeply sensuous nature moving blindly, in a world of rich detail and beautiful sentences, toward a destruction that is impelled by his own intensity of feeling and, despite everything, his own innocence.

—COLM TÓIBÍN