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BENNETT

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PORTRAIT OF Mr ARNOLD BENNETT

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Arnold Bennett

of the Five Towns

BY L. G. JOHNSON

LONDON; THE C. W. DANIEL COMPANY
Graham House, Tudor Street, E.c.4

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
THE STANHOPE PRESS, LIMITED
STROOD, : ROCHESTER

TO MY MOTHER

PREFACE

THIS book is about craftsmanship and genius. It is written with the conviction that among Arnold Bennett's Five Towns novels are to be found not only his best literary creations but some of the most important contributions to English literature which the first quarter of our century has produced.

The Five Towns novels are worthy of a special study because they reveal the essential Bennett—the Bennett, that is, who ought to live in the minds of ourselves and who will surely live in the minds of our successors. No doubt, for our successors it will be easier to estimate Bennett than for us ; for death will overtake his lesser creations, leaving only the greater for enjoyment and appraisal. Some industrious critic of a later time may, of course, go to the British Museum and read all his novels ; after which he may write a book tracing Bennett's evolution from a provincial to a metropolitan, pointing out that the evolution was marked by no development in artistic strength or wisdom : the contrary perhaps. He may also have a chapter demonstrating that the most important incident in that evolution was the discovery by Bennett that Coventry Street, London, W.C., had a respectable and a non-respectable side, even going so far as to

say of that uninteresting fact that it was part of the mental stock in trade of all the average and sub-average novelists of the early twentieth century, and accounted for their magnificent mediocrity.

But all that is in the future !

At the moment, it seems desirable that Bennett of the Five Towns should be recovered. He is one of the great gifts of the '60's of last century to the early decades of the twentieth. To me, a humble product of the '90's, "the sixties" are famous. They produced Barrie, Wells, Galsworthy, Bennett—and how many others ! Sad indeed is it that out of one's admiration must needs come the offence of a book !

But, like so many offences, this study springs from an innocent and ardent impulse. The Bennett whom "the sixties" gave lives in the Five Towns novels, and I want to say who and what he is, and to make big claims. For there is some uncertainty in critical circles even yet. Apparently *The Old Wives' Tale* is not secure. A critic, the other day, asked why it fell just short of greatness. A most ingenious assault, I thought. But Mr. Barker Fairley's article on "The Modern Consciousness in English Literature," in Volume IX of the English Association's *Essays and Studies*, is comforting. He, at least, has no doubt about the survival of that work of art. Ordinary readers are mixing things up, also ; *The Pretty Lady* with *Hilda Lessways*, for instance. That will not do.

The real Bennett, as I have said, is in the Five Towns novels. Just as the little painting by Simon Fuge in the Wedgwood Institution "was Simon Fuge," so the Five Towns novels *are* Arnold Bennett.

Towards the recovery of his real self, Bennett has assisted by writing *Riceyman Steps*. That novel confirms the conclusions reached in this study and, in doing so, strengthens my belief that the Five Towns novels afford scope for a complete study of Bennett as an artist, although I am conscious that I have not said all there is to say on that subject by a long way.

I have written about imagination—the imagination of the artist and of the reader. I believe it to be an important subject. The novelist who is also an artist helps to cultivate those qualities of imagination which are most required by his citizen contemporaries. For their assistance in this respect novelists have not been sufficiently praised. For myself, I am convinced that Bennett's novels, when read properly, do, by exercising the imagination in particular ways, make it possible to approach contemporary political, religious and social problems with some degree of success. They help to develop the imagination of the reader in such a way that he can wrestle with actual and stubborn facts without becoming tired and without losing the consciousness of life's immensity. Nothing could be more harmful to men and women of to-day than the habit of asso-

dating imagination with the ethereal and fantastic only.

In spite of the fact that the explanations made in this book are based upon personal conjectures about creative processes in literary art, the work is intended for ordinary readers ; especially the large number of readers who, loving literature, feel that they cannot describe their affection adequately and who utter the word " art " instinctively, but to their own confusion. Although such readers may not finally agree with the present exposition, they may find that, in trying to understand my interpretations, their own ideas will become clear and articulate.

The chapters are illustrated by numerous extracts from the novels examined. Which reminds me of Lessing's artful boast in his preface to *Laokoon*. If, he wrote, his reasoning was not as convincing as Baumgarten's, his work tasted more freshly " of the well-spring." I can only hope that my illustrations will make up for other deficiencies.

For permission to use the extracts I have to thank Mr. Arnold Bennett personally as well as Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton, Messrs. Methuen and Co., Messrs. Cassell & Co., and Messrs. Chapman and Hall, Ltd.

L. G. J.

CONTENTS

				PAGE	
I	THE ARTIST	..	..	..	13
II	PROVINCIAL LIFE	..	..	..	38
III	" ANNA OF THE FIVE TOWNS "			..	62
IV	THE TRILOGY			.	71
V	" THE OLD WIVES' TALE "		..	..	92
	SUPPLEMENTARY		..	..	107
	INDEX	..	..	..	109

ARNOLD BENNETT

CHAPTER I

THE ARTIST

" There is a vigilance of observation and accuracy of distinction which books and precepts cannot confer; from this almost all original and native excellence proceeds. Shakespeare must have looked upon mankind with perspicacity, in the highest degree curious and attentive."

JOHNSON—*Preface to Shakespeare.*

WHEN readers ask one another questions like " What do you think of Tolstoy ?" or " Do you like Hardy ?" they declare the fact that they have a wide circle of acquaintances apart from people they actually know in the flesh. Their reading has introduced them not merely to a world of books but to a world of creators or artists. But not every author impresses his readers as a creator, even though his stories may be highly appreciated. On the other hand, the relations of some authors with their readers is almost of a tactile nature. The H. G. Wells of the last ten years is an example. To produce such effects of tactility an author has to be something other than an artist, probably*

For, certainly, an author does not achieve art by the strident accentuation of his own ego. Equally certain is it that there is no dogmatic principle that an author must be like Mr. Polly's ghost, " a sort of diaphalous feeling—just mellowish and warmish like " ; although that may be nearer the ideal. An author is entitled to the designation of artist when the study of himself as creator is inevitably associated with the study of what he has created. If he walks out of his books like a boxer leaving his dressing-room for the ring, he has no claim to the title : he is a separate study from his works ; debater, philosopher or evangelist he may be, but not artist. An artist inhabits his works, and the study of the one is the study of the other.

Essential to the study of an artist is the appreciation of those qualities of intellect and imagination which his novels reveal and by reason of which he has been able to create. Art is the representation of something known ; its basis is apprehension. How an artist apprehends the material which offers itself to him is a vital factor in determining the character of his art ; and his manner of apprehending depends upon the intrinsic bias or interest of his intellect. One artist may be satisfied with simple perception, having an interest in multiplicity. Another may have, as an additional and stronger interest, the tendency to group together perceived objects for the purpose of forming some general notion or some descriptive idea of them, which idea definitely controls further perception.

That is to say, the particular notion becomes predominant in the process of apprehending and gathers to itself, by selection, those particulars which serve to demonstrate its own significance.

In the realm of fiction these two types of intellect are conspicuous. The singular thing is that only the second type has had any recognition—as intellect. There are two reasons for this : first, intellect as a factor in the making of fiction has not been sufficiently recognised. Careful examination, however, of the variations in any branch of art will show that, as a determinative influence in art, intellect is decisive. Diligent readers of any author soon become aware of a particular mentality which pervades all his works. An essential component of that mentality is the novelist's intellect—not intellect as elaborated by experience, but primary intellect. Talking about Tolstoy with Maxim Gorki once, Lenin made this remark :* " There was an artist for you ! And do you know what else is marvellous in him ? It is his peasant's voice, his peasant's mentality—the real peasant is in him." Lenin meant that Tolstoy could not help looking at things like a peasant; primarily, his intellect was that of a peasant. It is this functioning of the primary intellect of the artist which matters so much in an examination of his works.

Secondly, intellectual power is more obvious in

*Nicolai Lenin—*The Man*, by Maxim Gorki, published by *The Daily Herald*.

the works of an artist whose mind quickly conceives ideas out of presented materials than in the works of an artist whose chief characteristic is interest in multiplicity. The intellect of Wells, for instance, receives more attention than that of Bennett. This is due to the fact that Wells's mind is always busy with ideas, specialised syntheses, and demonstrations of his ideas as indisputable facts. His art is one of elucidation ; by the force of ideas he reconstructs life so as to irradiate it. The intellect of Bennett, on the other hand, after choosing a sphere for concentration, seems chiefly interested in the simple apprehension of particulars. These apprehensions are marvellously retained in all their simplicity. The perceptions of Wells are used up in a continuous process of proliferating thought. In Bennett there is no such process of absorption.

These two types of intellectual activity may be described as conceptive analysis and perceptive analysis. All acquisition of detail can be regarded as analysis. Perceptive analysis is the acquisition of detail by naked seeing. In art it fulfils itself in the representation of what is perceived to be relevant to any particular aspect of life chosen for concentration. It is analysis which is concerned purely and simply with the co-ordination of integrants. Conceptive analysis, on the other hand, makes use of conceptions formed out of groups of awared particulars, a conception being a sort of interpretation of its group. These interpretations become the chief point of interest in the

mental process ; other perceptions work towards them and artistic representations bear their impress. Perceived objects are subjected to a continuous alchemic process; they are worked into ideas which, being new facts, assist in effecting further transmutations, and so on. Hence conceptive analysis produces more or less theoretical representations and obviously indicates a thinker. As the manifestation of an intellectual attitude towards the spectacle of life it is well illustrated in the following passage from Wells's novel, *The Passionate Friends* :

" How those great outlines lowered at me in the twilight, full of fresh memories and grim anticipations of baseness and violence arid bloodshed ! I sit here recalling it—feeling it all out beyond the trellised vine-clad wall that bounds my physical vision . . . Vast crowded world that I have seen ! going from point to point seeking for clues, for generalities, until at last it seems to me there emerges—something understandable . . .

" I do not know why it is that I should dare, that any of us should dream of this attempt to comprehend. But we who think are everyone impelled to this amazing effort to get it all together into some simple generality. It is not reason but a deep-seated instinct that draws our intelligence towards explanations, that sets us perpetually seeking laws, seeking statements that will fit into infinite, incessantly interweaving complexities, and be true to them all!'

The success, however, of all these elucidatory

comprehensions of the world, of all explanatory conceptions of life, depends upon adequate perception of facts. Otherwise they become mere insubstantial theories : not necessarily valueless, perhaps, but insubstantial. A passage from Bennett's *Whom God Hath Joined* illustrates this view and contains a simple explanation of perceptive analysis. Lawrence Redware has to sum up his wife, Phyllis :

" And she had had theories on education, she ! Why, she possessed no exact knowledge about anything ! She had no sense of perspective ! She could not co-ordinate facts ! Her taste was capricious and unreliable. Sometimes she talked very cleverly. But that could not justify her staggering audacity in having dared to pose about education."

Perceptive analysis is the most elementary form of apprehension. The art which it produces may be regarded as the apotheosis of rudimental intellectual activity.

The objection will doubtless be raised that to call perceptive analysis a form of intellectual activity is to invest with undue importance something which would be more appropriately styled " mere observation." But mere observation is only another name for disinterested seeing. Perceptive analysis is just the reverse ; it is a way of acquiring detail in which the dictatorship of intellect is obvious. That work of art, a novel, cannot be properly understood except as the product of an alliance between intellect and imagination. Vital to it is

what Schopenhauer calls a "very rare excess of intellect." For, if art is the representation of something known, intellectual activity must be pre-supposed; or how have the materials of the representation been acquired? Unfortunately, there is a habit of thinking that intellect is exclusively something which produces scholarship or which enables a man to be prolifically endowed with ideas—as if intellect was something abnormal! Perhaps, if natural activities were sometimes thought of in their primary aspects, many things would be clearer and the employment of words would be less embarrassing.

Bennett, the artist, is remarkable neither for scholarship nor for ideas. Yet his intellect is a very important factor in his artistic achievements. His is an intellect busy with relevant facts; not with facts, that is, which will represent a complex situation in a certain light, but with facts which can integrate the whole as it is. Such intellectual activity has for its natural achievement in art the spacious ordering of detail, no speck of significant fact being allowed to escape. This spacious ordering of detail, it is important to emphasise, means more than tabulation. In fiction, tabulation is the enumeration of facts which are artistically irrelevant to the progress of the story. Very often it means putting truth to the uses of untruth. Shakespeare* illustrates its effects charmingly in *Twelfth Night*. Told by Viola that she ought to leave the world a "copy" of her beauty, Olivia

replies : "I will give out divers schedules of my beauty : it shall be inventoried, and every particle and utensil labelled to my will:—as, item, two lips indifferent red ; item, two grey eyes with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth." But no such inventory of truthful details could describe Olivia's loveliness ! Tabulation is the outcome of mere observation. And it would not be accurate to say that Bennett's novels are entirely free from it. But the proportionate disposition of materials which, more than anything else, reveals the nature of his intellect, is something entirely different, as will appear in later chapters.

His intellect, however, is not only remarkable for an excessive interest in facts as facts. What is of additional importance is that to this intellect no facts are specially repugnant and no facts are specially welcome. Its apprehensions are flagrantly unemotional : the only thing that can be described as emotion in its operations is the enthusiastic thoroughness of its seeing.

This has an important bearing upon Bennett's novels. Many people are disposed to detect in Bennett's unemotional apprehensions a rationalistic temper. Mainly, it would seem, because Bennett sometimes, in his novels, describes religious scenes. Some go as far as to confuse these descriptions with his faith as a member of the Rationalist Press Association—a colossal error ! Bennett has not described revivalistic meetings in Methodist chapels in

the way he has because he loathes them ; there is no temper in his descriptions. Nor is there so much irony as some people imagine. His descriptions reflect the unemotional character of his apprehensions. True, those apprehensions may be imperfect. Those who have what might be called the appropriate emotion for understanding a revivalistic service may read Bennett's descriptions and feel them to be repugnant. For Bennett, the artist, docs not possess that appropriate emotion ; and the repugnance felt by some readers is no doubt caused by its absence from his descriptions. The cause of the repugnance, that is to say, is not the actual representation itself but a feeling that, as a representation, it laeks something. The representation itself is perfectly ingenuous. Nor is it an argument to say that Bennett smiled at his pen when writing with such unfeeling exactness. In *Whom God Hath Joined'* may be found a corroboration of this exposition :

" Close by (the new and beautiful board school) is a cramped and tiny building of aged brown brick, with no asphalt yard and no system of ventilation and no wide windows and no blossoms : a deplorable erection, surely ! Carved over its modern stone portal, in old-fashioned lettering, is the legend, 'Sunday School, 1806.' Oh, wistful, unhealthy little temple of a shaken creed, fruit of heaven knows what tremendoiis effort up there in that village, the terra-cotta board school is not greater than thou, and it shall not be more honoured !"

* Chapter I.

It is entirely unhelpful to say that is irony. True, it can be called an emotional outburst. But there is no intrinsic emotional bias in the apprehension ; there has been no elimination nor addition of fact on the part of Bennett's intellect. Boldly and impartially, the little temple is declared to be "unhealthy" but "wistful." It is personal! As all apprehensions are personal. To remark that Bennett reveals his knowledge of Darwinism and the Higher Criticism, and their effects upon the Christian faith, is only to say that he is, like any other person, a system of gradually acquired knowledge. The extraordinary thing—and the above quotation should be read again in this light—is the ingenuousness of his intellectual activity within its personal context. That irony is to be found in his novels is true, but it cannot be called a purely atheistical irony. It is useful to recall certain characteristics of Mr. Brindley in *The Death of Simon Fuge** (a very important story for the understanding of the novels)—"irony," "violent humour" and "just and unprejudiced perceptions." They make a combination worth studying.

This examination of Bennett's intellect does not contradict a confession he makes, in the preface to *The Old Wives' Tale*, that he dislikes research work. Bennett's intellect is naturally alive to facts, that is the point. His confession means that he dislikes a certain form of strenuous intellectual activity. His is a busy intellect and functions

* See *The Grim Smile of Me Five Towns*.

Uniquely, but it is not a toiling intellect. In him there are no signs of intellectual strain, nor is ferment apparent. It is a coldly seeing intellect, giving its possessor a marvellous apprehension of things.

Intellect, however, does not make the complete artist. For its creation art requires the effective co-operation with intellect of imagination.

The imagination of Bennett, like his intellect, *does not declare itself loudly. It does not appear in his works as colour, and to most ordinary readers the test of imagination in a novel is colour—picturesque sentences. The application of this test is due to a very unsatisfactory interpretation of imagination. Imagination is something more than a daub, nor does it appear only in a novel where language manifests some strange excitation in the author's brain. A more useful view of imagination, as a factor in art, is the elementary description of it as the power of presenting to oneself the materials supplied by the industry of the intellect. In the artist it is the power which gives meaning and form to portions of his knowledge and thereby creates a demand for expression. "Nothing," Mr. Douglas Fawcett quotes Ravaisson as saying,* "is distinctly intelligible to us, save what we can picture in imagination." That is true, so long as imagination is not thought of as a mirror only; its co-operation with the artist's intellect as a positive agent must be recognised. Mr. Fawcett's

* *The World as Imagination*, p. 184.

own explanation is useful : " Imagination is the plastic psychical stuff in which all human activities have their being."* The activities of the imagination and the intellect are contiguous and interdependent. Imagination is super-intelligence—an extraordinary power of re-apprehension,

" in truth,
Is but another name for absolute power,
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And Reason in her most exalted mood."f

Through imagination, knowledge acquired by ordinary intellectual activity is raised to knowledge demanding artistic expression : materials supplied even by casual awareness are infused with vibrating life ; bits of detail which would otherwise have become dead cargo become living concretions. Of such animated bodies of fact is the universe of a work of art constituted. They are the powerful electrons of which the whole is composed. A work of art, therefore, can be described as an organism which grows out of smaller organisms, each of which, as well as the whole, is born in imagination.

Hence, in literature, it is necessary to take a practical view^f of imagination, and not to regard it as a sort of irresponsible colouring or verbal effusiveness.

For the examination of Bennett's novels this view is essential. They do not contain much

* *ibid.*, p. 135.
Wordsworth, *Prelude*, bk. XIV.

evidence of paint-brush imagination. The strength of his imagination must be sought in the life which animates the innumerable particles of fact out of which his total creations are formed. Those creations are not mere accumulations of ordinary observations ; they are not conglomerate masses of dead matter disturbed here and there by quickening germs of excitement. The outstanding quality of his best novels is the communication of the intrinsic nature of every particle of fact he uses in the creation of the whole. This is the supreme testimony to the power of his imagination. For, to make communicable the intrinsic qualities of what is intellectually acquired in the ordinary course of living is imagination's highest achievement. The value of all artistic representations depends upon that.

This explanation, it will be said, confuses imagination with literary ability : the power of imagination is one thing and the power of the pen another. The criticism is too feeble. In fiction, the power of the pen cannot be thought of apart from the power of imagination. Actual writing out only plays a part in communication when the imagination has possessed the knowledge of the artist in such a way that it is made communicable. When imagination has done its work, communication is urgent; the work is formed ; it exists : the straining birth-process into prose follows. The pen is midwife. Concern as to her efficiency is, of course, necessary on the part of the artist. He

may have a mistaken confidence. If so, a calamitous hiatus is inevitable. But, strictly speaking, there is no such a thing as a separation of powers in the complete artist. Intellect, imagination and skill in using words are a trinity, one and undivided.

This seems to be a point of especial importance for these days. Too much emphasis is apt to be laid upon the actual writing of the novel. Recommendations to literary aspirants not infrequently imply that mastery of technique (including mastery of language) is not only indispensable to literary success but that, given it, the rest follows. Such a view is mistaken, and can only lead to a cheapening of fiction as an art. For what is technique? It is appropriate expression in language of what is already, in the artist's brain, an artistic reality. Effective presentation in language is only possible because, already, in the experience of the author, the story has taken shape. Form is native to the imagination. Writing a novel is not the compression of imagined material into fixed forms of technical construction. Rather, imagination must be looked upon as the master of form. The shaping of materials into artistic form is inseparable from that co-operation of the imagination with the intellect which confers intelligibility upon a series of apprehensions.

In this process the imagination uses words, colours, shapes and all kinds of images. The task of transmitting the imagined plan is made difficult

because it has to be done only in words. Words alone, when the work is finished, must evoke the weird context of the imagination appropriately. The final stage, therefore, in the completion of a work of fiction is the employment, for the purpose of transmission, of a purely artificial (substituted) medium. This explanation, without diminishing the importance of the writing-down stage of a story, does serve to emphasise the supreme importance of imagination in the creation of a story. Imagination initiates, feeds, develops and imposes design ; its activities are the most comprehensive of any in the creation of a work of art—so comprehensive that only for convenience can the work of the intellect or of the pen be thought of as distinct from it. In the beginning was the imagination and the imagination was with intellect and the imagination was intellect. All things were made by it and without it was not anything made that was made. And the imagination was made verbal. The words of the New Testament writer* contemplating the mystery of creation can be usefully adapted when contemplating that other mystery—a genuine novel.

When judging the quality of an author's imagination, therefore, it is not sufficient to pay regard merely to the face-value of words. The absence of painted sentences does not indicate a weak imagination. Severely plain language, so long as it is the verbal incarnation of living material, is a demon-

* See Prologue to the Fourth Gospel.

stration of imaginative activity. A sentence from Cardinal Newman quoted by Pater, at the end of one of his "Essays from the Guardian"*, is worth taking to heart: "I wish you to observe that the mere dealer in w^rords cares little or nothing for the subject which he is embellishing, but can paint and gild anything whatever to order; whereas the artist, whom I am acknowledging, has his great or rich visions before him, and his only aim is to bring out what he thinks or what he feels in a way adequate to the thing spoken of, and appropriate to the speaker."

The trouble is that so many readers are influenced solely by the appearance of words; of susceptibility to words in any real sense they show no sign. Yet words are the agents through which the imagination of the reader and of the artist meet. "Words," says Mr. Bertrand Russell, in *The Analysis of Mind*,^f referring to their use in fiction, "may be used to describe or create imagination—images." In literature, by the creation of imagination—images, they enable the reader to reconstruct the imaginative experience of the artist.

Unfortunately, the habit persists of expecting everything from the artist without any counter-effort on the part of the reader himself. Yet this effort of the reader's constitutes the true joy of reading; or should do.

Reading is the stimulation of the reader's

* *English Literature.*

^f Page 202.

imagination to joyous activity; it is a fellowship of imaginations. Forgetting that imaginative activity on their part is a necessary complement to the artist's achievement, readers have become lazy about words. But the artist finds the employment of them hard work—simply because he realises that each word is something upon which other brains and imaginations will concentrate.

This weak responsiveness to words may be due to the fact that readers are becoming used to a kind of standardised colour and atmosphere of words in fiction. That is to be regretted ; for the tendency towards a settled taste in prose can only result in a very limited power of appreciation. Words may be expressive in two ways : their sensuous appeal may be so powerful that they seem to contain the things they describe, or they may only mention things. This second use is as artistic as the first. Nor can it be described as journalistic. In fiction, words must represent something valuable—valuable in itself and to the whole work. That is not an essential function of words in ordinary journalism. Words, in art, are the artificial bodies of those smaller organisms which were described above as the living constituents of the whole. Sometimes words and what they represent seem to be identical; in other cases what they represent is more deliberately seized, the things represented seem to be separate from the words and imagination—images are formed less spontaneously. This deliberate exercise of the imagination is a legitimate

demand of the artist's in so far as the words are tokens of significant matter.

It may, of course, be easier to read those stories which live in the colour and atmosphere of words. The tangibility of the story, in that case, is grasped in the words themselves, for they embody the things described. Hardy's description of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* is an example. Impressions pass into the mind spontaneously during the process of reading ; there is no labour in retaining a sequence of facts ; the words themselves produce sensations of colour and shape which mingle into meaning. That description manifests an imaginative context dominated by colour—a context of wondrously pigmented thought. The whole description rests upon what may be called a philosophical conception of the universe. " It was a spot which returned upon the memory of those who loved it with an aspect of peculiar and kindly congruity." Read in its wider verbal setting, the word " congruity " is seen to be the key to the artist's imaginative experience ; it represents the dominance of a notion. Had this conception been absent, a plainer image would no doubt have been created, to which a plainer description of the Heath would have attached itself. For plainer contexts required a more strictly symbolic use of words ; they produce descriptions remarkable for an approximately scientific use of language.

In Bennett, the plainer use of words dominates. The result is a severer test, probably, for the

imagination of the reader. Each of the facts mentioned by the words has to be imaginatively apprehended by the reader. He is kept busy with the deliberate retention and correlation of tangible facts. For these facts, as they exist in the world of space, constitute the tangibility of the story. Sometimes it seems as though Bennett was indulging in scientific enumeration. Accompanying him to the top of Toft End, and pausing to view the "one wondrous organism" which is the Five Towns, it is necessary for him to draw attention to the cells of that organism: "Railway stations, institutes, temples, colleges, grave-yards, parks, baths, workshops, theatres, concerts, caf[^]s, pawnshops, emporiums, private bars, unmentioned haunts, courts of justice, banks, clubs, libraries, thrift societies, auction-rooms, telephone exchanges, post offices, marriage registries, municipal buildings."* In such a manner does Bennett look on the spectacle of the world, and his novels are the exact counterparts of his seeing. They, too, are "wondrous organisms" composed of brick and steel images! For the artistic effectiveness of such a detailed enumeration lies in the fact that each item is an imaginative experience to the artist and is, therefore, vital to the story. Recognising this, the reader of Bennett's novels moves in the realm of concrete facts, amazed at the powerful imagination which has mastered such material and rendered the whole mass of detail significant.

**Whom God Hath Joined*, Chap. I.

These remarks must not be taken to mean that Bennett's use of language does not differ. He can employ words so that they do not only mention but embody objects, in the sense described above. *Clayhangcr* offers an illustration :

" Although they were all endeavouring to make a noise, they made scarcely any noise, from mere lack of strength. Nothing could be heard, under the implacable bright sky, but faint ghosts of sound, as though people were sighing and crying from within the vacuum of a huge glass bell."*

For the reader, a hungry crowd is in those two sentences. The understanding of that scene in Turnhill market-place spreads through the head like a sensation of noise or colour ; it is felt as an excitement from temple to temple. Even so, it is characteristic of Bennett. There is no strain. Some critics would call it an example of Bennett's economical style. But that is an unfortunate phrase ; it almost implies that Bennett employs fewer words than he ought. The truth is that Bennett is not given to extravagance in language. It is not that he docs not use the maximum number of words nor that he is content with a minimum ; he uses the right number : his use of words, that is, accords with the nature of his apprehensions.

Another misunderstanding which can be more decisively dealt with here is that Bennett uses words like a mere observer and has no eye for the inwardness of things ; that he is obsessed with externali-

*Chap. IV.

ties. Only superficial readers would lay this to his charge. An excellent refutation, if one is necessary, is to be found in *Clayhanger*, in the chapter entitled "Machinery." After detailing the features of a machine "full of natty little devices," the artist continues thus: "Everything contributed to the impression of immense ponderosity exceeding the imagination. The fancy of being pinned down by even the lightest of these constructions was excruciating. You moved about in narrow alleys among upstanding, unyielding metallic enormities, and you felt fragile and perilously soft."

The penultimate sentence of that description is a fine apprehension of the inner fact of that multitude of facts, the machine. Both intellect and imagination are powerfully present in this representation. The whole description is made, by that one sentence, artistically effective as a representation of environment ... "You felt fragile and perilously soft."

The object of this exposition of language as an artistic medium is to do justice to the factor of imagination in Bennett's works. It has been shown that the face-value of words cannot indicate adequately the quality of an author's imagination. There may be a complete absence of gaudiness, and yet the, total representation may be overwhelming in its livingness. And, after all, that is the test—the whole living organism of the story, the complete representation, as judged by the

reader's experience. For Bennett it is the great test. As has been said, his imagination does not parade itself; but his total representations are so wonderfully lifelike that abounding imaginative effort must have produced them. Behind the plain phrasing is tremendous toil—not of intellect but of imagination, which, in Bennett, is greater than intellect. It—his imagination—labours masterfully; it lifts his everyday awareness almost into omniscient seeing and quickens it into a massive experience which clamours for expression.

The reader does not discover that experience by dashes of colour here and there—"imaginative prose," the phrase sometimes runs—but by his own experience of the whole artistic communication. For the reading of a novel is an experience, and that experience is the basis of judgment. Nor is it safe to begin a book by demanding that it shall provide experiences of a particular kind. That is a habit which is growing. Many stock phrases now in use are eloquent of how people judge and of the kind of experiences they like to judge. "Ripping," "Tophole," "That was jolly," "Pretty rotten," and so on are examples. Short verdicts on short experiences! Everyday judgments are, unfortunately, for the most part flippant, and reveal a reluctance for profundity either of judgment or of experience. The same tendency shows itself in the reading of large numbers of people: they have a craze for books which are full of quick incident,

strong but ephemeral action ; books, in the reading of which it is possible to cry out " Ripping !" frequently.

Great fiction, when read properly, is a corrective to this. It cannot grimace for popularity; the story is first of all a profound imaginative experience to the author and, in the form of a book, it cannot be any other than the incorporation of and communication of a great experience. The best works of men like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Hardy and Bennett cannot be explained in any other way. A novel is not a few hundred pages of print. It cannot be defined as something between two clothbound covers, as Mr. Percy Lubbock has pointed out.* The novel is an experience outside the printed pages but which, through them, is discoverable by another experience. For this discovery snatches of language, however fine, however rollicking, however tearful, will not serve. The book is a complete experience, and as such the reader must regard it. Within the total experience, of course, there may be a multitude of other experiences, glorious ones. The unfortunate thing is that great novels are so frequently judged on these alone—the number of shocks or tearful moments they produce, for instance, or the sensations created by paragraphs wherein lurks the gospel of Socialism or of some other political creed. Reading of this sort is having disastrous effects

* *The Craft of Fiction.*

upon the art of fiction. Some novelists pander to it. To call their works novels is itself a fiction.

What the reader who wishes to judge a novel well should teach himself is that he must be loyal to the task of making the artist's experience his own. In a good novel this will not be difficult, although re-reading may be necessary. There may be paragraphs of what, on a first reading, may seem to be lifeless sentences, but which, subsequently, the reader may rejoice in because he has felt like the author and is one with him. Many must be the readers who can corroborate this statement!

At this stage of imaginative accord with the author, the reader should judge, using, for that purpose, his own intellect; for reading requires imagination and intellect, even as artistic creation does. The use of both makes reading more inspiring, diminishes the likelihood of boredom and makes hasty judgments impossible.

Reading is a profound occupation, and in an age characteristically superficial there is no need to apologise for the statement, but to insist upon it.

Bennett's classification of his literary output offers some support for this view. That the novels are classified apart from the "ripping" fantasias indicates that, for the artist, the former were profounder creations and are, therefore, profounder employment for readers. The artist has a right to expect the reader to approach such works seriously. What is called "skipping" may be

fatal to both reader and artist. Those who extol that method of reading do not know what they recommend. They forget that there are varieties of speed and of apprehension among readers. Both depend a great deal upon experience. Experienced eyesight and trained apprehension may permit one reader to read at a rate which another reader would call "skipping." For the rapid reader to laugh at his slower fellow and say, "Well, I get all out of the book that's in it! Try my way. Skip!" is nonsense. Readers must read in their own way and be loyal to their task.

This is not a mere digression. The art of reading is fundamentally associated with the art of fiction. An intelligent reader must know that a good novel is a work of art and that the writer of such a novel is an artist. Knowing that, the reader himself becomes an artist in the act of reading.

It is to readers who desire to be artists when they are reading that these brief chapters are offered* For, such readers can be relied upon to do justice to those qualities of intellect and imagination which have been declared to be the source of Bennett's power as a novelist.

CHAPTER II

PROVINCIAL LIFE

"Art . . . gains freedom when she has no more
to blush for her affinity with actual life/"
WAGNER—*The Art Work of the Future.*

HARDY, in his novels, has confined himself to a locality and given us the universe. Bennett has similarly restricted himself and given us England. "I think the Five Towns are much more English than London," says Manna Host, in *These Twain*. And the Five Towns novels confirm the accuracy of her conviction. But while the two writers have given a wider range of application to their respective localities, they have done so in different ways. Hardy received numerous impressions from his surroundings that the universe declared itself in village and town events of which the outside world never heard. The essential characteristics of the universe seemed to be reflected in the dramas of country men and maidens. His novels are translations of these "impressions"; they are "reenactments."* What is more, the novels are translations of matured impressions. As it seemed to Hardy,

* See the prefaces to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*.

the "well-known catastrophe" of Tess Durbeyfield's lost maidenhood reflected the discordancy of the whole world of men and gods. But in the novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, that impression is not so naively translated as Hardy, according to his preface, would have his readers think. The story of Tess is not merely a translated impression, that is ; it is also a demonstration of a ripened view of the world.

Bennett's stories are not designed as demonstrations. As an artist, he works with the materials of simple apprehension without permitting ideas of the world to exercise control. Hence, his stories are, to quote the prefatory poem to *Anna of the Five Towns*, histories "homely and rude." At the same time, big, transcending thoughts, which seem to over-step the boundaries of his locality, are to be found in them. A thought like this, for instance, taken from the novel just mentioned :

" Nothing could be more prosaic than the huddled, red-brown streets ; nothing more seemingly remote from romance. Yet be it said that romance is even here—the romance which, for those who have an eye to perceive it, ever dwells amid the seats of industrial manufacture, softening the coarseness, transfiguring the squalor, of these mighty alchemic operations. Look down into the valley from this terrace-height where love is kindling, embrace the whole smoke-girt amphitheatre in a glance, and it may be that you will suddenly comprehend the secret and superb significance of the vast Doing which goes forward below,"

But that thought did not dominate Bennett's imagination in the process of creation. His novels are not "impressions" directly confirming the truth of that observation. It is the same with his conception of the Potteries as "the most English piece of England that I ever came across." The Five Towns do not reflect England in the same manner as Hardy's Wessex reflects the universe. As far as the evidence of the novels goes, Bennett himself might have discovered the Englishness of the Potteries in the same way as his readers: through his own delineations. In his novels, the Five Towns remain exclusively provincial. Wessex, in Hardy's works, broadens out into a universe—"Hardy's universe," as it has been called. Bennett, the artist, has no universe.

This statement is made in spite of a certain resemblance between Hardy and Bennett—a resemblance to which Mr. F. J. Harvey Darton has drawn attention*. This resemblance, however, is chiefly interesting because an examination of it reveals the dissimilarities of the two artists. Like Hardy, Bennett introduces into his locality an invisible Force. His little provincial district is not out of touch with the universe, that is. Graveyards, banks, workshops and so on are "the natural, beautiful, inevitable manifestations of the indestructible Force that is within" men. Philosophical speculation, in fact, seems to have been one of Bennett's most persistent temptations. In

* *Arnold Bennett* (Niibet).

Whom God Hath Joined, from which the above quotation is made, he nearly succumbed to the temptation. He began the story, so he says, interested in the multitude of ordinary things as manifestations of an immanent and "indestructible Force." "In such a spirit I commence . . . But in what spirit I shall make an end of the history I cannot say." Entering upon his narration, he characteristically draws his readers a little closer to the ordinary elements of an ordinary spectacle, and then leaves them—like Pennington when he had served his citations. The spirit of the philosopher vanishes; there is no predominant body of interpretation in the work; it is just "the history of certain human beings." Bennett's novels are not distinguished for philosophical colouring. Probably that is why some people do not appreciate them, and attempt to minimise their importance.

Indeed, there would seem to be some confusion of thought with regard to what constitutes greatness in a novel. No novel, of course, can be great unless it has a universal accent. A work of fiction must have affinity with life as universally experienced; in the heart-beats of one individual, however meagre he may be compared with millions of others, must be felt the throbbings of the universe, if he is the subject of art. This quality of universality emancipates a novel from the narrow limits of its human and geographical elements. How is this emancipation achieved? What imparts universality to a work of fiction?

Some readers would say that the secret is to be found in grandly-phrased thoughts theologically of an orthodox or heterodox character. It is remarkable how, in fiction, philosophising has an inevitable tendency towards theology. There is an interesting book, published in 1806, by a Wesleyan minister, T. G. Selby, on *Theology in Modern Fiction*. The writer speaks of "a theology in solution which is diffused through all the higher literature of fiction." He describes George Eliot as "a spoiled theologian," admires the theology of Nathaniel Hawthorne and refers to Thomas Hardy as "an ethical and theological contrast" to both of them. And, undoubtedly, this "theology in solution" is responsible for the impressiveness of a novel as far as many readers are concerned. It must be admitted that the orthodoxy of Dickens and the heterodoxy of Hardy are potent factors in their stories. Sooner or later the artist's analysis of life is bound to bring him face to face with the subject of the world's governance. This is not to say that, in probing deeply into life, the artist must necessarily discover a fact "God," but that, in representing life, he will inevitably discover a man or a woman to whom "God" is either an accepted or a rejected fact. At this point of contact with man as an inhabitant of a universe which permits many and various hypotheses about its structure and control, the novelist is able to impress the reader with his insight into life. The deeper his researches go, the more will he be

tempted to trespass into the domains of theology and philosophy. So inevitable is this, that the above writer ended his book with the declaration that " in the long run the fiction which survives the test of years because it is true to all that is best and deepest in human nature, will be found to contain some of the elements of a sound, trustworthy, and permanent theology."

That is the view of an orthodox theologian and a sectary. Still, many readers will agree with it. Others will wildly denounce it. But even they, if they will be candid with themselves, will probably be forced to admit that it is the prospect of fiction incorporating an orthodox theology which fills them with dread. Let the theology of fiction be heterodox and anti-sectarian and all is well. Both kinds of readers, then, do admit that the theological bias of a novel has much to do with the impression it creates. But are they justified in saying that this bias, this orthodox or heterodox content, is the source of the novel's universality ? They are not. Theology and philosophy are not fundamental issues in a novel at all. A novel attains universality when the artist is imbued with a sense of the wonder and the everlasting interestingness of life. That sense of wonder reveals itself in the novel as sincerity. Sincerity is reverence and dignity.. It is the word which best describes an artist's majesty of deportment in his work. Sincerity is fundamental : it is the true source of universality in art. The story which treats life as

Life cannot help being universal in its appeal. Theology and philosophy are not fundamental: they are channels through which some writers express their sincerity, that is all. Lionel Johnson knew this when he wrote his book, *The Art of Thomas Hardy*. That is why, although he disagreed with Hardy's views on man and the universe, he was able to write that wonderful chapter on "Sincerity in Art"

Universality, therefore, characterizes the works of those artists who are able to communicate a real and extensive interest in Life even when they are only dealing with particular phases of it. Thus, Hardy has that interest; and that is why, in his novels, Wessex seems to lose its geographical boundaries. Wells has it, and that is why he produces fictional disputations in which the world is both assaulted and healed. Conrad has it, and that is why, in his works, the spirit of man is felt to be potentially mightier than ocean tempests, mightier than Fate. Bennett has it. He is conscious that life is universally like life lived in the Five Towns. Consequently, that tiny spot of England registers the pulse of the world's heart. Recall the passage in *Clayhanger* which describes Edwin's feelings when he was walking home from school for the last time.

" In that head of his a flame burnt that was like an altar-fire, a miraculous and beautiful phenomenon than which nothing is more miraculous nor more

beautiful over the whole earth . . . Some knew that it was 'Clay hanger's lad,' a nice-behaved young gentleman, and the spitten image of his poor mother . . . But they could not see the mysterious and holy flame of the desire for self-perfection blazing within that tousled head. And if Edwin had suspected that anybody could indeed perceive it, he would have whipped it out for shame, though the repudiation had meant everlasting death. Such is youth in the Five Towns, if not elsewhere."

There is a splendid abandon about those last three words—the abandon of an artist who flings himself from a subject supremely conscious that he has revealed—Life! Bennett knows that he is dealing with something "miraculous" when he is dealing with men and women of the Five Towns. There is no need to deplore the lack of a theology or a philosophy in his novels, nor to exaggerate his allusions to an "Indestructible Force," "Chance," and "the vast Doing," as though, if a case could be made out that Bennett the artist is a heterodox theologian, it could be more easily affirmed of his novels that they are universal and great. The essential thing is that Bennett knows life to be wonderful, vast, mysterious, provocative, interesting—and treats it with corresponding dignity. Universality is conferred upon his art not by transcendent thoughts but by his knowledge of the dimensions of life.

Taking this broader view of what is essential to greatness in a novel, it is possible to appreciate elements in Bennett's works which are often dis-

regarded. It is, for instance, objected that his novels are too much taken up with purely material things and that spirituality is absent; he does not, that is, present the true ratio between things spiritual and things material. Without denying that this criticism possesses truth, it may be well to ask how that ratio is to be fixed. Most people, it would seem, fix it according to their private assumptions about the spiritual basis of life. Indeed, the most esteemed novelists and thinkers are those who make the bravest assumptions. Dickens is an illustration. They may deserve their praise ; that is not an issue here. But it does require to be emphasised that to perceive the spiritual elements in works where such assumptions are not prominent is a necessary task and one which can prove valuable. It may be that those works will present a picture in which grossness abounds while grace still less abounds ; but no one has a right to be offended by such a spectacle. There is as much justification for such offence as for the anger of a Christian against God for having made Himself insignificant by the creation of so many hard substances. If the ratio between the material and the spiritual is to be discovered, an inductive study of life is essential. But, because so many people resent the conclusions of induction, novels like Bennett writes are misunderstood. They are condemned as half-truths.

But is this a justifiable description ? Are *Clayhanger* and *The Old Wives' Tale* half-truths ? The

question is important, for that a novelist should get somewhere near to "essential truth" is one of Bennett's beliefs.*

The answer is to be found by recognising that "essential truth" may be discovered in two ways. People often have their strongest convictions that they have found the real truth about life when they have met it in its most incoherent and mysterious shape. Many young adolescents meet life like that in the novels of Dickens, and for the rest of their lives revere those novels for their "essential truth," even though, when re-reading them in later life, they are mostly impressed by what the novels tell them about conditions in England during the early part of the nineteenth century. Life in Dickens may be likened unto a boundless sea of great swelling waves, the prospect of sailing upon which fascinates, or to a land of weird horizons which beckon to illimitable realms. The gross materialism of life, which causes so many shipwrecks and which robs multitudes of all sense of the illimitableness and fascinating mystery of life, melts in the heat of the novelist's spiritual faith.

But truth may be discovered in representations whose aim is only correspondence with actuality. Such representations offer materials for an inductive study of life; they do not bring before the soul a phantojn, but reveal the concrete body of life as it lies beneath the firmament of heaven.

* See his contribution to Symposium, "What is a good novel?" in *The Highway* Summer, 1924.

Happiness, for instance, is not revealed as a glorious abstraction inviting poetic outbursts, but, in the actual experience of some man or woman, it is shown to have size, shape, weight, relation and duration. The result is that instead of the reader being overwhelmed with sudden ecstasy, he is charmed only on reflection. He has discovered a rootlet of truth in a little solitary life, in an odd human experience or so.

Now, it is in this respect that novels like Bennett's are important. And here it is impossible to withhold a reference to *Riceyman Steps*, in spite of the fact that it is not a Five Towns novel. For in *Riceyman Steps* is one of the best illustrations possible of the point under consideration. It is in the chapter called "Early Morning." Elsie, a servant, had begun her early morning duties. Opening a window to shake her duster, she was captured by the beauty of the October morning—for ten seconds. Conscience suddenly reminding her that gaping at beauty meant wasting time, she shut the window, prepared breakfast for her master and mistress and then began to wash clothes. "As she bent over the linen in the tub, she hummed * God save the King ' to herself."

There she is left, and the reader is taken into the bedroom of her master and mistress. Mrs. Earlforward kisses her husband and tells him that she hopes he will eat a good breakfast, for the day will be a busy one, Mr. Earlforward informs her that

the trousers he wanted to wear that day were torn. The good wife consents to mend them in bed.

" * You're a fine seamstress,' observed Mr. Earl-forward, with affectionate enthusiasm, ' and I like to see you at it." Violet laughed, pleased and flattered. Simple souls," adds Bennett, " somehow living very near the roots of happiness—though precariously !"

There is great beauty in that chapter. The last sentence applies to master, mistress and maid. The whole chapter is a moving commentary upon happiness in human life, its place, nature and duration. What inspiration there is in the thought of that alluring abstraction, happiness, being rooted in Elsie's ten seconds at the window, duster in hand ! Here, surely, is essential truth ! Here, surely, is spiritual content !

This is only one illustration, but it is sufficient to show that there is no justification for labelling Bennett's novels as half-truths. They yield discoveries about the place of the material and the spiritual in life which are of the greatest possible value. They do not contain all the truth ; no novel can. One novel will emphasise the stomach of man more than the soul; another will emphasise the soul more than the stomach. " Essential truth," however, may be discovered in both. And it should be remembered, as Schopenhauer remarks, that their incompleteness " requires completion, not refutation."

After these considerations it may be possible to

examine with more interest some of the features of Five Towns life.

The descriptions of the Five Towns environment are well known. The one contained in the chapter of *Clayhanger* quoted above will serve admirably for the purposes of exposition. It is a typical perceptive apprehension. "The flame" which burnt in Edwin's head had three things for its setting: the architecture of the streets, Edwin himself and people other than himself. The description represents environment as it is seen by the naked eyes. Very different is Wells's treatment of environment. He conceives environment to be a living antagonist. The environment of Arthur Kipps is described as "matter arid darkness," "the anti-soul." The reader feels that Kipps is fighting something which has thousands of insanely beating arms—"the ruling power of this land, Stupidity." Hardy's Egdon Heath is conceived as active in a similar way. Bennett, however, seldom goes beyond perceptive description; his is a brick and mortar environment, rather like a wall. This, it may be argued, points out a weakness. A more vivid appreciation of the interaction between individuals and their environment might have produced more variety of characterization and have made the novels more profoundly significant as interpretations of human problems. .

The suggestion has point. On the other hand, the Five Towns may be unique in that they create for their inhabitants a peculiarly stiff and solid

environment, an environment which makes conformity to it habitual. Now, according to Bennett's representations, this seems to be the case. The majority of his characters are chosen from among people who conform to environment. Take the example of Anna Tellwright :

" Her grave face... seemed a face for the cloister, austere in contour, fervent in expression, the severity of it mollified by that resigned and spiritual melancholy peculiar to women who through the error of destiny have been born into a wrong environment."

She was a conformist. Moreover, the singular thing is that the rebels, the characters for whom the environment is impossible, escape from it! Sophia Baines, of *The Old Wives' Tale*, is an illustration. It may not be irrelevant to add that Bennett himself escaped !

The treatment of environment in the Five Towns novels, therefore, should not be regarded as defective. That environment is of such a stubborn nature that conformists are its natural and most conspicuous offspring. Certainly, there are other novels of the Five Towns which might be written, novels dealing with the battles between individuals and the environment otherwise apprehended, and in which the Five Towns should not have the best of it. Bennett does record the invasion of new thought and methods, it is true ; but he does not represent the tragic contests it creates for indi-

viduals, like Hardy has done in the character of Clym Yeobright.

The fact is that Bennett the artist is not intellectually inclined towards such apprehensions. Artistically, every author has his limitations, whatever he may be able to do as an ordinary man of the world. Such limitations are neither defects nor weaknesses and are to be noted, not judged. Bennett's limitation is one of intellect. Themes like Hardy's *Return of the Native* are not such as would naturally attract him, for they would launch him into something akin to philosophical interpretation, and that is not his bent as an artist, in spite of the intrusions referred to above.

Mainly, then, Bennett is concerned with the typical human products of such an environment as he describes. Their characteristics stand out with wonderful clearness. Five Towns men and women exist for ever as that variety of human facts designated provincials. They are facts.

In *These Twain*, Bennett uses the word "provincial" frequently. Through Hilda Clayhanger, the Five Towns are seen "as something definitely provincial." Hilda went to London "not like a staring and intimidated provincial, but with the confidence of an initiate returning to the scene of initiation. And once she was there, all her old condescensions towards the dirty and primitive ingenuous Five Towns had very quickly revived." This separation from London, what a wonderful and absurd fact it is ! It is more than a geographical

fact: " The sagacious and successful provincial in Edwin was darkly jealous of London as a rival superficial arid brilliant." Who can define these non-metropolitan entities ? Provincial life is both a national curiosity and a mystery. (And, of course, the same might be said of London life !) Read the first page of that excellent little story, forerunner of better things to come, *The Man from the North*, and then turn to *These Twain* and look up the description of Hilda Clayhanger's return to Knype after a visit to London.

" The damp chill of the Five Towns came in through the opened door of the compartment . . . and she regretted the elegance of Ealing. But simultaneously her heart was beating with ecstatic expectation. She saw Edwin's face. It was a local face."

A local face ! That is one of the most dumbfounding and humorous sentences in twentieth century fiction !

Local people they are, the men and women of the Five Towns, a people unto themselves ; and as Bennett portrays them they provide an entertaining and serious study. " It makes me laugh," says Manna Host, in *These Tzvain*, " because you are so English and you do not know it. I love you."

One outstanding characteristic of the provincials of Bennett's novels is a reverence for tradition. The contempt of Constance Povey of St. Luke's

Square, Bursley, for the progressiveness of Hanbridge is a general illustration. To this source, doubtless, can be traced the extraordinary power of blood-relationship among the Five Towns people. Of Anna Tellwright it is written that "Enthralled by austere traditions and that stern conscience of hers, she had never permitted herself to dream of the possibility of escape from the parental servitude." There is the tyranny, too, of that splendid mother, Mrs. Baines of *The Old Wives' Tale*. "In her days mothers had been autocrats," and she sought to carry on the tradition nobly—if misguidedly. Then there is that terrific dame, Edwin Clayhanger's Auntie Hamps. She is a wonderful fact in fiction. How the reader writhes and laughs when she makes a little ceremony of Edwin's school-leaving by presenting him with half-a-sovereign and delivering a sermon. "Nothing could stop her. The girls loathed these exhibitions . . . Even Edwin . . . profoundly deplored these moralizings of his aunt. They filled him with a desire to run fast and far, to be alone at sea, or to be deep somewhere in the bosom of the earth. He could not understand this side of his auntie's individuality. But there was no delivery from Mrs. Hamps." It is interesting to notice how directly concerned with the tragedy and romance of Five Towns life blood-relations* arc. In fact, Bennett's novels are an illuminating commentary on the tyranny of blood.

The chapel life of provincials, as depicted in the

novels, is a subject upon which many people comment sorely. What seems to cause offence is the plain language in which Bennett describes chapel proceedings. The language in these descriptions is rudely unemotional, lacking, as some would say, that mystical colouring which only a genuine chapel experience can impart. For instance : " Mynor's prayer was a cogent appeal for the success of the Revival." To pursue this point, however, would mean repeating statements made in the last chapter.* As those remarks were intended to show, there is a positive explanation of Bennett's descriptions. To point to the absence of a particular emotion is, after all, only a negative form of criticism. There is no foundation for the dogma that a particular phase of life admits of only one description. Dickens, it was said, could not portray a gentleman : to which Mr. G. K. Chesterton has replied that he could not portray a gentleman as a gentleman would wish to be portrayed.

Rejecting all accusations, then, is not the chapel as a factor in the lives of Bennett's provincials convincingly revealed ? It lives not only as a specifically religious institution, but as a society for door-step conversation, an institution for the encouragement of courtship and other homely functions. To anyone who has had the experience of a chapel upbringing in the provinces, Bennett's representation is nothing less than masterly.

Provincial society, characteristically graded, also

*See page 21.

appears in Bennett's picture. As is well known, provincial towns make their own nobility and rank people as they will. Go to live in one of them and turn out, in the appropriate costume, with a tennis racket—and a knighthood is won. This social grading is a tremendous factor in the lives of provincial people and it is not exaggerated, by any means, in the Five Towns novels. " Mrs. Prockter (who by reason of the rare " k ⁵ in her name regarded herself as the sole genuine in a district full of Proctors) may be described as the dowager of Bursley, the custodian of its respectability, and the summit of its social ladder. You could not climb higher than Mrs. Prockter."* Mrs. Prockter, Mrs. Sutton, and the Clayton Vernons are essential to Bennett's canvas ; their presence in the picture makes it more life-like.

Provincial principles make a more interesting study, Bennett understands the subject thoroughly. Mr. Baines of *The Old Wives* Tale* may be chosen as an example. A signboard outside his shop blows down and he decides not to replace it. " This abstention of Mr. Baines's from indulgence in signboards was somehow accepted by the more thoughtful members of the community as evidence that the height of Mr. Baines's principles was greater even than they had imagined." What an occasion for mirth the reading of that sentence is for a reader who delights in scrupulous delineation ! In such passages as that, provincial life is

* *Hekn with the High Hand*, eh. v.

stripped and confronts the reader in its ethical nakedness. Mr. Baines's easily-earned reputation imparts lucidity to other features of the representation. Take, for example, the provincial attitude towards money. Mr. Baines's reputation helps to explain the fact that money is accepted by the Five Towns people as the sole criterion of success. In spite of abounding religion, Bennett's people have no notion of nor regard for ethical soundness as such. Principles are mere accidentals, entirely devoid of ethical significance. It never occurs to these provincials that there may be something grossly non-spiritual in the axiom that money is the test of success. Hence the misers, religious and non-religious, that are to be found in Bennett's novels. A good illustration of how this axiom affects conduct is to be found in *Mary with the High Hand*, one of the Tales of the Five Towns. The novels afford numerous illustrations. As proverbial philosophy, the axiom appears in *Anna of the Five Towns*. After her engagement to the successful merchant, Henry Mynors, Anna knew that:

" Many people would say, and more would think, that it was her money which was drawing Mynors from the narrow path of his celibate discretion. She could imagine all the innuendoes, the expressive nods, the pursing of lips, the lifting of shoulders and of eyebrows. "Money'll do owt": that was the proverb."

However accusatory the proverb may seem to be in

this context, it embodies one of the chief doctrines of the Five Towns. In that doctrine, Anna's father believed tenaciously.

" His chief interest lay in those fiscal schemes of organisation without whose aid no religious propaganda can possibly succeed. It was in the finance of salvation that he rose supreme ..."

All phases of Five Towns life are permeated by this omnipresent faith in money as the criterion of success. It is a perfectly respectable, and a perfectly religious faith. " Providence stands god-father to many commercial enterprises in the Five Towns."

Objectionably mundane as the Five Towns people seem, when judged in the light of such a characteristic, so comprehensive is Bennett's representation of them that even their faith in money has a meritorious aspect. It is associated with a marked capacity for self-denial. The way some of the misers deny themselves holidays and entertainments for the realisation of " independence " is astonishing. They are stalwart misers, indeed. Darius Clayhanger, Edwin's father, had an indescribable pride in his business. There were other businesses, he knew, larger businesses, but " they were not sacred. His was, genuinely. Once, in his triumphant and vain early manhood he had had a fancy for bulldogs ; he had bred bulldogs ; and one day he had sacrificed even that great delight at the call of his business ; and now no one could guess

that he knew the difference between a setter and a mastiff!" Those bulldogs are a most important detail.

Lastly a brighter corner of the canvas claims attention. Provincial towns have their own methods of recreation. They appreciate the amateur. Which means, of course, that they can entertain themselves. Their enthusiasm in so doing is immensely refreshing. In spite of their sordid surroundings, the Five Towns people were aware of " the interestingness of existence," and not merely through " the mighty virtue and attraction of ale." That is a declaration in *Clayhanger*. How splendidly it is confirmed in the tenth chapter of the first book of that novel ! In the Dragon Hotel, the Bursley Mutual Burial Club was holding one of its " periodic jollities."

" Messrs. Arthur Smallrice, Abraham Ilarracles, Jos Rawnpike, and James Yarlett rose, stepped heavily on to the little platform and stood in a line with their hands in their pockets . . . They had no music. They knew the music ; they had sung it a thousand times. They knew precisely the effects which they wished to produce, and the means of production. They worked together like an inspired machine . . . 'Loud Ocean's Roar' . . . was performed with absolute assurance and perfection. Mr. Arthur Smallrice did the yapping of the short waves on the foam-veiled rocks, and Big James in fullest grandeur did the long and mighty rolling of the deep. It was majestic, terrific, and overwhelming."

It is tempting to continue the quotation. But Big James's rendering of " The Miller of the Dee " clamours for space.

" It was classical, hallowed. It was the only possible rendering of ' The Miller of the Dee.' If the greatest bass in the world had come incognito to Bursley and sung ^c 'The Miller of the Dee,' people would have said, ⁴ Ah ! But ye should hear Big James sing it ! "

A memorable piece of description is the chapter from which these extracts are taken. The reader enjoys " the free and easy " as much as young Edwin Clayhanger himself. And when his emotions have cooled down, he is able to tell himself that, now, he knows something about the provincial genius for entertainment.

It is these careful and intimate delineations which make Bennett's representation of provincial life so thoroughly comprehensive and life-like. The imagination of the reader responds to the minute depictions in such a way that the environment of the Five Towns becomes as familiar as any brick and mortar environment can be, and its typical human offspring are acknowledged to be living facts.

The amazing thing is that Bennett's scrupulosity did not destroy him as an artist. The Five Towns, apprehended as he apprehended them, might easily have buried him. His novels might have become mere local charts and he, the artist,

a "provincial" in the realm of art, interesting but inferior. Fortunately, the imagination of Bennett was strong enough to master the materials. The artist in the Five Towns novels shows no signs of being embarrassed by the multiplicity of detail; he works with ease. The artist is greater than the materials, for they achieve greatness by reason of his art. Consequently, in these novels of provincial life, universality is a dominant note.

CHAPTER III

ANNA OF THE FIVE TOWNS

⁴'But in her tone and look he read the rest."
KEATS—*Isabella*.

THERE is something very interesting about this novel as one thinks of it apart from the details of the story. It is both a success and a failure ; it is strong and it is weak ; it has quality, richness of spirit, atmosphere, is undeniably the work of an artist—and yet falls short of eminence as art. The explanation of these strange contradictions is the vast potentiality of the novel—its adolescent strength. For *Anna of the Five Towns* reveals qualities in Bennett that are characteristic and others which might have become characteristic. There is a curious blending of materials, a blending without any definite taste of its own, although each of its constituents has a very decided flavour. The novel, therefore, contains evidence that its creation was not marked by that complete accord between intellect and imagination which later works manifest, as if the artist had not quite found himself.

An examination of the story will make this clear.

What is the story ? Anna is the daughter of a miser. She is shocked by her father's harsh conduct towards a tenant, Titus Price, who is the superintendent of a Sunday School to which Anna belongs. At the same time, she dutifully endorses that conduct. Her restricted circumstances and absorption in duty are responsible for the pleasure afforded her by the attentions of a successful business man, Henry Mynors. She, however, only enjoys the illusion of romance, the cause of her "intoxication" being not that she loved Mynors but that he loved her. The tragic result of her father's oppression of Titus Price—the victim's suicide—impresses Anna profoundly. She soon discovers that Willie, the son of Titus Price, whom she knew well and who had suffered from Tellwright's hardness along with his father, was the natural object of her devotion. The actions which follow upon this discovery cause Anna's father to dismiss her, and his tyranny ceases to be aggressive as far as she is concerned. But the result of her era of servitude, and the circumstances it created for her life, remains—the engagement to Mynors. She was forced by her submissive nature to regard that engagement as an arrangement which demanded dutiful fulfilment. The later revelation which comes to her in a painful interview with Willie Price—? that they were lovers"—does not move her from the path of duty, and Willie Price passes sadly out of her life for ever.

Thus summarised, the story reveals Anna to be

a slave to duty. Her life is saddened by renunciations*

Bennett seems to have formed this conception of Anna before he wrote her story, and it exercised a large amount of control during the creative process. The result is attenuation. For Anna does not live in the book ; she is seen from an angle, that is all—a wistful, cloister-like being. She had other qualities ; hers was a nature " strong and righteous."* But the story does not reveal her effectively in that light. It is a story of tantalising hints and undeveloped material.

The attenuation is natural. Bennett is not at his best in dealing with characters from an angle. He cannot develop a character like Conrad, for instance, by concentrating a particular thought-ray upon it and construing it always in the light of a narrow focus. He must, as will be shown later, be free from particular ideas about his characters. He must rely upon broad historical construction, using, chiefly, the evidence of naked perception. His art is the drawing of life-size portraits.

There are signs that, in venturing upon this novel, Bennett was distracted between a treatment of Anna from the point of view of a duty-bound slave and a treatment in which she would have been drawn comprehensively. Had Bennett set himself to give the fuller representation, Anna would have dominated the story. As it is, she does not. The governing elements in the story are the Five Towns environment and Anna's

father, Ephraim Tellwright. A reader once remarked to the writer that, after reading the novel, he felt that he wanted to see Anna married ; he had a feeling that the story was incomplete. And, for a novel entitled *Anna of the Five Towns*, the story is incomplete. In the book devoted to her, Anna lacks stature. A better title for the novel would have been *Ephraim Tellwright of the Five Towns*. He is the master-character.

Careful reading will show that the three chief factors in the story are : the Five Towns as a general environment, Methodism as a more particularised phase of that environment, and the one-time circuit-steward, Ephraim Tellwright. The particular story to be told is Ephraim Tellwright's story : upon him depend the destinies of both Anna Tellwright and Willie Price. These two are separated in life by the engagement to Mynors, which is the direct outcome of the circumstances created for Anna by her father's tyranny. And, intimately surrounding them all, the background of their daily lives, are the Five Towns and a certain kind of Methodism.

On this basis, the story would have assumed more harmonious proportions. The fine depiction of the religious background would have been even more splendid had Bennett concentrated upon the steward Ephraim ; and the tragedy of Anna's dutifulness and of Willie Price's simplicity would have fallen into place as aspects of his history. This must have nearly happened. What made it

impossible was the fascination of two conceptions, two angular views, one of Anna, which has been mentioned, the other of Willie Price.

In Bennett's gallery of portraits, Willie Price is unique. He is the confirmation of a statement made earlier in this chapter that, in *Anna of the Five Towns*, Bennett reveals characteristic qualities and qualities which might have become characteristic. Willie Price affords evidence for the belief that Bennett might have turned to what might be called philosophic characterization. He represents the emotion of an idea which affected the making of the story powerfully. During the period of creation, a particular thought-ray pursued Willie : " He is," said the artist, " the incarnate truth of the third Beatitude, ⁴ Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.' " It is a splendid conception, worthy to be placed alongside of Dostoevsky's conception of Prince Muishkin in *The Idiot*. The writer confesses that he frequently associates the two characters in thought—not, of course, as literary achievements but as artistic conceptions,

But what is the result of this conception as far as *Anna of the Fire Towns* is concerned ? Attenuation—again ! The imagination cannot grasp Willie Price concretely; he is thinned down to an evanescent, boneless, bloodless being. He was not concrete to Bennett, for, as artist, Bennett has neither the intellect nor the imagination for such characterisation. When he attempts it, as in this

novel, a sense of foreignness invades the story, alien elements disturb the harmony. Willie Price, soon after his appearance in the story, begins to be something transcendent, something spiritual which rises out of the Five Towns environment and diffuses itself throughout the universe. He is a philosophy. Could Bennett have developed the conception, a great artistic achievement would have been accomplished. But his strength does not lie in that direction ; his art is in the magnificent construction out of detail of a limited environment and in life-size depictions of the typical human offspring of that environment. His men and women are local units universally related. His locality is a piece of the world ; it does not expand into the world.

As another unique failure, then, Willie Price helps to explain the mystery of this novel. But there is another aspect of this particular failure, which ought to be mentioned. Willie Price represents an intrusion of material into the story. Is he not a greater character than Anna ? Would not Willie Price's life have made a more significant novel ? It is tempting to believe so. He enters the story and clamours for life, which he does not get. " Only the meek, the timid, the silent can, in moments of deep feeling, use this language of hyperbole without seeming ridiculous." Such a sentence makes the reader cry out for a creator; it expresses the emotion of an idea which yearns to be made flesh. The reader has the dissatisfied

feeling that here are superabundant materials which the artist has not exploited. Not only that: because of his potentialities as material, Willie Price enters into a sort of rivalry with the thinly-drawn Anna. He over-tops her. To use a musical expression, *Anna of the Five Towns* is a failure in counterpoint.

There is still another feature which reveals the distraction of the artist's imagination in the creation of the story. Consistent and harmonious co-operation between imagination and intellect manifests itself usually in harmonious and appropriate design. But the construction of *Anna of the Five Towns* reflects disharmony. The technique of the novel is hardly native to it. Readers of the book will have noticed the extraordinary quickening of pace in the last few pages: the story moves suddenly to a palpitating end; a disused pit-shaft arrests the attention, excites the imagination and casts a spell over the whole story. Ephraim Tellwright, Anna, Mynors, Methodism, fade away. What has happened? The whole story has been subjected to the imposition of a short-story climax. That exciting finish is altogether too abrupt, too erratic. There is an appropriate speed—or tempo, as it may be called—for the narration of every story. Even the fire-side yarn-spinner has to depend upon his—probably unconscious—ability to make his talcs move at the correct rate of time. With the novelist, tempo is inherent in his imagination's mastery of materials. • Variations of move-

ment within the general time-scheme are, of course, natural and inevitable, but no variation can be permitted which will impair the harmony of the whole. *Anna of the Five Towns* ends with an acceleration of movement which spoils the tempo of the entire story. For a short-story, where retardation is dangerous, such an ending is appropriate. In a novel of abounding materials and careful delineation, like *Anna of the Five Towns*, it is disastrously artificial.

But attenuation meant something of this kind—inevitably. The novelist, being the particular artist he is, was unable to utilise the materials effectively. His intellect wandered, his imagination went astray. Deliverance was sought in the artificial employment of technique; a mechanical device—not without effect—was used to impose harmony. But the harmony created was the harmony of an end and not the harmony of a perfect narration.

For all that, *Anna of the Five Towns* is a novel which cannot be ignored. It represents an interesting stage in Bennett's development as an artist and, as the first member of the Five Towns group, is a child of promise. Like some of Mrs. Gaskell's stories and some of Mark Rutherford's, it will live a very long time. It affects the reader for the same reason as one of Denham's poems affected Pepys, it is "too sharp and so true." Also it has beauty. Bennett, like Masfield's Dauber, had discovered beauty where men and women seldom look for it,

He had joy in creating—the joy Coleridge wrote about in *Dejection*. And because this "beauty-making power" was communicated to his story, *Anna of the Five Towns*, in spite of defects, inspires an affection which a glitteringly arrayed story like *Sacred and Profane Love* can never inspire. For brilliant as *Sacred and Profane Love* undoubtedly is, it expresses no deep and luminous joy, but an excitement like wine creates. The difference is one of life and death.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRILOGY

" The convergence of the Twain."
HARDY—title of poem.

BENNETT'S Five Towns novels are a triumph of art over uninspiring materials. The Five Towns are not exactly an idyllic setting and their inhabitants are not conspicuous for virtues which stimulate fervent admiration. Yet the novels contain no signs that Bennett shrank from the earthliness of his subject. He was enamoured of his materials like a true artist. In spite of his locality, therefore, his representations have that quality of interestingness which is inherent in art. The zealous exploitation of the mundane has made a severely familiar spectacle new and inviting.

The artistic representation of any given subject is a new birth for that subject; it is reborn into freshness and henceforth invites attention because of a certain pristine attractiveness.

To speak of pristine attractiveness with regard to the smoky Five Towns may seem ludicrous, The phrase is retained because of the conviction that, even to those who know them well, the Five

Towns as they exist in Bennett's novels are not only thoroughly familiar, but familiar with a touch of novelty; the reader pardons their ugliness in the rapt consciousness of witnessing a new scene.

Many readers, unfortunately, cripple their powers of appreciation by deliberately searching for inspiring characters in books. They derive no inspiration from art as art and obtain no pleasure except from the satisfaction of their personal demands. That is not the way to read. Readers of that kind are on a level with the old ladies and old gentlemen who are always hunting in books for quotations from the Psalms. A work of art is a new creation and it is responsiveness to the newness of the creation which marks a good reader—even when the subject-matter is familiar to him.

Complaints about uninspiring material are useless if the mind is not awake to the presence of art. It is not the business of an artist to choose elevating subjects, nor is it the business of a reader to demand such subjects. Art is produced when certain materials disturb an artist creatively. However uninspiring those materials may be in their geographical setting, the disturbance they have caused in the artist's brain is the sign that they have inspired his intellect and imagination. It is in that inspired setting that the particular representation of them is created. Upon the successful communication of that inspiration the artistic value of the work depends. Inspired represen-

tation—representation, that is, produced by intellectual and imaginative eagerness—is the essence of art and its sole justification. The acknowledgment of this elementary fact by readers would improve the quality of their judgments; they would read with more sensitive minds and be less dogmatic. It is their failure to get any response from walls of dogmatism which accounts for the condemnation of some authors. Art is not a name on a label. It is not even a single ideal: something which becomes immanent in paintings, poems and novels. There is no macrocosm called Art, only an ever-increasing number of microcosms. Art is a number of units which never can and never will make a whole. What happens is that something new is made, which *is* art without being called art. That new existence is art because it possesses grace ; it has virtue. One element of that grace is refinement. Whatever the constituents of a new art-unit may be, that grace, that refinement, will be present. No knack of travesty produces it. It is inherent in the experience which produces art. For that reason, the artist is not concerned about the uninspiring nature of his materials in their earthly setting, but about what the reader thinks of his representation of them. Is the reader aware of a re-assimilation of those materials into a new body of. grace and character?—that is his question.

These observations are relevant to a study of Bennett because he is the victim of the complaints

they attempt to silence. " I have never found an inspiring character in Bennett's novels, yet. They are so sordid," said an intelligent reader to the writer, once. Bennett, to him, seemed to have " a dirty mind." Here is a strange confusion. The last remark has been dealt with in an earlier chapter. The presence of embarrassing or peculiarly sordid detail in Bennett's novels is due to the fact that nothing is repugnant to him ; he has shameless eyes and an almost brazen perception. But it is his natural attitude to the spectacle of life and not an insolent pose. Moreover, the details accumulated are appropriately contained in his novels. They are not intrusive elements inserted for the benefit of unclean minds. In other words, they are artistically controlled. That they are " dirty," " sordid," " uninspiring," does not matter. To those who can detect it and appreciate it, art justifies anything; it is its own inspiration. No condemnation of Bennett can be based upon the eructatory habits of Darius Clay hanger. They are part of the story as a work of art.

Bennett's artistic triumph over uninspiring materials is an aspect of his work no reader can afford to ignore. From this point of view, his trilogy is of great importance. It denotes an attempt to deal with such materials on a large scale. Bennett must have planned the work in a spirit of rare effusiveness. He had in him the will to become the omni-competent artist of the Five

Towns. As a trilogy, however, the work ended disappointingly. *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways* added to Bennett's fame. The third novel, *These Twain*, left it stationary.

The explanation of this failure is probably to be found in the scheme of the trilogy. It is a simple scheme ; a novel was to be devoted to each of two Five Towns characters, Edwin Clayhanger and Hilda Lessways, up to the time of their marriage, the third book being devoted to their union as man and wife. Careful examination will show that this design is not altogether in accord with Bennett's particular genius as a novelist. He works best with a large canvas. In the novels under consideration, his full canvas is the Five Towns. Pre-eminently, Bennett's subject is, to use an expression of his in the dedication to *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*, "the human nature of the Five Towns." The clear articulation of this human nature is achieved in novels which are life-surveys of particular individuals. The same novels are, significantly, the highest expressions of Bennett's art. The explanation is that these life-surveys utilise his materials most effectively. The secret of them, it will be found, is the relation of the main characters to the typical varieties of Five Towns characters grouped around them. Take two illustrations—the character-groupings of *Clayhanger* and *The Old Wives' Tale*.

<i>Clayhanger</i>	Darius	Mr. Abraham
	Clayhanger	Harracles
	Mr. Shushions	Mr. Jos. Rawnpike
	Auntie Hamps	Big James
	Clara and	The Orgreavcs
	Albert Benbow	
	Enoch Peake	Florence Simcox
Mr. Arthur	Jos Curtenty	
	Smallrie	
<i>The Old Wives' Tale (Constance)</i>	Samuel Povey	Maggie
	Dick Povey	Cyril Povey
	Daniel Povey	Miss Insull
	Mr. Baines	
	Mrs. Baines	
	Mr. Critchlow	

If the characters in either of the above groups are regarded singly, they make a group of phenomena. Actually, however, in the life of the main character, around which they are grouped, something common to them all is made articulate, which can best be described as the phenomenon of "the human nature of the Five Towns." It is when he is able to make his whole subject articulate like this that Bennett rises to high achievement as an artist. In this connexion, it is worth while noticing how many of his best novels have titles which indicate that they are concerned with the history of particular men and women.

In the first two novels of the trilogy, Bennett has his full canvas. He ranges abroad in the lives of his chief characters and their setting. The careers of Edwin Clayhanger and Hilda Lessways are

recorded from a period of indefinite yearning to a period when, having found themselves through various fortunes and misfortunes, they face a new future. Both books end similarly : Edwin braces " himself to the exquisite burden of life." In Hilda, " the invincible vague hope of youth and the irrepressible consciousness of power, were almost ready to flame up afresh, contrary to all reason, and irradiate her starless soul." Chronicling their lives up to those respective stages, Bennett has freedom and a large canvas.

In the third book that canvas is narrowed. This is the defect of the trilogy's design. *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways* are revelations of the two characters engaged in the battle of life; in *These Tivain* they are engaged in the battle of home—a minor scrap in comparison with the other. At the end of *Clayhanger*, Edwin thinks of " the many problems and difficulties which marriage with her (Hilda) would raise" as "trivial." That is a thought in a big context, a context which enabled Bennett to be at his best. But when, in the third novel, he is restricted to that thought alone, weakness shows itself.

" He was married, certainly—nobody could be more legally and respectably married than was he—but the mere marriage seemed naught in comparison with the enormous fact that he had got this unexampled creature in his house and was living with her, she at his mercy, and he at hers."

" Lying thus close to his wife in the dark, he had

perceived that the conflict between his individuality and hers could never cease. No diplomatic devices of manner could put an end to it. And he had seen also that as they both grew older and developed more fully, the conflict was becoming more serious. He assumed that he had faults, but he was solemnly convinced that the faults of Hilda were tremendous, essential, and ineradicable."

The limitation of scope which these two quotations from *These Twain* indicates—showing the subject of the novel to be the domestic conflict of two individuals who have been translated from the big world of the Five Towns into a bricked-in space of so many square yards—was for Bennett fatal. The rich effusiveness of the trilogy's commencement disappeared.

The trilogy as a whole, then, falls far short of perfection. All the same, it is a considerable achievement.

A better estimation of the work as a revelation of Bennett's power will be obtained by studying the three novels separately.

"• CLAYHANGKR "

THE first book of the trilogy is the greatest. The life of Edwin Clayhanger makes a notable reading experience. He is not what would commonly be called an inspiring character. "He was not brilliant, nor masterful, nor handsome, nor in any manner imposing. On the contrary, he was awkward and apologetic, and not a bit spectacular."

There are readers who feel disappointed that he did not make a braver show in life and, as a consequence, go so far as to doubt Bennett's portraiture. Edwin is a conformist! That he conforms so consistently may annoy some—but there it is! And whatever Edwin may be, his life has had an inspired treatment, so that those to whom inspiration can be communicated by art are grateful for him.

Edwin Clayhanger is of the Five Towns more than Anna Tellwright. How appropriately the typical Five Towns characters enumerated above group around him and what a splendid articulation of their human nature Edwin is ! Splendid is the artist's detailed record of his life. All the ramifications of the Five Towns environment are visualised in the process of reading and the book lives in the memory because Edwin is commensurate with that environment. He grows in the book. He is, at the close of the story, the man in whom " the flame " burnt when a boy. Without haste, quietly, gradually, he becomes flesh and blood as the pages turn over. The reader sees him just as Hilda Lessways saw him for the first time :

" His face . . . presented itself to her, in some mysterious way, as a romantic visage, wistful, full of sad subtleties, of the unknown and the seductive, and of a latent benevolence. It was as recondite and as sympathetic as the town in which she had discovered it."

That is the Edwin Clayhanger known to the readers

of this first book. Himself, a person, an individuality, but demonstrative of something more than himself—" as recondite and as sympathetic as the town in which he lived." Throughout the novel, Bennett is faithful to this view of him. It is not an obsession of his, causing him to emphasise the fact unduly. That is one reason why the book is so impressive. In *These Twain* there is an obsession. But in the first and second novels, without the assistance of bare statement, the feeling grows upon the reader that this man is of the Five Towns and that of such is the humanity of the Five Towns. The Five Towns are his world, fashioning him, impelling him, controlling him. They are a factor, even, in his love-affair :

" He looked round the lamp at her furtively, and seemed to see in her shadowed face a particular local quality of sincerity and downrightness that appealed strongly to his admiration."

Seldom can he act without expressing the specific humanity of his world. One of the brightest illustrations is his appearance at Preston Street, Brighton, when, finding Hilda Lessways " vanquished and weary," he produced fifty pounds in notes.

⁴⁴ He looked at her like a conqueror. He had taught her a thing or two. He had been a man. He was proud of himself. He was proud of all sorts of details in his conduct. The fifty pounds in notes, for example, was not an accident. Since the death of his father, he had formed the habit of never

leaving his base of supplies without a provision far in excess of what he was likely to need."

The significance of that passage will not be lost to readers who know the Five Towns novels well. Edwin's prudence was the prudence of his town.

Adding to the glory of the book is some of the best prose Bennett has written. The chapter entitled "The Child Man" is one which can be read and re-read for the sheer delight of the writing. Section two of that chapter contains a noble blending of sarcasm and pathos. Marred by no affectation, the story of "the man of seven" lapsing "into the child again" is as poignant as anything in Dickens. *Clayhanger* is literature, however that word be defined.

" HILDA LESSWAYS "

The second book reflects the glory of the first. Much of its power is due to the fact that Edwin Clayhanger is seen through Hilda Lessway's eyes. Students of the two works will be repaid by comparing their parallel passages. The fourteenth edition of *Clayhanger* and the tenth of *Hilda Lessways* compare with one another as follows :

Incident	<i>Clayhanger</i> PAGE	<i>Hilda Lessways.</i> PAGE
Introduction of Edwin and Hilda	203	166, 169
Garden and Porch	196-225	180-197
Centenary	224-254	198-206
Fifteen months later	278-298	360-877
Bradshaw	300-809	886-897

To write effectively in two separate novels of two lives which intrude into each other so subtly was no easy task. Yet it is the subtle nature of the man's intrusions into the life of the woman and of the woman's intrusions into the life of the man which makes *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways* so absorbingly attractive. From this point of view, a study of the above analysis is recommended. Those who are disposed to accuse Bennett of blunt crudity, especially, should study this aspect of the two novels. They will discover the delicate side of his art. Let them consider the task of making the relations of two Five Towns people artistically real and attractive whose lives thrust into one another by means of statements to the effect that there is no virtue in believing and that the sanguinary melodrama of the Blood Tub is the Five Towns' form of poetry.

After *Clayhanger* *Hilda Lessways* was no easy composition. The first book had introduced a very remarkable girl. She appears in the Five Towns atmosphere and setting as something unique. She has alien qualities. To Edwin she is a strange perturbation. If that impression of her was to survive the second novel, so that a third would be welcomed, the second novel would have to be deftly constructed. Hilda's life would have to be touched fully at certain points, but be left tantalisingly mysterious at others, and the story of her life would have to end in such a way that interest in her fascination for Clayhanger should not be

exhausted. The first book of *Hilda Lessways*[^] consequently, dealing with Hilda's "start in life," is the longest of all. On the other hand, the sections dealing with Edwin Clayhanger are the shortest. The result is that Hilda, as a human setting around those incidents of wistful and mysterious contact with Edwin, lives when the novel is finished, and interest in the two as beings with converging destinies remains.

For Hilda's creation as an intimate character, the reader naturally longs after reading *Clayhanger*. The girl who visited Edwin surreptitiously, late at night, and on a very slight acquaintance ; who protected old Mr. Shushions at the centenary meeting with maternal abandon excites interest. The only stipulation the reader makes is that, when created, Hilda shall possess the *Clayhanger* charm. Nor by reason of her strangeness must she appear to be staged ; she must be inevitable.

The story satisfies these demands by revealing the absence of accord between Hilda and her environment and by the introduction of George Cannon. The reader passes naturally from *Clayhanger* to such a sentence as this, the second in *Hilda Lessways*: "Hilda hated domestic work, and because she hated it she often did it passionately and thoroughly." And to others like :

"If her mother had said to her squarely, * Tell me what it is will make you a bit more contented, and you shall have it even if it kills me ! ' Hilda

could only have answered with the fervour of despair, *I don't know ! I don't know ! "

" She was in prison with her mother, and saw no method of escape, saw not so much as a locked door, saw nothing but blank walls."

Hilda in a predicament has the right affinity with Hilda of *Clayhanger*. These earlier experiences of hers recall, as an experience, the wistfulness with which the reader left the maturer Hilda when the last page of *Clayhanger* was read.

George Cannon has a rather thankless part to play in Hilda's story. It is easy to think of him as a sort of intruder who makes another book necessary. That, of course, is a superficial and selfish view for the reader to take. To Hilda—the Hilda of the " Maud " episode—he is natural. He suffers in comparison with Hilda and Edwin because, in spite of creating a separation between them of ten years, he is a secondary character. It is difficult to become intimate with him, however, and the blame probably lies between Bennett for deficient delineation and the reader for disliking him too much. Cannon deserves to be more wistful. Bennett is remarkably faithful to him, but he has not made him so appealing as he might have been. The consequence is that Cannon is neither a villain nor a hero, and the reader can shape him according to any particular mood.

Probably too much of the quality which is to be expected in Cannon is transferred to his and Hilda's son. Master George tends to make his father

negligible, although, in *These Twain*, strangely enough, Cannon comes for a moment—in the Dartmoor prison scene—into his own. His entry into that story is one of its most effective scenes.

Still—and this is the important point—George Cannon does fall into place naturally. He solves the very difficult problem of deflecting the course of true love, or potentially true love, the consummation of which the reader of *Clayhanger* naturally wishes to see, and, for that reason, he is responsible for making the relations of Hilda and Edwin a thrilling forecast when the second novel ends.

A large amount of the pleasure afforded by the two early novels is accounted for by the very detailed knowledge the reader acquires of the lovers' chief characteristics. What are they? Edwin is ambitious, thoughtful, occasionally profound, enigmatic, introspective, generous and sympathetic. Hilda is conspicuous for the intensity of her inner life; she is egotistical, has a heroic tinge, and an eagerness for life. She appears to be anything but a conformist, and, like all Bennett's rebels, she leaves the Five Towns. Her "immorality" does not affect her environment nor attempt to do so. Alongside this, place the fact that Hilda's distinguishing quality is a profundity not of thought but of feeling, and it will be seen, instantly, that there are dramatic possibilities in her acquaintance with Clayhanger and in his acquaintance with her. An incident

which reveals the two and the way they re-act upon one another is the conversation which takes place between them when they are going to Bursley station in search of a Bradshaw. Inside Snagg's Theatre, a strike meeting is taking place, and in the doorways are scores of starving children. Hilda is impressed by the scene.

" ' I'd no idea there was a theatre in Bursley,' she remarked idly, driven into a banality by the press of her sensations.

"⁴ They used to call it the Blood Tub,⁵ he replied. ⁴ Melodrama and murder and gore—you know.' She exclaimed in horror. ' Why are people like that in the Five Towns ?'

" ' It's our form of poetry, I suppose,' said he.

" She started, sensitively. It seemed to her that she had never understood the secret inner spirit of the Five Towns, and that by a single phrase he had made her understand it ... ⁴ Our form of poetry ' ! Who but he could have said a thing at once so illuminating and so simple ?

" ... he said: ' But you belong to the Five Towns, don't you ? ' She answered quietly that she did. But her heart was saying : ' I do *now*. You have initiated me. I never felt the Five Towns before. You have made me feel them.' "

That conversation shows that Clayhanger was just the man to stir the depths of Hilda Lessway's feelings. With his gift for expressing profound and abstruse thoughts he was bound to be a lover of hers. But intense feeling, exquisite sensitiveness, and morbid reactions made Hilda vulnerable to

more than one type of male. That is why both Cannon and Clayhanger are natural in her life. Clayhanger, however, gained the deeper response. He it was who won the potential conformist in Hilda. " Her heart was saying, 'I do *now*.' " Had her distinctive attribute been thought rather than feeling, Hilda's career would have been different. She would have been a more aggressive antagonist of environment. Feeling, however, cannot make an ideal rebel. Hilda was bound to conform when the right man came.

“ THESE TWAIN ”

It is this conception of the relation between Clayhanger and Hilda which provides a basis of explanation for *These Twain*. In that novel, Bennett concentrates upon Edwin's Hilda, the Hilda who said " I do *now*:"⁹ The Hilda of *These Twain* is fundamentally conformist and rebellious only incidentally—irritatingly, of course ! The result is that the man and the woman seem, as Mr. Arthur McDowall* has remarked, to be " fettered to their own shadows, * condemned to do the flitting of the bat." " Hilda Clayhanger is only reminiscent of the real Hilda Lessways. The discordant aspects of her life in *These Twain* are, in comparison with those depicted in the earlier novel, trivial. She ceases to fight life, in spite of the fact that her " firm, assured carriage " said " ' I have

* " *Realism*" p. 74

stood before the world, and I cannot be intimidated/ " and battles with a man. " He . . . was living with her, she at his mercy, and he at hers." On page twenty-six, Edwin gloats over the thought that " his passion had forced destiny to render her up to him mysteriously intact . . . There she was dramatically." At that early stage of the story the reader agrees and expresses gratitude to Bennett for leaving Hilda " mysteriously intact" when the second volume of the trilogy ended. But, after page twenty-six, the mysterious and dramatic Hilda vanishes rapidly.

What is the explanation ?

In fairness to Bennett, due weight must be given to his account of the change in Hilda after she was married to Clayhanger. " Previous to her marriage she had shown little interest in dress. But now she would spasmodically worry about her clothes, and she would make Edwin worry." The matter contained in the section from which these two sentences are taken justifies some difference between Hilda Clayhanger and Hilda Lcssways. But the question is certainly legitimate whether the earlier Hilda did not exist as forcefully as ever in spite of new characteristics, and whether such items as dress, and the motive behind dress, are not given undue prominence in the story of her married life. The spasmodic peculiarities of Hilda seem to flaunt themselves too conspicuously. " At the least sign of recurring danger all her nerves were on the qui vive." Nerves may be truly relevant to a domestic

setting; but Hilda was more than a congeries of easily disturbed nerves.

What seems to have happened is that, in writing the story of Edwin and Hilda married, Bennett concentrated on this incidental Hilda too much. He interprets her in action, true ; but the reader remembers the dramatic Hilda merely by sundry bald statements. So that, in *These Twain*, the greater Hilda is only a memory for whose sake the one represented is tolerated.

This fact illustrates the shrinkage of subject matter which characterises the third novel. Earlier in this chapter it was explained as a narrowing of the artist's canvas. Hilda, in *These Twain*, shrinks to a figure interacting with a small bricked-in environment. No powerful indications are given of her interaction with the larger world. It is the same with Edwin. In the first two novels he is a man possessing a number of definite characteristics, a real man. In *These Twain* he carries those characteristics about with him. No longer are they expressive of a type of human nature. They are fencing sticks, like Hilda's characteristics are, with which daily duels are fought. Edwin has shrunk into a mechanical individual; the poetry of his nature, of the Five Towns nature, has gone. Disastrous is the result. There is no atmosphere in *These Twain*, and no powerful prose. The detail is too meagre for either. Imaginative zeal is absent and the story becomes a mass of petty perceptions. An artist's method of narration

should never betray itself. It is most powerful when it obliterates itself, as a method of presentation, by the fine effectiveness of its achievement. That is true of every branch of what is called "realistic literature." In *These Twain*, Bennett's method is unable to hide itself because of the paltriness of the detail.

What is equally unfortunate is that the story leaves room for questions : were not the quarrels of Edwin and his wife relieved by intervals of heartier attractiveness ? And so on. Bennett, from non-fictional sources, could be quoted against himself here.

Certainly, the story in *These Twain* may be truthful. The point is, it is not significant. But for the reminiscent qualities of the story it is questionable whether *These Twain* was worth writing. Hilda and Edwin, as it portrays them, hardly seem to merit a novel. Not even as a criticism of marriage is the work significant; it does not palpitate with big meaning; it does not apply itself dramatically to life. Even Ingpen and his "freedom," to which the "tied" life of Edwin and Hilda is a contrast, do not drag the story out of the realm of triviality into that of great issues. The married couple are in that "dead world" from which Edwin, in *Clayhanger*, liked to think he had escaped.

Should they have been taken back into that world ? Was there not a vaster treatment which would have made the whole trilogy mightily

significant ? The last chapter of *These Twain* seems to indicate that there was.

For the non-occurrence of this happy consummation, two explanations are possible. First, the book has a text, it is governed by a conception. Life, that is, is construed according to a particular idea—" It's each for himself in marriage after all." Along that line, as has been stated previously, the intellect and imagination of Bennett do not work effectively. His materials become a fetter to him. There is no area for Bennett in ideas. Not compression but extension of detail is his forte.

Secondly, in *These Twain*, Bennett has too consciously labelled his characters " provincial." The word occurs in numerous places, and it seems almost as if in this novel Bennett parted with his beloved Five Towns by the facetious pronouncement of a verdict: " Provincial, my dear Five Towns, provincial! But England—yes, England !" The verdict meant that, for Bennett the artist, the materials of the Five Towns had lost their freshness ; he knew them too well. Knowledge, as is well known, may reach a stage when it no longer seduces the intellect and the imagination and, losing its dynamic force, becomes a static mass. To such an inanimate state had Bennett's knowledge of the Five Towns fallen when the last novel of the trilogy was written. Bennett knew his subject as a man knows the shape of his hands or the colour of his hair. For that reason, as Bennett of the Five Towns, *These Twain* marks his passing.

CHAPTER V

III: OLD WIVES' TALE: A STUDY IN CHARACTERIZATION

" Who am I, and what is my life, or my father's family in Israel ?"

1 Sam. xviii. 18. (R.V.)

IT might seem, from the valedictory nature of the conclusion to the last chapter, that the study of Bennett's trilogy would have made the most appropriate ending to this book. The chronology of the novels would point the same way. But there is a reason for considering *The Old Wives' Tale* after the trilogy. That work is notable because it makes the humanity of the Five Towns specific. *The Old Wives' Tale* is more personal : it has many points of resemblance with *Clayhanger* but differs from that novel in being a more specialised delineation of personal character. Edwin Clayhanger expresses everything with which he is in daily contact, the whole environment of the Five Towns; in Sophia Baines of *The Old Wives' Tale*, that environment expresses itself as - personalised humanity in opposition to another, a foreign environment. *Clayhanger* and *The Old Wives' Tale* make, therefore, an interesting combination.

Regarded together they pay a finer tribute to Bennett as an artist than any other two of his works. They are an enduring testimony to the amazing energy of his perception and the power of his imagination, declaring both to be those of a genius. Of a genius, because the two together represent the natural imaginative incorporation of the very marrow of his materials. In the creation of a work of genius the imagination of the artist works like another intellect, but in such an animated manner that it extracts from materials qualities which, in the act of simple apprehension, were not detected. Genius is, consequently, remarkable for the profound employment of materials. *Clayhanger* and *The Old Wives' Tale* demonstrate such employment on the part of Bennett. Each is the complement of the other, and they are a united testimony to him as a complete artist.

The preface to *The Old Wives' Tale* makes interesting reading. In view of what was said in the last chapter, it is especially important to notice Bennett's confession that, in writing *The Old Wives' Tale*, he desired to emulate de Maupassant's *Une Vie*. It was the most natural thing for Bennett to have that desire. But it should be observed that the inspiration for this achievement came through witnessing a certain incident. Being, one day, in a Paris restaurant, his attention was attracted by the entrance of an old woman. "She was fat, shapeless, ugly, and grotesque." The whole

restaurant laughed at her awkward movements and the fussiness with which she chose a seat. What hurt Bennett more than anything, however, was the giggling of "a beautiful, pale young" waitress. Once, he reflected, the old woman was young—slim and beautiful, too, perhaps. And, looking at the situation from that point of view, he saw possibilities in it for "a heart-rending novel." Now, it is easy to think of an artist being impressed with some particular idea about life in witnessing that scene, an idea which would have dominated the creation of the ensuing story. Bennett, quite naturally, produced a life-survey bearing no trace of any controlling conception whatever. "An excerpt from life," Mr. Harold Williams has called *The Old Wives' Tale*, and the description is admirably appropriate.

There are two life-surveys in this novel, and, first of all, it will be well to discover their specific qualities. Reference has already been made to the personal nature of this work. There are varieties of characterization in fiction as there are of characters. Characterization may be concerned with the revelation of an individual's character as a latent quality, as something assertive, as something which formalizes itself in response to environment, or as a specialized product of a race, nation, or family. The artist may select one or more of these aspects for concentration; he may choose them all, but, inevitably, he will emphasise one aspect more than another. Thus, a particular

character may unfold in a novel both as the expression of a kind of human nature common to the people of a certain geographical area, and as the personal possession of a certain individual, the emphasis being on one aspect more than another. In *The Old Wives' Tale*, the emphasis is on character as a personal possession. "Constance personified for her (Sophia) the qualities of the Baines family. Constance's letter was . . . the natural expression of the Baines character at its best . . . She, too, must show her Baines blood." That experience of Sophia's when reading Constance's letter, after fourteen years separation, is the keynote of *The Old Wives' Tale* as a life-survey. The range of characterization here is narrowed down from a locality to a family and from a family to each of two members of it, and, in such a way, that those two members live with the reader not as representatives of a locality nor of a nation—and they are both!—but as Mrs. Constance Povey, nee Baines, and Mrs. Sophia Scales, nee Baines.

How is this effect achieved ?

Sophia is of the greater importance for this enquiry. Away from her native setting, the humanity which she had inherited from that setting leaps into assertiveness. The Five Towns become a person, instead of, as in *Clayhanger*, a person becoming the Five Towns. As a girl, Sophia differed from Constance, her sister, in having a more restless and ambitious spirit. Constance was able to settle down in the traditional manner of

the family. Sophia shrunk from such a prospect. Elopement with a young commercial traveller, who promises to take her to France, offered her the escape from commonplace experiences which she desired. During the elopement, however, her fundamental resemblance to Constance, her parents and her town began to reveal itself strongly. Already, ^ a prudent, mysterious instinct had moved her " to steal money for the flight. When, at London, Gerald Scales, her prospective husband, wanted to cross over to Paris without their being married, Sophia was staggered by " his casualness," for " despite her extreme ignorance and innocence, Sophia held a high opinion of her own common-sense and capacity for looking after herself, and she could scarcely believe that he was expecting her to go to Paris without being married . . . Her head was full of a blank astonishment at being mistaken for a simpleton . . . She felt sorry for him . . ." The victory was hers; they were married in London. But Scales " did not reflect that this fragile slip of the Baines stock, unconsciously drawing upon the accumulated strength of generations of honest living, had put a defeat upon him." At Paris, Scales naturally wanted his wife to be Parisian. He took her to an establishment in the Chaussee d'Antin. The prices alarmed Sophia. " She was, however, forced by some instinct to think about prices—she who at home had scorned the narrowness of life in the Square. In the Square she was understood to be quite

without commonsense, hopelessly imprudent; yet here a spring of sagacity seemed to be welling up in her all the time . . . her notion of the boundary line between throwing money away and judiciously spending it was still the notion of the Square." Scales giving way to dissipation, the glory of Sophia's new life was eclipsed; she had nothing left but her character and, now, that became the determining factor in her contest with the new environment. She despised the "quality of casualness" of the people who formed her daily companions. "In St. Luke's Square there was always, in every head, a sort of time-table of existence prepared at least one week in advance. But in Gerald's world nothing was pre-arranged.*' She grew to loathe her husband. "He was a fool. With all her ignorance of the world she could see that nobody but an arrant imbecile could have brought her to the present pass. Her native sagacity revolted." One day, gazing at Scales, when he was prostrate on the bed after a bout of drinking, and reflecting on his lack of "sense," she saw a packet of English bank-notes, worth two hundred pounds, sticking out of the breast-pocket of his coat. "She took it . . . The act was characteristic of her enterprise and of her fundamental prudence." When, later, she was abandoned by Scales, that wad of banknotes laid the foundation of a fortune. Armed with the commonsense of her Five Towns nature, she battled with the alien world. Brought into association with a

certain Madam Foucault, she " coldly condemned " the woman " for having allowed herself to be brought into the world with such a weak and maudlin character." Her own character growing more and more solid, she could not help feeling both contempt and tenderness for the volatility of the French. " She felt towards the French nation as a mother might feel towards adorable, wilful children suffering through their own charming foolishness." Again, " all the practical Teutonic sagacity in her wanted to take care of it in its difficulties and was rather angry with it for being so unfitted to take care of itself." During the 1871 siege of Paris, she showed " astounding astuteness" as a landlady, by war-time hoarding and profiteering of a very familiar kind. Her boarders were amazed at the perfection of her domestic management. Sophia had triumphed in " the new world." " And she went up to her room every night with limbs exhausted, but with head clear enough to balance her accounts and go through her money . . . She began to love gold, to love hoarding it, and to hate paying it away." A Frenchman proposed to her. His " display of sentiment " sickened her. She wanted a more commonsense kind of love, " placid, regular, somewhat stern ..." " The foundation of her character was a haughty moral independence, and this quality was what she most admired in others." In time, she took a Pension in a street of evil fame. She fought the street, but it was " not one in which a woman of

Sophia's race, training and character, could exist." As proprietor of another Pension, the Pension Frensham, she reached her apogee. " She was *the* landlady : efficient, stylish, diplomatic and tremendously experienced." She " employed two servants, working them very hard at low wages," and, English-like, " her preference for the respectable rose to a passion." So the years passed, until a letter from Constance arrived inviting her back to the Five Towns. " Sophia was convinced that no one but a Baines could have written that letter. She felt that she must rise to the height of that letter, that she must show her Baines blood." Soon after, they met on Knype station. " ' I should have known you anywhere,' said Sophia, with apparent careless tranquility . . . Constance saw this marvellous tranquility . . . It was a Baines tranquility." They settled down together. " See Sophia sitting primly there by the table, a woman approaching sixty, with immense experience written on the fine hardness of her worn and distinguished face ! Though her hair is not yet all grey, nor her figure bowed, you would imagine that she would, in her passage through the world, have learnt better than expect a character to be consistent. But no ! She was ever disappointed and hurt by Constance's inconsistency ! And see Constance, stout and bowed, looking more than her age, with hair nearly white and slightly trembling hands ! . . . You would not think that that placid soul could, while submitting to it,

inly rage against the imposed weight of Sophia's individuality." In that year, her sixtieth, Sophia was taken ill in a motor-car on a Cheshire road, near Congleton, and died soon after reaching home.

Outlining Sophia's life in this way, it is seen that Bennett is all the time concentrating upon Sophia's inner qualities, her "commonsense," "independence," "fundamental prudence," "astuteness." These qualities may be regarded as the constituent elements of "her Teutonic sagacity," and, in that sense, Sophia is an experiment in racial characterization. Or they may be regarded as the components of "her native (that is, Five Towns) sagacity." But more than either of these, they are the qualities which make "the essential *her*."* That is the phrase which reveals the artist's quest in *The Old Wives' Tale*. Sophia herself is what emerges. The characterization ranges abroad only to concentrate more definitely upon her essential being. It is not what Sophia incorporates that is of chief interest to the artist or to the reader, but her particular corporate self.

Nowhere else has Bennett created such a very personal character as Sophia. She is something new and distinctive in his work as an artist. As an achievement in characterization, she is greater than Constance because of her lonely fight with a strange environment. To create her in such circumstances was no simple task. Easily she could have been made a sort of cheap phenomenon,

* Chnp. V., hk. iii.

a mere bundle of eccentricities. As it is, acquaintance with the character of Sophia Baines means acquaintance with something deeply powerful and strongly assertive, a thing with a will, veined, and possessing real nervous energy ; character which is, in Drinkwater's words,

" . . . Desire and valiance that range
All circumstance, and come to port unspent."*

But the treatment of Sophia's character does not exhaust the greatness of *The Old Wives' Tale*. Characterization is only an intimate phase of the story. Mainly, the novel is a survey of the lives of two women from girlhood to old age and death. The manner in which that survey is effected is the true source of the novel's power. Neither Constance nor Sophia are extraordinary women in the commonly accepted meaning of that word. Constance is an ordinary girl, an ordinary wife and an ordinary mother. Sophia is a more assertive form of the same fundamental ordinariness. But it is just in this respect that the novel achieves distinction : in revealing the grandness of the ordinary. For what is the ordinary ? Surely, that which escapes notice—the long series of events which are too familiar for exploration. It is a realm of experience which eyesight seldom invades. Sometimes, Sophia would stand outside her life, so to speak, and regard it with amazement. " ' How

* *Abraham Lincoln.*

strange it is that I should be here, doing what I am doing!' But the regular ordinariness of her existence would instantly seize her again." Like Sophia, most people are only intermittently aware of the ordinary ; in its grip they become blind to it. Fortunately, the artist is able to intervene. And if he possesses a lively perception and a strong imagination like Bennett, he is able to represent the ordinary in detail and to reveal its true significance.

But the reconstruction of the ordinary is difficult because it involves, especially in such a long survey as *The Old Wives' Tale*, an extended sequence of detailed experiences. The danger here is that the artist should deal with what is merely trivial. For trivialities do not make the sequence called life. That sequence is composed of significant events, some of which may be extremely small in comparison with others. This distinction is important ; it places upon the artist the responsibility of detecting what is merely incidental (trivial) and what is essential (significant). In *The Old Wives' Tale*, ordinary life is represented by means of a genuine sequence. Consequently, the story moves. A careful reader will be astonished at the cumulative effect of this sequence. There is no complicated plot to be unravelled in the story, no thrilling solution to wait for. Why read to the end, then ? To read about the death of a surviving sister—an old woman ? No ; but to reach the end of the sequence. For that is " what life is," to quote the

title of the last section of the novel—a sequence with an end.

" Old people said to one another : ' Have you heard that Mrs. Povey is dead ? Eh, dear me ! There'll be no one left soon.' These old people were bad prophets. Her friends genuinely regretted her, and forgot the tediousness of her sciatica. They tried, in their sympathetic grief, to picture to themselves all that she had been through in her life. Possibly they imagined that they succeeded in this imaginative attempt. But they did not succeed. No one but Constance could realize all that Constance had been through, and all that life had meant to her."

" All that Constance had been through "—that is the sequence to the end of which the reader desires to be brought. Unlike Constance's neighbours, Bennett succeeded in the " imaginative attempt " of reconstruction, and his readers are able to experience what they were not and to enjoy the novelty of her ordinariness.

The background of this sequence is Time. This was another difficult problem for the artist. He overcame it. The years in this story step out measuredly; they are years ; they can be felt as years—and it is novel to feel years. Language and incident both communicate the effect of passing and maturing time. " Years passed, until there was a vista of years behind her. Sometimes she would think, in an unoccupied moment, ⁶ How strange it is that I should be here, doing what I am doing! * But the regular ordinariness of her

existence would instantly seize her again." That reflection gathers up into itself the whole vista of the past years, and, ceasing, it disappears into more years. Time and incident blend marvellously in *The Old Wives' Tale*. The reader sees life, physically and temporally, actually in procession before him.

To this feature of the novel, the attention of those who condemn *The Old Wives' Tale* as dull should be directed. That complaint is often heard. It should be remembered that, in the sequence of life, there are both major and minor, sensational and non-sensational, details. Any representation of life which claims to be faithful must include minor details. The peculiar quality of these experiences is, in actual life, realized at the moment of their occurrence, and provides a certain amount of ephemeral interest. That quality is not easily communicated when the experience is represented in words. Anyone may confirm this by recalling occasions when they have been relating to friends sundry minor events in their own daily lives. They will remember how hot it made them when they suddenly realised that their talk was having no effect, that their auditors were not a bit interested. Nevertheless, these events cover significant periods in life and are the appropriate context of more dramatic experiences. No event is trivial which belongs to the pattern of life, and inasmuch as life is crowded with small events as well as big ones, some of the small events must belong to the

pattern. Consequently, art cannot ignore them. Because Bennett recognised this and represented minor as well as major detail, he has made *The Old Wives' Tale* dull in parts, perhaps. But that dullness belongs to the representation ; it reflects the actual dullness of life, and, in doing so, pays tribute to Bennett's artistic fidelity and to his creative genius.

The tempo of the narration and its sequential unfolding are manifestations of that exquisite perception, that sense of area, temporal as well as spatial, and that skill in the disposition of material, which were mentioned, in the first chapter, as among Bennett's chief attributes as an artist. And, with the same distinction as in *Clayhanger*, the artist's work is perfected by a non-spectacular earnestness and precision of language.

Of all Bennett's works, *The Old Wives' Tale* is the greatest. Not that it stands in lonely isolation from others, but because it is the utmost expression of his genius. *Clayhanger* confirms that judgment, and is, in the realm of greatness, *The Old Wives' Tale's* fittest companion.

These statements must not be taken to exclude other works from high praise. *Clayhanger* and *The Old Wives' Tale* justify higher praise here because an attempt has been made to exhibit them as the consummation of the work of an artist engaged upon certain materials.

With the works created out of those materials alone, this little book is concerned. There may be some criticism because the book has not dealt more fully with other of the Five Towns novels. *Whom God Hath Joined*, *Leonora*, and others, however, have not been deliberately slighted. Rather, this study of Bennett as an artist should assist in the estimation not only of the novels to which these chapters have been devoted, but of all the Five Towns novels. The omission of any novel is not an act of disrespect. From the writer's point of view, the novels dealt with offer the best field for a critical appraisal. Those novels are the productions of an artist whose work possesses enduring qualities. Some of them will endure longer than others, but those in which the artist's powers are most completely manifested have a permanent place in English literature. They have given an eternal re-birth to phases of life which easily pass into obscurity. For that reason, later generations will rejoice in them and declare Bennett of the Five Towns to be in the line of succession with novelists dead and gone whose names are now upon the scroll of fame.

SUPPLEMENTARY

SOME readers may appreciate a few suggestions concerning the order in which to read Bennett's Five Towns novels. The scheme of reading which is here suggested, however, should only be regarded as an experiment. Moreover, it does not include all the Five Towns novels, nor are the novels mentioned placed in order of excellence.

- A. Read chapter 3 of F. J. Harvey Barton's *Arnold Bennett* (Nisbet).

The chapter on Bennett in J. W. Cunliffe's *English Literature During the Last Half Century* (Macmillan, 1920) may also prove useful.

- B. Begin the novels with *A Man from the North* and *Anna of the Five Towns*. Follow these by reading "The Death of Simon Fuge," in the collection of stories entitled *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*. Read also the dedication to that book. Then take up *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways*. As a sort of lively interlude, read *The Card* and its sequel, *The Regent*, and then settle down to *The Old Wives' Tale*. After-

wards try *Helen with the High Hand* or *The Price of Love*. It is then the turn of the two important novels, *Leonora* and *Whom God hath Joined*.

- C. So that the scheme may assist in making the foregoing chapters worth looking at again, two other novels are recommended : *Sacred and Profane Lore* and *Riceyman Steps*.

INDEX

- " Anna of the Five Towns," 39, 51, 54, 55, 57, 58, 62 ff.
" Clayhanger," 32, 33, ", 46, 50, 54, 58-60, 71 ff., 92, 93, 95, 105
Coleridge, 70
Conrad, ", 64
- Darton, F. J. H., 40
Dickens, 42, 47, 55
Dostoevsky, 35, 66
- Fawcett, D., 23
- Gaskell, Mrs., 69
Gorki, 15
" Grim Smile of the Five Towns, The," 22, 75
- Hardy, 30, 38-" 50, 52
" Helen with the High Hand," 56
Hilda Lessways," 8, 71 ff.
- Johnson, Lionel, "
- " Kipps," 50
- " Leonora," 106
Lubbock, Percy, 35
- " Man from the North, A," 53
Mary with the High Hand/' 57
McDowall, A., 87
- Newman, Cardinal, 28
- " Old Wives' Tale, The, 8, 22, 46, 51, 54, 56, 92 if.
- " Passionate Friends, The," 17
" Pretty Lady, The," 8

- " Return of the Native, The," 30
" Riceyman Steps," 9, 48
 Russell, Bertrand, 28
 Rutherford, Mark, 00
- " Sacred and Profane Love," 70
 Schopenhauer, 19, 49
 Selby, T. G., 42
 Simon Fugc, The Death of," 9, 22
- " Tess of the D'Urberviiles," 38, 39
" These Twain," 38, 52, 33, 71 IT.
 Tolstoy, 15, 35
- Wells, H. G., 13, 10, 17, ", 50
" Whom God Hath Joined," 18, 21, 31, 40, 41, 106
 Wordsworth, 24

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