

The Craft of Arnold Bennett

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The Craft of Arnold Bennett

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Abstract:

For the first thirty years of the twentieth century, Arnold Bennett (1867 – 1931) was one of most famous writers in Great Britain and the United States of America. His stock began to wane after the end of the First World War, and since his death his work has been neglected. What remains of his reputation today rests largely on his achievements in his Five Towns fiction.

During his lifetime and posthumously, Bennett was accused of operating as a literary profiteer and vulgar self-promoter. Some of his contemporaries alleged that, as a literary reviewer, he exercised a capricious and excessive influence on the middlebrow reading public. His detractors also suggested that his penchant for writing potboiling serials revealed that he was little more than a commercial servant of magazine and newspaper editors, and of the mass consumerist ideology which they blandly sustained. Most damagingly, his critics came to believe that the quality of his fiction had so declined by the end of the war that he was artistically incapable of embracing the radical challenges of Modernist experimentation.

The thesis shows that, as a prolific journalist and perceptive literary critic, his catholic appeal to the reading public was extensive. It also shows that his articles are important for contemporary readers because they sketch out a relief map pointing to the most significant contours of the literary landscape between 1900 and 1930.

In addition, the thesis demonstrates that his serials have been injudiciously undervalued. Whilst they were never conceived as high Art, they were important because they helped him to develop as a writer. They provide cogent proof that he always travelled freely along a continuum linking the artist to the craftsman and tradesman. Furthermore, the cultural codes, social values and moral shibboleths which they presciently evoke still resonate in the digital age of the twenty-first century.

In his presentation of the enclosed Five Towns communities, the thesis argues that Bennett combined mimetic topography and local culture with deft and complex interpretations of social and private identity. This sophisticated construct allowed him to combine his fidelity to realism with subtle explorations of self-definition.

Bennett was not just an accomplished regionalist, and the thesis concludes that he never became stranded as a beached reactionary after the war. His metropolitan novels draw freely upon the interest which he took in the work of Freud and W.H.R. Rivers. They shaped the emergence of his new manner fiction and several of his short stories, allowing him to demonstrate the invalidity of Virginia Woolf's claim that he could not write convincingly and powerfully about human psychology and its susceptibilities to the refracted and sublimated impressions of daily life.

INTRODUCTION

ARTIST, CRAFTSMAN, TRADESMAN

This thesis will examine the range and nuances of Arnold Bennett's work as a professional writer. It will identify the reasons why, and the process by which, his reputation declined after the First World War. In so doing, it will seek to define and authenticate his position as a hybrid artist, craftsman and tradesman who welcomed modernity and its experimental adjuncts and exploited a multiplicity of practice and a range of personae, in order to cater for the tastes and interests of his readership and audiences.

Lord of the English Language, master of plot and plan,
Wizard of clever diction, seer of the heart of man;
Sculptor of subtle syntax, scribbler of sapient screed,
We in our breathless interest, quiver with joy as we read
Story or sermon or satire, confessions, reflections, reviews,
Essay or drama or novel – eagerly these we peruse,
All other authors forgotten while his new books we devour;
All other idols dethroning, Bennett's the Man of the Hour!
Have we an author to match him? Is there a writer of us
So vigorous, various, versatile, vivid, voluminous?
No; to our Old World brother we offer the laurel and bays;
His to write magical marvels, ours but to read and to praise.
Loud as Olympian thunders, clear as Pandean Pipes,
May he record his impressions under the Stars and Stripes.
Gladly we give him our homage, hopefully seeking the way
How to Read Arnold Bennett on Twenty-Four Hours a Day.¹

I forget which of the French symbolist writers of the late nineteenth century denounced a hack writer as a urinator of journalistic copy in the phrase '*pisseur de copie*'.²

¹ *Letters of Arnold Bennett*, ed., James Hepburn, 4 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1966 – 1986), IV, 23 November 1911, pp. 93 – 94. The footnote to the letter, written by Bennett to his wife Marguerite, indicates that the poem was recited by Carolyn Wells at a grand dinner which took place at the St Regis Hotel, New York on 27 November 1911. The dinner was given in honour of Bennett by Colonel Harvey, President of Harper's. Carolyn Wells (18 June 1862 to 26 March 1942) was a prolific American writer, whose specialities were popular mysteries, children's books and humorous verse.

² Muriel Spark, *A Far Cry from Kensington* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 45.

Arnold Enoch Bennett was born in Hanley, Staffordshire in May 1867. He was a prolific writer; from the inception of his career in 1898 until his death in 1931 he wrote 34 novels (a further one, *The Dream of Destiny* (1932), was never finished), 7 volumes of short stories, 13 plays (on some of which he collaborated with other dramatists), and his autobiography. In addition to this prodigious output, he also wrote articles and stories for over 100 different newspapers and periodicals, worked in the Ministry of Information for a short period of time towards the end of the First World War in 1918, and wrote librettos and film stories at the end of his career.³

During the first decade of the twentieth century his popularity and fame grew exponentially. By the time he made his first visit to the United States of America in 1911 at the age of forty-four, he had achieved international celebrity and popularity as a writer. As the first epigraph to this chapter implies, he was received by the American public with adulation, and he was even considered to be the most popular and influential English author to visit America since Charles Dickens in 1867.⁴ After Bennett's death his reputation and achievements were first undermined and then destroyed, and today he is largely unremembered. What remains of his reputation is confined to his novels, the best known of which depict in documentary detail the Potteries of his childhood and youth. This thesis will identify the reasons for the precipitous decline of Bennett's reputation during his lifetime. More significantly, it will also analyse the nuances and flexibility of his approach to his work and demonstrate how this was mediated not just by the commercialisation of authorship and commodity culture, but also by his ambitions for recognition as an artist and craftsman. It will also show that his *oeuvre* was multi-faceted, that he was able to engage with popularity and wealth in spite of his egalitarian principles, that as an

³ Margaret Drabble, *Arnold Bennett: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), pp. 375 – 77.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

artist and critic he was throughout his career an enthusiastic champion of modernity, and that as artist, craftsman and tradesman, he was a victim of cultural determinism as both prisoner and exploiter of the literary marketplace.

Arnold Bennett: Edwardian and Georgian

Arnold Bennett's career can be divided into three phases: the Edwardian, the early Georgian (including the First World War) and the later Georgian. For Bennett and his coevals, the Edwardian era was an exciting decade. The financial and cultural rewards for successful writers were expansive, and Literature was afforded the imprimatur of impeccable *réclame* with the award of the Nobel Prize in 1907 to the first English writer, Rudyard Kipling.⁵ There were other significant dimensions to Edwardian literary life too, particularly (as Kemp, Mitchell and Trotter have recognised) the appearance in the fiction of Bennett, H. G. Wells and John Galsworthy of a 'recognition of suburban humanity as an irreversible feature of Modern England.'⁶ However, Bennett's concerns in his early novels extended beyond the experience of the provincial middle classes to the lives of the urban poor, concerns which were shared to varying degrees by Wells in *Tono Bungay* (1909), Galsworthy in *Fraternity* (1909) and E. M. Forster in *Howards End* (1910).⁷ Writers were also confronted with further tensions.⁸ For example, the struggle to escape from the constraints of Victorian patriarchy can be found not only in Bennett's most famous Five Towns novels, but also in the works of his contemporaries: Samuel

⁵ S. Kemp, C. Mitchell, and D. Trotter, *Edwardian Fiction: An Oxford Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 226.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁸ Anthea Trodd, *A Reader's Guide to Edwardian Literature* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1991), p. 47.

Butler, Edmund Gosse, Bernard Shaw, Harley Granville-Barker, J. M. Barrie, Galsworthy and E.M. Forster.⁹

As the Edwardian age ended and the Georgian era began, Bennett was at the height of his fame and popularity, but the seismic social and political impact of the First World War undermined his reputation. Nearly twenty years after his death, the critic Walter Allen was not alone in his view that: 'It is scarcely possible not to see him as a war casualty. In 1914 Bennett was a brilliant novelist; after 1914 he was generally no more than a brilliant journalist.'¹⁰ This thesis will reject such an assessment as injudicious because it is based on a mistaken assumption that, owing to the war, his energies and talents were completely dissipated in tendentious journalism, Committee work and propaganda for the Ministry of Information. It will also demonstrate that, whilst Bennett undertook a great deal of public service work during the war, he also continued to write innovative and experimental fiction, such as *The Pretty Lady* (1918). Most importantly, it will demonstrate that Bennett's journalistic talents did not compromise his artistry, but enhanced it by emphasizing that the derogatory division between journalism and fiction was a brittle cultural construct.

The socio-political malaise and dislocation which flowed into the 1920s were accompanied by the upheaval of Modernism in literature and by persistent and, at times, atrabilious criticism of Bennett as outmoded. In rejecting the assertion that, as a novelist and critic, he had degenerated into a spent force by the 1920s, this thesis will reference his continuing enthusiasm in the last decade of his career for artistic innovation and experiment, as well as his affinities with modernity and Modernism.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 53 – 59.

¹⁰ Walter Allen, *Arnold Bennett* (London: Home and Van Thal, 1948), p. 35.

The critical dismantling of Bennett's reputation

The entry for Bennett in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) illuminates the causes of the abiding hostility which was directed towards him by his younger contemporaries:

Arnold Bennett was a prolific and highly successful author in a wide variety of modes. As essayist, dramatist, occasional travel writer, author of short stories, and, above all, of novels, he profited in most senses of the word from the fact that his career coincided with the pre-eminence of the printed word in cultural life. Yet his very success alienated younger writers suspicious of the professionalism on which he prided himself. Bennett for them exemplified the popular as opposed to the good. They saw him as a man whose concern for his pocket far outweighed concern for the novelist's art.¹¹

Many of the new generation of writers which emerged after the First World War, of which D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf were the most prominent, took the view that the Edwardians (Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy) had long since passed their climacteric; hence they became the subject of their condescension and then hostility. In effect, they became the representatives of an old-fashioned and complacent view of Art and Literature, against which the new writers could fashion their rebellion. Bennett was reviled on moral grounds by D. H. Lawrence who thought that he had compromised himself as an artist because of his accumulated wealth – with characteristic pugnacity he scoffed at him as ‘a pig in clover’ – and he was dismissed by Virginia Woolf on aesthetic grounds (along with Wells and Galsworthy) as irrelevant and outmoded.¹² Given this context, it was not surprising that Bennett became a conspicuous *bête noire* for the 1920s Modernist highbrows. The gravamen of their unfair charges against him was that he was little more than a

¹¹ John Lucas, ‘Bennett, (Enoch) Arnold (1867–1931)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2010
<<http://www.oxforddnb.com.liverpool.idm.oclc.org/view/article/30708>> [accessed 20 December 2015].

¹² Quoted in Drabble, *A Biography*, p. 289.

complacent, profiteering businessman who was all too willing to pander to populist middlebrow tastes.

As Virginia Woolf acknowledged, it is difficult to settle on one authoritatively complete definition of the term middlebrow, or what J. B. Priestley defined as its twin sibling, broadbrow, or to provide either with a glibly homogenised identity:

Now there can be no two opinions as to what a highbrow is. He is the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea. [...] By a lowbrow is meant of course a man or a woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life. [...] But what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer. They are neither one thing nor the other. [...] The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige.¹³

The term middlebrow has been melodramatically embodied by John Carey as a sinister conspiracy, one which was conceived by an intelligentsia resentful of the newly literate masses with the aim of denying them access to literary excellence.¹⁴

More convincingly, it has been conceptualised as a conservative realist form aiming intermittently for moral complexity and artistic merit, but handicapped by the necessity to sustain an anathematised lower middle-class with populist blandness.¹⁵

In actuality, middlebrow only emerged as a defined stratum of the literary market after the emergence of the seismic shifts and impacts of highbrow Modernism on literary culture. The term was first coined in the 1920s, and from its initial appearance it was heavily freighted with pejorative connotations.

¹³ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, ed., Leonard Woolf, 4 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1966 – 67), II, pp. 196 – 99.

¹⁴ John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880 – 1939* (1992; repr. Chicago, Illinois: Academy Chicago, 2002), pp. 16 – 17.

¹⁵ *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920 – 1960*, eds, Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 1.

As for Modernists, they were experimentalists; they were also canonical meliorists and unabashed élitists. Goaded by fears of cultural plurality, they viewed themselves as a self-referential elect, and adopted a *de haut en bas* attitude to the middlebrow and lowbrow. They were suspicious and fearful of any writer who could attract diverse and multiple audiences, and they particularly vented their spleen against modern best-selling authors whom they accused of debasing standards through their pandering to a mass culture. Highbrows were sustained by an adamant conviction that the commercially popular products of an admass culture were ephemeral and inferior to the rarefied and timeless work of the genuine artist. In their endeavours to protect their identity and values, they sought to demonise and subvert the middlebrow by sneering at and undermining its eclectic appeal:

The training of the reader who spends his leisure in cinemas, looking through magazines and newspapers, listening to jazz music, does not merely fail to help him, it prevents him from normal development [...], partly by providing him with a set of habits inimical to mental effort. Even in small matters it gets in his way: for example, the preconceptions acquired from the magazine story and the circulating library novel are opposed to any possibility of grasping a serious novelist's intention.¹⁶

They deplored, in particular, the influence on contemporary journalism of editors and proprietors such as Sir George Newnes, Sir Arthur Pearson and Lord Northcliffe, and bemoaned the enterprise of the New Journalists who, driven by business imperatives, made free use of mass psychology to meet the needs and tastes of a burgeoning lower middle- and working-class readership.¹⁷ Highbrows were appalled by the emergence of a profit-focused marketplace, contaminated as they saw it by inconsequential middle and lowbrow artefacts, and their alienation led them to their conviction that only an alert and active minority could protect the corpus of literary

¹⁶ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; repr. London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 224.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 178 – 79.

excellence against the infections of common (in every nuance of the adjective) literary tastes.

All of this was in stark contrast to the middlebrow. Filling the interstices between high and lowbrow, middlebrow's reference was to a culture and a literature that emphasised mass popular appeal rather than literary rigour and radical innovation. It was also susceptible to objectification (as an easily accessible art form, incorporating, *inter alia*, literature, journalism, and drama), and to personification (as a stratified audience keen to acquire a culture from which it feared exclusion).

Bennett never subscribed to the unleavened criticism that the highbrows had simply attempted to legitimise the cryptic and the abstruse as preferred literary vogues. On the contrary, he was interested in, welcomed, and accommodated innovation and experiment on almost every front. He understood the cultural and social significance of the advent of the cinema and was a Modernist in his visual tastes. Indeed, this thesis will assert that Bennett was more of a Modernist than has generally been realised. Unfortunately for him, because of his celebrated affiliation to realism as a dominant aesthetic, he appeared to 'les jeunes' – his younger rivals and critics – to have contaminated himself with an outmoded and rival culture and so was exposed to their excoriations.¹⁸

The spearhead of his younger adversaries was Virginia Woolf. Her animated exchanges with Bennett began with her unsigned essay entitled 'Modern Novels', which was published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 10 April 1919.¹⁹ She later developed her thoughts in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' (1924) and 'Modern Fiction' (1925). Whilst the 1919 essay attacked Wells and Galsworthy for their

¹⁸ Quoted in *Arnold Bennett: The Critical Heritage* ed., James Hepburn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 96.

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Novels', *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 April 1919, quoted in Jane Goldman, *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 16.

materialism, Bennett was singled out as the worst culprit of the three. His novels were compared to well-built houses in which no one lived.

Whether this criticism was motivated in part by personal animosity (she complained that Bennett had dismissed her as etiolated, decadent, enervated, emasculated, and priggish) or by class-conscious disapproval and snobbery, is irrelevant.²⁰ What matters is that the fallout from their quarrel was a serious one and inflicted much damage to Bennett's reputation, from which it has never recovered. This is regrettable because Woolf failed to acknowledge Bennett's frequent innovations as he sought to produce original and artistic fiction. Nor, ironically, did she recognise that they were able to share common artistic principles and tastes. Both believed in the importance of characterisation as a *sine qua non* for fiction, and when Woolf argued that a complete understanding of the soul and spirit could only be found in Russian fiction she missed the point that Bennett would not have demurred with her contention.

Nonetheless, the fundamental breach between the two was irreconcilable and enduring. In *The Common Reader*, Woolf explained that the charge against Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy was that their work was conservative, outmoded and vitiated by their attempts to present the trivial and transitory as true and enduring, and she scoffed at their gravest weaknesses which, she felt, were spawned by their anaemic and unconvincing characters. Her specific charge against Bennett was that:

His characters live abundantly, even unexpectedly, but it remains to ask how do they live, and what do they live for? More and more they seem to us, deserting even the well-built villa in the Five Towns, to spend their time in some softly padded first-class railway carriage, pressing bells and buttons innumerable; and the destiny to which they travel so luxuriously becomes

²⁰ Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 117 and Samuel Hynes, 'The Whole Contention between Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf' in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, I (Fall 1967), p. 34.

more and more unquestionably an eternity of bliss spent in the very best hotel in Brighton.²¹

For his part Bennett felt that some of her characters lacked credibility and were dislocated from the environment and society in which they lived, as he demonstrated in his *Evening Standard* article on 2 December 1926:

She has written a small book about me, which through culpable neglect I have not read. I do, however, remember an article of hers in which she asserted that I and my kind could not create character. This was in answer to an article of mine in which I said that the sound drawing of character was the foundation of good fiction, and in which incidentally I gave my opinion that Mrs. Woolf and her kind could not create character.²²

Virginia Woolf was not Bennett's only critic, and in life and posthumously much of his writing was, and has been, dismissed as superficial and mercenary. In *The Roaring Queen* (1973), Wyndham Lewis decried him as an arrogantly opinionated literary tipster – in effect a *pisseur de copie* – derided his Five Towns construct by renaming it Snekkheaton-over-Pegpot, and mocked him as an arch commercial potentate of letters.²³ Lewis spared no bile in caricaturing Bennett's *alter ego*, Samuel Shodbutt, as: 'a shoddy sunset of blustering verbiage', and in his capacity as book reviewer he disparaged him as the Hitler of the book trade, whose hobby was the imperious pursuit of literary fame.²⁴ The contempt which he felt for Bennett is evident in his ferocious dismissal of him as a complacent philistine and parvenu middlebrow who had patronisingly adopted the obtuseness of the common reader.

Another of Bennett's acerbically critical coevals was Cyril Connolly, who reprobated him for his cavalier disregard for craftsmanship:

²¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series* (London: Hogarth, 1925), p. 186.

²² Arnold Bennett, 'Another Criticism of the New School', *Evening Standard*, 2 December 1926, in *Arnold Bennett: The Evening Standard Years, 'Books and Persons' 1926 – 1931*, ed., Andrew Mylett (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974), pp. 4 – 5.

²³ Wyndham Lewis, *The Roaring Queen*, ed., Walter Allen (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973), p. 26 and p. 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123 and p. 11.

The explanation of the apparent vagaries of Mr. Bennett appears to be that he does not write potboilers, but that he conscientiously produces three grades of work – writing good novels for those who like literature, novels for those who read fiction, and books like ‘The Strange Vanguard’ for those who read anything.²⁵

Connolly’s contention was that Bennett was an unashamed profiteer – willing to exploit a gullible reading public to satisfy his cupidity and the financial demands of his wife and mistress.

More august figures were quite prepared to join in the hostilities. Henry James anticipated the Modernists’ attack on Bennett by damning him with faint praise. Referring to *Clayhanger* (1910) and *Hilda Lessways* (1911) as examples of Edwardian novels which accreted huge monuments of material, he compared them to a building in which stones, bricks, rubble and cement had been promiscuously heaped on each other to produce a massive and unwieldy artifice. Actually, Bennett could consider himself fortunate to escape so lightly from James’ mauling. Whereas his fiction was excoriated simply as an accumulated and variegated heap, Wells’ was condemned as excreted waste.²⁶

A more considered and convincing perspective was provided by J. B. Priestley, who persuasively argued that a clearer understanding of Bennett’s craft would be achieved if his fiction were viewed, not as the work of three different authors, but of one author shaped by, and subject to, the three formative divisions in his life:

There is, first, his childhood, education and early manhood in the Five Towns. From 1867 to the beginning of the ’Nineties, young E.A. Bennett, brisk as a bee, was unconsciously hiving facts and impressions, scenes and characters for the day when Arnold Bennett, already a smart journalist with a story or two to his credit, should seek a new element for his fiction and suddenly pluck out these fat golden honeycombs. [...] The second period is that of his early years in London, when he was engaged in journalism and

²⁵ Cyril Connolly, *The New Statesman*, 19 January 1929, pp. 470 – 71, quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 491.

²⁶ Trodd, *A Reader’s Guide to Edwardian Literature*, p. 98 and p. 101.

ingenious pot-boiling of various kinds. He became a very successful journalist, and has remained one ever since; most of his lighter novels, whatever else they may be, are certainly good journalism. [The] last set of influences [...] is the result of his early interest in French, chiefly modern French literature (at a time when his acquaintance with our own literature was only slight), and of an equal interest in French life that finally led to his living in France for nearly ten years.²⁷

However, it remains the case that even Bennett's posthumous admirers have frequently been critical of him. James Hall, in *Arnold Bennett: Primitivism and Taste* (1959), for example, claims that the majority of Bennett's works are far worse than the reader familiar with only the best could imagine.²⁸ Others, like Robert Squillace, give vent to the accusation that Bennett's career was ruined by the pre-war financial success which destroyed him as a disciplined craftsman and realist.²⁹ The overarching accusation, which this thesis will strenuously challenge, is that he allowed himself to degenerate into a graphomaniac tradesman through his excessive, trite and formulaic outpourings.³⁰ My challenge will be explored in two ways: firstly, by evaluating the breadth and versatility of Bennett's *oeuvre* as evidence of his ability to balance the demands imposed on the artist, craftsman and tradesman to keep pace with, and respond to, cultural change, and secondly, by examining his narrative strategies for representing psychological realism.

Arnold Bennett: the versatile professional

As a champion of regional fiction, Arnold Bennett was aware of its potential from the earliest stages of his career. His success can be partly ascribed to his ability to soak his Five Towns novels in his upbringing and recollected experiences, but he

²⁷ J. B. Priestley, 'Mr. Arnold Bennett', in *London Mercury*, February 1924, pp. 394 – 406, cited in *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 434 – 37.

²⁸ James Hall, *Arnold Bennett: Primitivism and Taste* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959), p. 11.

²⁹ Robert Squillace, *Modernism, Modernity and Arnold Bennett* (London: Associated University Press, 1997), p. 115.

³⁰ Lucas, 'Bennett', *ODNB*.

was also influenced by his admiration of French, Russian and British writers: Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac, Guy de Maupassant, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, H. G. Wells and especially George Moore. His aim in his regional fiction was to establish himself as a realistic writer and artist and to present the universal experiences of ordinary people whose lives were confined and determined by the restrictions of the enclosed, introspective communities in which they lived. As a meticulous craftsman, he planned the Five Towns novels with such care and tenacity that he was able to sustain their narratives over two independent trilogies. They were linked by a preoccupation with the influences of class and money and by the disruptive forces and recusant energies which were required to challenge and destabilise the entrenched rigidities of dominant patriarchies. Bennett's attitude to the Five Towns was not unambiguous. At times, he was proud of his construct and certainly grateful to it for the financial rewards which it brought him, but by the middle of his career he had become disenchanted with his lucrative artefact and had turned his back on it.

His ambitions, however, extended far beyond his aspirations and achievements as a writer of regional fiction; flexibility and variety were the hallmarks of his work. He had begun his career as a freelance journalist, an occupation which he never abandoned and which he always viewed seriously in entrepreneurial and commercial terms.³¹ He became widely known as an oracular book reviewer, and his articles, written from multiple viewpoints as literary artist, tipster and critic, demonstrate the breadth and sophistication of his tastes. In them, he particularly relished the debate on the respective values of mass culture and highbrow intellectualism, berating those who disdained popular and commercially

³¹ Arnold Bennett, *Journalism for Women: A Practical Guide* (London: John Lane, 1898), p. 97.

successful literature.³² More than just a novelist and literary journalist, Bennett was also a prolific writer of self-help manuals and popular philosophies, such as *Literary Taste: How to Form It* (1909), *Self and Self-Management* (1918), and *How to Make the Best of Life* (1923), and he neither forgot, nor experienced any shame, that his most commercially successful work was *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* (1912).

Bennett also devoted his journalistic energies to writing professional primers. The articles which were collected and published in *How to Become an Author* (1903) are particularly important because he used them to articulate the differences between the old Victorian and the new Edwardian journalism:

The difference between the old and the new journalism is twofold, and lies partly in the journal's attitude to its readers, and partly in its attitude to the world. The old journalism said to itself, in effect, when it wrote its copy: "This is what our readers ought to like. This is good for them. This is genuinely important. This ought to interest. This cannot be omitted. This is our expert opinion on a vital affair – " And so on. The new journalism says to itself: "Will our readers like this, will they be interested in it? [...] If they won't, however excellent it may be, it is of no use to us." Again, the old journalism considered that many aspects of life were beneath its notice. The old journalism ignored nearly everything except politics, law, trade, and the arts. The new journalism ignores nothing, considers nothing beneath its notice. Everything that is human is good enough for the new journalism, and the more human it is, the more warmly does the new journalism welcome it.³³

As a consequence of these insights, his conviction that the job of the freelance journalist was to identify and respond to market needs – especially as a writer of serial fiction – never wavered. *How to Become an Author* is also significant because in these articles he set out with self-assurance his uncomplicated definition of the art of fiction:

Now the action, as I have before explained, should spring out of the characters, and the characters should spring out of the general environment. [...] By the environment I mean the place or places where the action is to pass, the general class and sort of people involved, and the broad effect of

³² Arnold Bennett, 'Magazine Sales: What the Public Wants: Love, Beauty, Adventure, Heroism', 15 September 1927, in *The Evening Standard Years*, pp. 82 – 84.

³³ Arnold Bennett, *How to Become an Author: A Practical Guide* (London, C. Arthur Pearson, 1903), pp. 62 – 64.

landscape and other surroundings. The mind must ponder on these things until they begin to take shape. Then follows the conjuring-up of one or two (probably not more than three at the outside) appropriate principal characters.³⁴

Framed in a simple conceit – the imperative to conflate an intrinsically interesting narrative with characters fixed in their environments – his exegesis was re-endorsed in the four substantive articles which he collected and published as *The Author's Craft* in 1914. These demonstrate that he had little difficulty in identifying inviolable rules of design and construction: it was his belief that the novel must focus on one to three figures who must dominate the plot and who should be presented with greater sympathy than any others: 'The single motive that should govern the choice of a principal figure is the motive of love for that figure.'³⁵ This abiding interest in presenting individuals and locating them in the environment that influenced their personalities and behaviour points to the cultural terrain which he was to dispute with the Modernists in the last decade of his career.

The breadth of his expertise can also be seen in the commercial rewards which he enjoyed as a playwright prior to the outbreak of the First World War. For him the theatre was the earner. In fact, he enjoyed such success with *Cupid and Commonsense* (1908), *What the Public Wants* (1909), *The Honeymoon* (1911), *Milestones* (1912) and *The Great Adventure* (1913) that by 1913, out of a total income of £17,000, £9,000 was derived from his plays.³⁶

Although Bennett's writing and career were underpinned by his protean flexibility, he was sufficiently self-critical to accept that there was unevenness in the quality of his work, and in later life he confessed to feelings of embarrassed contrition with some of his earlier fiction, such as *Teresa of Watling Street* (1902)

³⁴ Ibid., p. 135.

³⁵ Arnold Bennett, *The Author's Craft* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914) p. 53.

³⁶ *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 125 – 26.

and *Hugo* (1906). In contrast, he was not afraid to experiment even in his Five Towns fiction, as can be seen in *The Price of Love* (1914), and he later developed into an accomplished writer of the political documentary and metropolitan fiction in novels such as *Lord Raingo* (1926), *Riceyman Steps* (1923) and *Imperial Palace* (1930). These were leavened by his light social satires and morality tales, such as *The Card* (1911) and *Mr. Prohack* (1922). In addition, it was not surprising, given that one of his first publications in 1891 was ‘What’s Bred in the Bone’, a parody of Grant Allen’s style, that he always valued his short stories and never dismissed them as trifling ephemera; ‘The Death of Simon Fuge’ is regarded as probably his outstanding achievement.³⁷ It is a judgement with which Bennett concurred as he made clear to his agent, Eric Pinker, in January 1925:

A long short story of mine called ‘The Death of Simon Fuge’ is often mentioned by connoisseurs, and I see it is mentioned in Johnson’s recent book on me. The other night Rebecca West mentioned it, and George [Doran] suggested that it should be issued in an Edition de Luxe. I have often had this idea myself, and I think the story is about as good as anything I ever wrote.³⁸

He also wrote bawdy and experimental novellas, such as *The Pretty Lady* (1918), controversial feminist polemics, like *The Lion’s Share* (1916) and satirical ones, such as *A Great Man* (1904), in which he mercilessly satirised the publishing industry in his portrayal of Henry Shakespere Knight, the artist alienated by financial success and popular acclaim. It was this preoccupation with the tension between the disinterested artist and the unashamedly enterprising and commercially successful professional author, most clearly seen in Bennett’s frictionless oscillation between aesthetically crafted fiction and serialised melodrama, which most disturbed him and which, ultimately, inflicted what has proved to be enduring damage to his reputation.

³⁷ Drabble, *A Biography*, pp. 142 – 43.

³⁸ *Letters I*, 20 January 1925, pp. 346 – 47.

Artistic Tension: Craftsman, Tradesman and Journalist

Although as a young man, Bennett, under the aegis of his mentor Eden Phillpotts, sought an apolastic, self-indulgent life, he was driven, nevertheless, by high artistic ideals at the start of his career. Yet he faced the dilemma which applied to those who aspired to write serious fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century and who sought to reconcile the mass production of popular serials with the desire to secure critical kudos as a craftsman. This problem was how to establish and maintain a rapport with his readers, both as a novelist and a journalist.

In many respects, there was nothing new about such a dilemma. In fact, there was a direct historical line connecting the Victorians, George Gissing, W. M. Thackeray and Anthony Trollope to Bennett and other Edwardians. Gissing, in particular, had shown in *New Grub Street* (1891) how literature had become for some aspiring authors a soulless, mechanically generated commodity. The significance of *New Grub Street* for Bennett was that it documented and debated the business of literature. Many of Gissing's obsessions, the development of the art of fiction, the alienation of the artist from an increasingly centralised society dominated by London, and the development of a popular press, were key ingredients in the cultural crisis that was to plague Bennett's conscience throughout his career. It was a crisis most deftly encapsulated in *New Grub Street* in the cynicism of Jasper Milvain's two contrasting reviews of the novel, *Mr. Bailey: Grocer* (one eulogistic and the other less favourable), and in his conviction that it was more profitable in every sense of the word to be a man of letters rather than a literary man.³⁹ The bleakest conclusion of *New Grub Street* – that the reading public was a vast, helplessly inert mass and that every attempt to oppose or establish a compromise

³⁹ Peter John Keating, *George Gissing: New Grub Street* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), p. 20.

with the forces of commercialism was doomed to failure – did not resonate with Bennett; it was an assertion with which he frequently took issue as he sought to define what he persistently referred to as his craft.⁴⁰

The obsession with the craft of authorship which bound Bennett to Gissing tied him to Trollope, too, and not just adventitiously as an author of regional fiction. Like Bennett, Trollope was forced into complex and intractable compromises in his dealings with the literary market place, and like Bennett he was accused of being a cynical materialist. Trollope (and for that matter, Thackeray) conceived the writing of fiction as something closer to a trade than a profession; he compared the writer to an artisan shoemaker, whilst Thackeray compared the simple labours of the novelist to those of the shoeblick.⁴¹ On the other hand, theirs, like Bennett's, was a complex calling, for both believed that there was an ethical imperative to their work which transcended the desire to accumulate wealth. Thackeray was motivated by his desire to tell the truth as he saw it, whilst Trollope was driven by a commitment to preserve the creative autonomy which would enable him to satisfy his conscience by preaching his sermons with the same moral purpose as the clergyman.⁴²

Even though Trollope did not relish writing serialised fiction, whilst Bennett found this activity a necessary and profitable distraction, there were many similarities between the two. Neither believed in waiting indefinitely for inspiration and both were prolific, compulsive writers and obsessive word counters. Both wrote quickly and without redrafting. Both were undisturbed by their self-identification as tradesmen; Trollope's motto of '*nulla dies sine linea*' could easily have been adopted by Bennett. Both sought fame and wished to establish a reputation. Both wrote for

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴¹ Dinah Birch, 'Paradoxes of Success in Nineteenth-Century Writing', in *Essays in Criticism*, 62:4 (October 2012), pp. 373 – 95.

⁴² Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, ed, Michael Sadleir and Frederick Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 146.

financial reward. The major differences between the two were that Trollope did not believe that writing quickly affected his style or the quality of his work, whereas Bennett knew that for him it could and did; Trollope also saw his vocation and career through class perceptions, as an appropriate accoutrement for a gentleman, whilst Bennett was untroubled by such a consideration.

Thus, Bennett, as a regular fabricator of serialised potboilers, was never reluctant to acknowledge to himself and to others that he wrote for money. He had no patience with the idea that his output should be limited, and he set great store by the speed and regularity with which he produced his work, as he made clear in April 1904 to James Pinker, his literary agent:

I entirely disagree with your theory. I should like to have an instance of a man who spoiled his reputation by too rapid production of good work. [...] You would be under a false impression if you imagined that I was working at pressure. I am not. I could do lots more. I have vast leisure. When I think that I wrote the *Grand Babylon Hotel* in less than a month & that I am taking over 3 months with *Hugo*, I ask myself, Why? You don't yet realise what an engine for the production of fiction you have in me. I could take long holidays & still produce as much as you would require from me, but the fact is I am never content unless I am turning out the stuff.⁴³

Nor was he unwilling to celebrate the industriousness and productivity of others. He held the best-selling writer Silas Hocking in high regard because he felt that he had the right trade attitude to work.⁴⁴ It was this mindset which enabled him to reconcile his higher ideals as a serious artistic writer with the desire to acquire fame and wealth by provisioning mass audiences with what they wanted to read.

Bennett's responsiveness to his readers' taste is unsurprising, given that he was in the vanguard of the changes which affected the professional author and critic at the turn of the twentieth century. When he began his career, he was writing at a time when authorship was becoming professionalised and at a period following rapid

⁴³ *Letters I*, 27 April 1904, p. 50.

⁴⁴ *The Journals of Arnold Bennett*, ed., Newman Flower, 3 vols (London: Cassell, 1932 – 33), II, 15 May 1915, p. 131.

advances in the production and distribution of books. For these reasons he was quick to realise the importance to his career of an able literary agent because:

The advent of the literary agent as an intermediary between author and publisher gave a new kind of cohesion and professionalism to the literary life. The Edwardian period marked the transition between the Victorian era, when publishers were still in some respects mediators between authors and printers and the contemporary mass-audience, multimedia publishing business.⁴⁵

Thus, he was able to enjoy a productive and highly lucrative relationship with the foremost London agent, James Pinker – in marked contrast to the latter’s volatile and uneasy relationships with Conrad, D. H. Lawrence and Wells. Bennett had been dissatisfied with his first agent W. M. Colles for several years, and he brusquely, but shrewdly, dismissed him after being introduced to Pinker – ironically by Wells – in December 1901. At the end of 1900, his total earnings were £620; the importance of Pinker’s role in ensuring that his income would rise during the next twenty years to £20,000 per annum (enabling Bennett to luxuriate in a conspicuously affluent lifestyle) was incalculable.⁴⁶

Bennett’s letters to Pinker are of enormous importance in illustrating how he operated as an artist and craftsman. From the beginning of their relationship they show that he always treated him as an intimate business colleague and confidant and as someone in whom he could confide his future work schedules:

I repeat that I attach much importance to the publication of the short stories in the summer. They are artistic work, some of my best, & they must come between a potboiler like *Ghost*, & another potboiler like *City of Pleasure*. I cannot let 2 potboilers come together. Please therefore arrange the short story volume with C.[hapman] & H.[all], unless C.[hatto]&W.[indus] will give way, *at once*. [...] The two things that I want to impress on you are, the importance of the short story volume, and the length, & general ambitiousness, & the blend of tragedy & humour in the new novel, which will be ready for publication next summer.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Edwardian Fiction*, Kemp et al., p. xvii.

⁴⁶ *Letters I*, p. 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 April 1907, p. 87.

Apart from revealing the symbiotic relationship which the two men enjoyed, his letters also demonstrate Bennett's business acumen and his determination to maintain his output, whilst simultaneously developing and extending the theory and practice of his craft. As he scathingly observed to Pinker, it was his belief that: 'An author isn't a Bradford mill, to shut down whenever the middleman thinks it profitable to do so.'⁴⁸

Populariser and champion of the masses

Writers like Bennett became very aware of the development of the mass reading public at the beginning of the twentieth century and of the vastly increased demand for books and magazines. They were anxious to meet the demands of emerging audiences and, as Kemp, Mitchell and Trotter have observed, constantly speculating about what might interest them:

Writers sought out new and more narrowly defined readerships. They identified and addressed their readers by creating new characters (jockeys, diplomats, spies, journalists, housewives, anarchists, international criminals, dictators, aesthetes), new points of view and new sub-genres, such as Ruritanian romance.⁴⁹

Bennett never wrote for the literary groundlings, but he was among the number of writers who 'sought to bridge the increasing gap between up-market and down-market readerships by combining a self-consciously literary style with an interest in social and aesthetic theory and with sensational subject matter.'⁵⁰ It was this intellectual curiosity and energy which enabled him to move easily and fluidly between genres in his fiction – from naturalist novels, to marriage problem polemics, from melodramas to light-hearted fantasias and from readerly-lisible to writerly-scriptible texts.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6 March, 1906, p.70.

⁴⁹ *Edwardian Fiction*, Kemp et al., p. xv.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. xvii.

Not surprisingly, given this background, he embraced generic promiscuity in his willingness to cater for the interests of a burgeoning reading public. He relished the role of populariser, not only through his self-help handbooks, but also in his book reviews, especially those which he undertook towards the end of his career for the *Evening Standard*. Such was his influence here that publishers awaited the first editions containing his reviews before deciding immediately, on the strength of his judgements, whether to order additional print runs.

Bennett's relationship with his reading public was never an untrammelled one, and his ambivalence towards his middle-class audience can be seen in his reference to those who peopled it as enemies of art and progress, even though they provided him with his daily bread. Furthermore, in his reflections in his *New Age* column, he observed that novelists needed to remember that their professional prosperity depended on the fact that the most intellectually supine class in England sought an escape from its own dullness in fiction.⁵¹ In light of these comments, this thesis will test whether this mindset invalidates John Carey's claim that Bennett's work as a writer inaugurates a democratisation of literature by repudiating the prejudice of intellectuals against the tastes of the masses.⁵²

Bennett, of course, believed that it was part of the writer's job to cater for cultural experiences which the masses could understand, but he also aspired to be recognised as an artist and intellectual. He devoted himself as a writer to showing the profundity of the lives of the unliterary, like Constance and Sophia Baines in *The Old Wives' Tale* and Elsie Sprickett in *Riceyman Steps*. Yet he also maintained that knowledge of literature was a vital component for a fulfilling and fulfilled life.

⁵¹ Arnold Bennett, *Books and Persons: Being Comments on A Past Epoch 1908 – 1911* (New York: Doran, 1917), pp. 99 – 100.

⁵² Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p. 152.

Paradoxes and contradictions

This thesis will also demonstrate that Bennett's work sheltered many paradoxes and contradictions. These explain why his craft was multi-layered: he was not only a serious artist, engaged in a persistent struggle to identify the most accomplished European fiction so that he could emulate it in his own work, but also an entertainer, polemicist, ideologue, and businessman. The most recent appraisals of Bennett's work, such as Clive E. Hill's in 2011, have begun to re-evaluate the range and complexities of his career. Even critiques, like Hill's, however, are not immune to patronising gibes at his popular middlebrow fiction:

He was a typical 'middlebrow' author in that he wrote many short stories, several plays and travelogues, and even a few scripts for the emerging spectacle of cinema. He published novels regularly with several major London publishing houses. [...] He was able to avoid simply following popular taste by alternating both his publishers and the level of seriousness of his novels, although many of his more popular works were either thrillers or farcical comedies, structured according to the rule of serial writing, with limited characterization and numerous plot crises.⁵³

Bennett was not reluctant to accept the middlebrow mantle, nor did he shirk from taking up the cudgels against what he saw as highbrow arrogance. He was, for example, a stout defender of the best-selling authors A. M. S Hutchinson and Charles Garvice, whose works Modernist aficionados like Q. D. Leavis would have proscribed, as she made clear in *Fiction and the Reading Public*:

In what terms, by what scale, one asks, can decline or improvement be assessed? How can the reading public of the early seventeenth century be compared with that of the twentieth? [...] If we want an impersonal standard to measure by we should start by showing that the market is now, owing to popular fiction, in a less healthy state for literature [...], whose importance can be assumed to need no demonstrating to any reader of this essay. Then, with these facts in hand, to Arnold Bennett's rhetorical questions, 'Was it not worth while to give pleasure to the naïve millions for whom Charles Garvice catered...? Ought these millions to be deprived of what they like because...?' etc., one will be in a position to reply, without more exaggeration than is

⁵³ Clive E. Hill, 'The Evolution of the Masculine Middlebrow: Gissing, Bennett and Priestley,' in *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880 – 1950: What Mr. Miniver Read*, ed., Kate Macdonald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 45.

justified, ‘When any one buys a volume of Charles Garvice he is doing harm to literature.’ [It has then to be shown that when he reads it he is doing harm to himself. But this must be left till last.]⁵⁴

In addition, he had no difficulty in acknowledging without discomfort or embarrassment that the quality of his work was uneven. He openly graded his fiction and accepted without apparent demur that some of it was commercialised potboiling; his casual acceptance of the profit motive is clearly manifested in his attitude to the commercial imperative of the professional theatre, and is most egregiously presented in his play *What the Public Wants* (1909).

Bennett was always untroubled by his willingness as a writer to accommodate paradoxes and inconsistencies; for a liberal man, for example, his feminist credentials were not impeccable. Although he railed against the exploitation of women shop workers and was a fierce advocate of educational and economic freedom for young women, on occasions he could be gauche and complacently chauvinistic. The infelicities of some of his gender-coded assumptions in *Our Women: Chapters in the Sex-Discord* (1920), in which he advanced the unreconstructed proposition that men are intellectually and creatively superior to women, were at least partly responsible for the persistence of Virginia Woolf’s hostility to him.⁵⁵

In addition, it is ironic that he valued intellectual honesty so highly, whilst regularly cultivating a pragmatic hypocrisy; he appears, for example, to deride the acquisition of wealth as a means of procuring happiness in *The Human Machine* (1908), but throughout his career he actively set out to earn, amass and spend money, and whilst he was disturbed by the social consequences of economic distress and poverty he took few significantly self-sacrificing steps to alleviate them. This was

⁵⁴ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 208.

⁵⁵ Arnold Bennett, *Our Women: Chapters on the Sex-Discord* (New York: Doran, 1920) p. 112.

surprising because much of his writing was suffused with the enlightened principles which easily pricked his conscience, so that he frequently chafed at the worst aspects of social, spiritual and intellectual exploitation. He was always impatient with censorship and with the commercially driven insincerities of organised religion, retaining throughout his life an abiding mistrust of Wesleyan Methodism, the faith in which he was raised.⁵⁶ In addition, he worked tirelessly throughout his career to liberate his readers from the cultural snobbery of an aloof minority, and there is no doubt that part of his commercial and critical success was based on his appeal to a general reading public which was sympathetic to his accommodating style and conceptual accessibility.

Cultural Iconoclast, Psychologist and Modernist

Underpinning Bennett's career as writer was a frustrated iconoclasm. It should not be forgotten that his entry into the market place with his first published story and novel had been consciously calculated to appeal to the literary avant-garde and, as Kemp, Mitchell and Trotter have observed, he was a curious and energetic experimenter from the start of his career. Bennett:

is best known today for the novels set in the fictional 'five towns', based on the Potteries area of the midlands – his characteristic fictional territory, first established as early as 1902 in *Anna of the Five Towns* and deepened and broadened in later novels from *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908) onwards. *Whom God Hath Joined* belongs with *Sacred and Profane Love* (1905), another sensational tale, to a transitional phase during which he experimented with a range of genres.⁵⁷

Despite, or because of, his willingness to innovate, he never lost his ambition to secure the status and acclaim of a distinguished artist.

⁵⁶ Arnold Bennett, *Things That Have Interested Me*, 3 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1921 – 26), III, pp. 252 – 58.

⁵⁷ *Edwardian Fiction*, Kemp et al., p. x

Although he was puzzled by the alienating density and distracting ambiguities of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), he nonetheless greeted it as a significant artistic achievement, and he was one of the first to recognise the talent and potential of the emerging D. H. Lawrence. This thesis will argue that Bennett's admiration for Joyce and Lawrence metamorphosed in his critical reviews to strong sympathies with the Modernist enterprise. Modernity did not elude him, which is why he turned away from the Five Towns after completion of the Clayhanger trilogy, and why he was quick to champion Roger Fry's post-Impressionist art exhibition in 1910.⁵⁸ He was one of the first authors to recognise the actual and potential impact of the cinema on mass culture, as John Shapcott has shown.⁵⁹ In addition, throughout his career, he demonstrated his commitment to experimental innovation. As he recorded in his *Journal*, he was determined that *Hilda Lessways* (1916) would be the first systematic study in fiction of the ways in which women differ from men:

Yesterday I had a goodish large notion for the Hilda book – of portraying the droves of the whole sex, instead of whole masculine droves. I think I can do something with this, showing the multitudinous activities of the whole sex, the point of view of the whole sex, against a mere background of masculinity. I had a sudden vision of it. It has never been done.⁶⁰

A further instance of his determination to experiment artistically can also be found in his engagement with the psychodynamics of modernity in *The Pretty Lady* (1918), a wartime novel which he wrote when many of his critics argue that he had already begun to decline.

The idea of radical innovation never lost its appeal for him, and concurrently with Modernist writers he developed in his new manner novels techniques for capturing, and merging with his Darwinian convictions, the new Freudian

⁵⁸ Squillace, *Modernism, Modernity and Arnold Bennett*, pp. 22 – 23.

⁵⁹ John Shapcott, ed., 'Introduction' to Arnold Bennett, *The Price of Love: A Tale* (1914 repr. Leek: Churnet Valley, 2006), pp. x – xi.

⁶⁰ *Journals I*, 2 October 1910, p. 386.

appreciation of the latent psychological pressures on emotional and cognitive experience. This thesis will demonstrate that a key driver of Bennett's development between 1914 and 1930 was not only his introduction to Freudian analysis, but also the influence of the celebrated neurologist, psychologist and ethnographer W. H. R. Rivers, who stimulated in him an interest in how the secret, unconscious self was manifested in both social and private behaviour.⁶¹ Bennett's fascination with the complexities of the concealed psyche is scarcely surprising. Both his personal and professional lives were affected by the psychological stress of his severe stammer. Whilst his mother believed that it had resulted from trauma, when he fell out of his high chair as an infant and was reprimanded by his father, speculation about its aetiology has been inconclusive. He was always exposed to its incapacitating persistence, however, and his letter to his mistress, Dorothy Cheston, on 14 November 1923, provides an eloquent commentary on the miseries to which he was subjected:

I used to discuss this matter with the late W.H.R. Rivers, one of the greatest specialists in nervous affections. He could never suggest anything better than to forget the trouble & leave it alone. As he stammered himself, he would be very likely to know all there is to be known. Also he was a very intimate friend of mine, & a really great man. [...] Why the subject is not more generally studied than it is by the experts I have never understood, for the affection is very widespread (among males – it is very rare among females) & the nervous strain of it is of course continuous and severe – very severe. The said strain is too much for many sufferers and they retire to the completest privacy that they can arrange for. It is always a marvel to me that I, with my acute general sensitiveness, have risen above this *enormous* handicap and am even, in spite of it, recognised as a great 'persuader' of people.⁶²

Bennett was being somewhat blasé in his commentary. He sought professional help, but no doctor or speech therapist could relieve him of his oppression. He was unable

⁶¹ *Letters III*, 29 December 1919, pp. 119 – 20.

⁶² *Letters IV*, 14 November 1923, pp. 408 – 09.

to operate as a public speaker, and as a result lost significant income, for example, by his refusal to give lectures or readings on his visit to the United States of America in 1911. For many of his friends and acquaintances his impotent attempts to express himself clearly in speech were humiliating for him and trials of acute unease and embarrassment for them. However, the real significance of his letter to Dorothy is not his casual affectation of fortitude in the face of adversity, but his brief reference to his friend and mentor, Rivers. His work on the neuroses and manifestations of the concealed psyche was to have a major impact on Bennett's work as a novelist.

Re-evaluating Arnold Bennett

The separation of élite art and popular middlebrow culture is one of the main causes of the loss of Bennett's posthumous reputation. His achievements were first undermined when he was alive and then dealt a *coup de grâce* after his death. As a reappraisal of Bennett's achievements as artist, craftsman and tradesman, this thesis consists of five substantive chapters. Chapter One examines Bennett's work as a journalist, and demonstrates how it complemented and enhanced his career as a novelist. Chapter Two considers his work as a writer of regional fiction, and focuses on the two Five Towns trilogies and *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908). Chapter Three re-evaluates the significance of his work as a writer of serials and potboilers, and shows how this aspect of his craft has been undervalued. Chapter Four shows Bennett's emergence as a writer of post-war metropolitan fiction and engages with his determination to embrace modernity through his new manner novels. Finally, Chapter Five demonstrates that Bennett was a compulsive, versatile and gifted writer of contes, stories and novelettes. Apart from a brief reference to *What the Public Wants* (1909) in the Conclusion (Chapter Six), Bennett's highly lucrative career as a

playwright is not considered; neither is his work in the nascent film industry of the early twentieth century.

CHAPTER ONE

BORN JOURNALIST AND TRADESMAN OF LETTERS

I have not had a clear and fixed ambition. I began to write novels because my friends said I could. The same for plays. But I always had a strong feeling for journalism, which feeling is as strong as ever it was.¹

Arnold Bennett, *Some Impressions*, manuscript held at the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, 29 August 1926, quoted in James Hepburn, ed., *Arnold Bennett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 12.

In the opinion of his first editor, Fitzroy Gardner, Arnold Bennett was a born journalist.² His judgement, as this chapter will illustrate, was a shrewd one. The formative years of Bennett's literary life were given to the articles and stories which he produced for the local papers in the Potteries, and the inspiration for his early career as a writer was provided by the popular weekly *Tit-Bits* in which he won a competition for the best parody of Grant Allen's *What's Bred in the Bone* (1891). This had been followed by a period of what he later described as humiliating uncertainty as a freelance journalist, drawing on his legal experience to publish articles in half penny evening papers, like T. P. O'Connor's *The Sun* and six penny monthlies, like *Cassell's Family Magazine* and the *English Illustrated*.³

In practice, he had begun his career as a professional journalist on New Year's Day 1894, after having resigned from his post as a solicitor's clerk with the London firm of Le Brasseur and Oakley. Financial assistance from his father enabled him to take up the post of Assistant Editor with the *Woman* magazine which had been founded five years previously. The conservative nature of this weekly paper can be inferred from the crusading inertia of its motto, 'Forward but not too fast',

¹ Quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 12.

² Arnold Bennett, *The Truth About an Author* (1903; repr. New York: Doran, 1911), p. 59.

³ *Letters I*, pp. 10 – 11 and Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice: 1880 – 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 68 – 69.

and from its contents, where the emphasis was on domesticity – cookery, fashion, gardening and leisure.⁴

As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, Bennett never forsook his journalistic roots and no *cordon sanitaire* ever separated his work as a journalist from that as a novelist. The chapter will demonstrate that Bennett's craft was multifaceted and that his creative and artistic talents were not confined to his popular serials and canonical fiction. It will illustrate, too, that he was a versatile journalist, commanding the attention of both middlebrow and highbrow readerships and able, as a cultural arbiter, to influence a literate audience through his literary criticism and popular philosophies. The chapter will also emphasise that any reading of Bennett's work which separates his journalism from his fiction misconstrues the force and synergies which bind his work as artist, craftsman and tradesman of letters. Bennett was a driven man and the chapter will demonstrate that this disparaged and now neglected writer self-defined his craft at the earliest stages of his career and, having done so, ghosted easily and without self-reproach through, around and among genre fiction, highbrow literature and a gamut of literary, non-literary and political journalism. A fundamental characteristic of his career was that he saw no difficulty in producing serious fiction, light and sensational fiction, and journalism all at the same time. This was because he accepted that the skills of the journalist were similar to those of the realist novelist.

In view of this, I take issue in this chapter with Peter McDonald's misleading proposition that Bennett began his career as an Assistant Editor with few ambitions to become a literary writer.⁵ Admittedly, Bennett's own self-ascription as a

⁴ *Letters I*, p. 13.

⁵ McDonald, *British Literary Culture*, p. 69.

mediocrity when he wrote to his friend, George Sturt, in October 1894 was peppered with dispirited resignation:

I may say that I have no inward assurance that I could ever do anything more than mediocre viewed strictly as art – very mediocre. On the other hand, I have a clear idea that by cultivating ‘that lightness of touch’ to which you refer, & exercising it upon the topicalities of the hour, I could turn out things which would be read with zest, & about which the man in the street would say to his friends ‘Have you read so & so in the What-is-it?’ I would sooner succeed as a caricaturist of passing follies than fail as a producer of ‘documents humains’.⁶

What McDonald fails to acknowledge, however, is that Bennett’s career was full of contradictions and compromises and that he never actually succumbed to self-commiserating disintegration. His letters to Sturt may imply a stoic and deflated acceptance that he would achieve little more than popularity with a less literate and cultured readership, but only a superficial interpretation of his comments would view them as the disconsolate lament of a depressed and defeated young author torn between his aspirations to produce serious artistic fiction and his ambitions to achieve celebrity and material success.

A teasing writer who frequently cloaked himself in disparagement and diffidence when commenting on his work, he appeared at times to consign his abilities and talent as a writer to a pit of despair.⁷ On the other hand, his propensity for posturing and self-aggrandisement was one which Sturt recognised, questioned and rejected as a pose.⁸ Even Bennett himself was prepared to concede his capacity for self-indulgent contradiction:

I have boasted to at least one person (another of my indiscretions) that I know I am an artist. I know no such thing. When I have read my first novel in print, I think I shall know. Yes, I am well aware that this farrago, coming from a youthful person who has nothing to show, nothing done, is absurdly self-conscious & egotistic.⁹

⁶ *Letters II*, 28 October 1894, p. 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23 April 1901, pp. 149 – 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Sturt’s letter to Bennett, 9 May 1901, p. 152.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11 November 1895, p. 27.

The main force of Bennett's ambition can be seen in his revelation to Sturt in April 1901 that he wished to become famous:

I am constantly disgusted that I can't work like Balzac, who literally wore out four chairs, & died exhausted at 52, despite a superb constitution. [...] Although I am 33 & I have not made a name, I infallibly know that I *shall* make a name, & that soon. But I should like to be a legend. I think I have settled in my own mind that my work will never be better than third rate, judged by the high standards, but I shall be cunning enough to make it impose on my contemporaries. And that is something. My plays will make a market for my novels; this is a very neat arrangement.¹⁰

The driving force of this thesis is to demonstrate that, since his death, he has been denied the recognition which he coveted and which he deserves.

Woman, Journalism for Women (1898), Academy, and Fame and Fiction (1901)

Whilst Bennett's career was never seriously impeded by self-doubts about his abilities, it was frequently galvanised by his feelings of unfulfilled ambition. Although he had been promoted to the editorship of *Woman* in November 1896 and invited to write for *Hearth and Home*, 'a dainty weekly for gentle women', in 1897, he remained disillusioned with the more prosaic elements of his responsibilities, as his letter written in December 1899 to the aspiring journalist and author Lloyd Humberstone reveals:

Just now I am consumed with a fever to chuck up women's journalism utterly, & go in for fiction & criticism only. I could do it if I had the pluck of a louse; but having got used to a comparatively expensive way of living I haven't the courage to make the necessary sacrifice. Nevertheless, I swear I will get out of that damned office inside two years or shoot myself. (I always keep my oaths.) Not that I object to editing a woman's paper & looking after nursery notes. It is not that. I am in editorial control of my paper, but it is only one of several belonging to a company, & I can't tolerate working for a company unless I am managing director or God almighty or something of that kind.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., 23 April 1901, p. 151.

¹¹ Ibid., 18 November 1896, p. 69 and 17 December 1899, p. 127.

Bennett's frustrated despondency is easy to understand. Before the cultural shift which followed Lord Northcliffe's launch of the *Daily Mail* in 1896, daily newspapers had conspicuously omitted any material directed exclusively at women. Even at the innovative *Daily Mail*, journalists were initially expected to provide its women readers with bland, domesticated fare specifically designed to reject intellectually challenging or *risqué* topics. Editorial fears were well founded: 'The first publication of an advertisement portraying a woman "in combinations" in 1898 provoked an uproar', and were representative not just of a conservative sexual ideology, but also of patriarchal constraint.¹² The element of gendered censorship which they endorsed did not provide Bennett with any enduring sense of professional fulfilment.

Whatever the appeal of editorial power, Bennett was seeking, as his struggle with his first artistic novel demonstrates, a role as stylistic arbiter from the very beginning of his career. It was, therefore, no coincidence that his professional primer, *Journalism for Women* (1898), was published in the same year as *A Man from the North* (1898). In this publication, he exploited his journalism as an entrepreneur and transactional retailer, exacting payment for sharing advice and guidance with those who had interests, hopes and ambitions to become writers themselves. Ostensibly, it was a *pot-pourri* offering the practical guidance which women required if they were to gain a foothold as a working journalist. Much of his advice was functional and utilitarian. For example, he advised aspiring writers that all manifestations of human behaviour and the social structures which shaped them provided the most rewarding potential copy:

¹² Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 28 and p. 32.

A woman afflicted with journalistic ambitions once wrote to an editor complaining that she was out of the world, actually two miles from a shop. “Then write an article,” the editor replied, “entitled ‘Two miles from a shop.’” She did so; it was accepted and followed by others of a similar kind.¹³

Journalism for Women, however, was much more than a utilitarian trade manual. It reveals that Bennett was never ashamed of the articles which he produced for magazines and newspapers because, like Hilda Lessways in his *Clayhanger* trilogy, he took pride in what he regarded as important and valuable work:

Touching *Woman*, I do trust to make a better thing of it. But I reckon that already there is no other woman’s paper to come near it. I wish I could get my friends to see that it isn’t edited for fun, or to meet *their* tastes, but as a business venture, depending on the suffrages of perfectly ordinary women as they actually exist – not as they might be & will be.¹⁴

This conviction enabled him, not just in these articles but throughout his career, to demonstrate a facility for moving easily between commercial imperatives and aesthetic theorising. These proclivities explain why in his quintessential professional primer he saw no incongruity in referencing Schopenhauer’s comments in ‘On Authorship and Style’ to support his case that the enemies of good writing were hackneyed and trite expressions:

Everyday authors [...] do not really themselves understand the meaning of their own words, because they take ready-made words and learn them. [...] The result is that their foggy kind of writing is like print that has been done with old type. On the other hand, intelligent people *really* speak to us in their writings, and this is why they are able both to move and entertain us. It is only intelligent writers who *place individual words together with a full consciousness of their use*, and select them with deliberation.¹⁵

It is not difficult to see why Bennett was beguiled by these powerful aesthetics, but in one respect his enthusiasm is all the more surprising since Schopenhauer

¹³ *Journalism for Women*, p. 71.

¹⁴ *Letters II*, 2 December 1896, pp. 70 – 71.

¹⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Literature: A Series of Essays*, Selected and Translated with a Preface by T. Bailey Saunders (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891), quoted in *Journalism for Women*, pp. 41 – 42. The italics in this quotation were inserted by Bennett.

harboured an enduring disdain for those who wrote for financial gain, as he made clear in the same essay:

Writing for money and reservation of copyright are, at bottom, the ruin of literature. No one writes anything that is worth writing, unless he writes entirely for the sake of his subject. What an inestimable boon it would be, if, in every branch of literature there were only a few books, but those excellent! This can never happen, as long as money is to be made by writing.¹⁶

It was a point of view to which Bennett never subscribed.

Signposts to Bennett's subsequent career can also be found in *Journalism for Women* in his energetic encouragement to aspiring journalists to study the interest and tastes of their prospective readers.¹⁷ In support of his argument, he was able to demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of burgeoning commercial markets, pointing out the various requirements of the editors of popular penny weeklies and the halfpenny evening papers, as well as identifying the diverse publications which welcomed contributions from outsiders or inexperienced writers.¹⁸ Nor was he slow to point out that, whilst there were abundant markets in Britain, there were even more in the United States.¹⁹ These aggregated preoccupations demonstrate that Bennett's willingness to accept the obligations imposed on him by commercial imperatives was driven by a recognition that his craft straddled the marketplaces for light and serious work in both his journalism and his fiction.

That Bennett envied and sought the prestige and influence of the cultural mentor can be seen from the beginning of his career. Although he quickly became disillusioned with his position as a full-time editor, he relished his talents as a book reviewer and these were energised by opportunities to contribute to the *Academy* from 1898 onwards. The *Academy*, then edited by Lewis Hind, was a highly

¹⁶ *The Art of Literature*, pp. 3 – 4.

¹⁷ *Journalism for Women*, pp. 29 – 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 78 – 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

respected weekly review of the arts and sciences, and it enabled him to indulge his enthusiasm for serious writers – as diverse as Matthew Arnold, Ivan Turgenev, George Moore and George Gissing. Bennett's journal entry for 24 August 1899 provides an elegant example of his nascent capacity to curate and project both his journalistic and literary ambitions:

In an article of mine on d'Annunzio in last week's *Academy*, there is a passage which seems to me, now, such beautiful English that I can't help repeating it over and over, in my mind. Perhaps in ten years' time I may come to despise it in favour of a more severe, ascetic style. Here it is: 'Those rare creatures, sad with the melancholy of a race about to decay, radiant with the final splendour which precedes dissolution, wistful by reason of a destiny never to be satisfied, move through the drama with a feminine perfection of bodily and spiritual elegance seldom equalled and certainly never surpassed in any previous prose fiction.'²⁰

In addition, under the general heading 'Enquiries', he wrote a series of twenty articles for the *Academy* to analyse the heterogeneous celebrity of several popular writers, the genres which they exploited and the psychological affinities of their readers. These he collected and subsequently published in 1901 as *Fame and Fiction*.²¹ In the guise of advocate for the democratisation of art and literature, he defined himself in these important essays as a conduit between highbrow and middlebrow tastes:

If 50,000 people buy a novel whose shortcomings render it tenth-rate, we may be sure that they have not conspired to do so, and also that their apparently strange unanimity is not due to chance. There must be another explanation of the phenomenon, and when this explanation is discovered some real progress will have been made towards that democratisation of art which it is surely the duty of the minority to undertake, and to undertake in a religious spirit. [...] My chief aim in most of the following chapters is to explain to the minority why the majority likes or dislikes certain modern novelists.²²

²⁰ *Journals I*, 24 August 1899, p. 94.

²¹ *Letters II*, 13 February, 1900, p. 130 and *The Critical Heritage*, p. 17.

²² A. E. Bennett, *Fame and Fiction: An Enquiry Into Certain Popularities* (London: Grant Richards, 1901), pp. 5 – 6.

It was a role which he retained and serviced for the rest of his career and one, too, which was fuelled by self-aggrandising energies. As this chapter will demonstrate, Bennett never lacked the confidence to assume the role of magus, eagerly identifying and deconstructing the criteria for artistic and commercial success and providing compressed interpretations of these for a broad readership anxious to share and benefit from his powers of discernment and discrimination.

As a journalist, Bennett was frequently a bludgeoning proselytiser, but when he advanced the proposition in *Fame and Fiction* that a great novel could be written to unite two readerships, an exclusive minority (of those with elevated intellectual and literary tastes) with an inclusive majority (of those who lacked them), he belied his intentions with a cultivated and mocking insouciance; in apparently perfecting the template for a culturally egalitarian novel what he actually conjured was little more than a pastiche of highbrow bias and preconception soused in ironic cliché. The ideal novel would, he suggested:

afford abundant natural opportunities for sentiment of the simplest, lucidest, least subtle kind, and this sentiment must be produced by the machinery of physical event. The average reader has not yet perceived that a soul may have its history apart from the body; he can only see the one in the other, and if you offer him the one without the other, he will be mystified, and therefore aggrieved. It is not quite essential that the dominant interest of the novel should be a love-interest; I have shown in the chapter on Magazine Fiction that the great fiction-consuming public does not always demand its dish of Love; but a dominant love-interest would be advisable, because any taint of eccentricity is to be avoided, and because nothing can compare with a love-interest as a continual fount of sentiment.²³

This affectation of teasing ambivalence became one of his recognisable singularities as his career progressed.

In his *Fame and Fiction* articles, Bennett acknowledged and responded to the seismic cultural implications of the social and consumer shifts which the

²³ Ibid., pp. 17 – 18.

Education Act of 1870 had promoted. The national growth of literacy which followed had engendered a ‘New Journalism’ by commodifying a reader-centred enterprise for a mass audience. In writing his articles for this burgeoning readership, Bennett reveals himself as a determinist, one whose principles had been moulded by his conviction that the social distinctions conferred by birth and wealth both controlled and directed life opportunities and experiences. They reveal, too, his attentiveness to the realism on which he based his *Five Towns* and *Metropolitan* fiction – his class concerns become his fictive obsessions. In addition, they illustrate several of his characteristic strengths as journalist and critic – his identification with his readers, his refusal to patronise them, and his willingness to challenge their tastes. Like many of them, he admired synchronic crime and detective stories, but not in the hands of the popular Mrs. L. T. Meade:

Mrs Meade has said to an interviewer that her stories “are all crowded with incident, and have enough plot in each to furnish forth a full novel.” This is quite true. There is no padding whatever; incident follows incident follows incident with the curtness of an official despatch.²⁴

Neither was he reluctant to spare his readers’ faults, complaining teasingly of their habitual inattentiveness and mental indolence.²⁵

Although he assumed the maven’s mantle as elucidator, he did so with protestations of humility, willingly confessing that he had failed to arrive at a clear definition of popular taste. On the other hand, he had been working as a reviewer for several years before he began writing his ‘Enquiries’, and his experiences had bequeathed him a critical obduracy which he was not reluctant to deploy. Whilst he reveals his admiration for those who have succeeded commercially, he does not spare the unreconstructed blandness of the celebrated Victorian fiction factories:

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 13 – 16.

Miss Corelli has the not-ignoble passions of the reformer. She must tilt or she will die. That her tiltings are farcically futile is due neither to lack of energy nor lack of sincerity, nor diffidence in attack, nor doubts, but simply to a complete absence of humour and artistic feeling, and her rhapsodic ignorance of life. Invincibly self-possessed and self-satisfied, conscious of power, and, above all, conscious of rectitude, she revels gorgeously in her lyric mastery of the commonplace, deeming it genius, and finds in the fracas of pamphleteering fiction an outlet and satisfaction for all her desires.²⁶

He was not slow to excoriate other women writers too, accusing Sarah Grand of debasing literature by vitiating her creative imagination in her messianic determination to promote her tendentious religious beliefs. Rhoda Broughton's foundering faults as a writer arose, he argues, from her blinkered representation of the domestic novel. *Foes-in-Law* (1900) might have enjoyed commercial success, but it showed an atomised isolation from the struggling realities of the everyday world because of its imaginative failure.²⁷ As for J. M. Barrie, his weakness in Bennett's opinion was his inability to transmute life into elevated art, a criticism validated by his failure in *A Window in Thrums* (1889) to realise that:

the first and noblest aim of imaginative literature is not either to tickle or stab the sensibilities, but to render a coherent view of life's apparent incoherence, to give shape to the amorphous, to discover beauty which was hidden, to reveal essential truth. The great artist may force you to laugh or wipe away a tear, but he accomplishes these minor feats by the way. What he mainly does is to *see* for you.²⁸

In contrast, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novels succeed because her characters are connected with daily life, a point of view which both emphasised Bennett's commitment to realism in his fiction and encapsulated the essence of his quarrel with the post-war Modernists.²⁹ As for George Moore, his unique contribution to literature was to depict life as he witnessed it with all its Spartan rawness, economic deprivation and emotional insecurities. It is clear from his article that what

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 89 – 90.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 66 – 67.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 38 – 39.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

distinguished Moore for Bennett was his ability to conjure art from the commonplace by revealing that ‘from life at its meanest and least decorative could be drawn material grand enough for great fiction’.³⁰ This was a talent which, he believed, Moore shared with George Gissing who was also endowed with the ability to discover and present the recondite beauty hidden in unsuspected places.³¹ In shaping and articulating these opinions in his *Academy* articles, Bennett was incrementally developing the artistic credo which he sought to emulate in his Five Towns fiction.

Bennett’s association with the *Academy* encompassed more than just his *Fame and Fiction* articles and also provided him with the opportunity to entertain its readers with his facetious autobiography, *The Truth About an Author* (1903), which was serialised in weekly parts between May and August 1902. It was deliberately provocative and baited journalism, designed to be a *succès de scandale* with its assumption of provincial contempt for the effete indolence of his Metropolitan coevals and its triumphantly debunking assertion that the anonymous author had written, from the inception of his career, solely for financial gain rather than for a place on the Parnassian heights:

What, beyond the chance of a guinea, made me turn so suddenly to literature I cannot guess; it was eight years since I had sat down as a creative artist. But I may mention here that I have never once produced any literary work without a preliminary incentive quite other than the incentive of ebullient imagination.³²

The counter theory of the commercially driven artist that Bennett facetiously advanced as a journalist in this serial was a highly significant indicator of the intersections between author, reader, text and commerce which fascinated and engaged his critics and him for the whole of his career. Even as late as 1928 in *The*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

³² *The Truth About an Author*, p. 21.

Savour of Life, Bennett was still defending his right to publish lucrative, potboiling journalism.³³

Literary Taste: How to Form It (1909)

Literary Taste: How to Form It (1909) also metamorphosed from his journalism to re-emerge as a book. These articles are significant because of what they reveal of Bennett's eagerness to project himself as a cultural connoisseur so that he could legitimise his burgeoning celebrity as a novelist by tempting his readers with the prospects of self-improvement. In offering to share his literary predilections, Bennett was exploiting the cultural insecurities of an aspirational readership. His stratagem was to prey on sensitivities and perceptions of inadequacy and exclusion by articulating his belief that a classic text privileged a minority market which was intensely and permanently attracted to literature. As a counter balance, many of Bennett's authoritative pronouncements in these articles were characteristically functional and utilitarian. His approval of Mark Pattison's dictum that it was necessary to spend 5% of personal income on books in order to be considered a book lover reveals his untroubled acceptance that literary taste could be commodified, a viewpoint clearly illustrated by his calculation that a complete library would comprise 337 volumes written by 226 different authors, ranging from Malory and Chaucer to Thackeray and Dickens.³⁴ Tantalisingly, he offers no opinion on whether the acquisition of literary taste through financial exchange could develop or perfect the novelist as a writer. However, in demonstrating his willingness to engage his public in an authoritative discourse on serious literature, Bennett showed his

³³ *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 7 – 8.

³⁴ Arnold Bennett, *Literary Taste: How to Form It: With Detailed Instructions for Collecting a Complete Library of English Literature* (1909; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), pp. 99 – 126.

eagerness to confront the cultural and literary polemics which directed and channelled the development of his career as a novelist.

Pocket philosophies

Many of the articles which Bennett wrote were republished in a sequence of self-help coaching manuals masquerading as pocket philosophies: *The Reasonable Life* (1907), *The Human Machine* (1908), *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* (1908), *Mental Efficiency* (1912), *The Plain Man and His Wife* (1913), *Self and Self-Management* (1918) and *How to Make the Best of Life* (1923). In these popular and commercially successful editions, Bennett presents himself as a lifestyle shaman, seducing his reader with invitations to a more abundant mental, spiritual and physical life. With their emphasis on self-discipline, self-reflection and mental callisthenics, they can be viewed as Enlightenment by-products echoing Candide's conviction that, in order to lead a balanced and fulfilled life, 'il faut cultiver notre jardin'.³⁵

At times Bennett's self-help manuals appear to offer little more than vapid intonations and specious nostrums: willpower must be governed by common sense, personal ambition should be held in check by a suppression of egotism, emotional stability is only achievable when the intellect dominates personal feelings.³⁶ Some of his observations can appear as derivatives or worse: the Micawberish warning that control of expenditure is the key to happiness and personal dignity appears as direct plagiarism of Dickens.³⁷ In addition, in *The Human Machine* Bennett leaves himself open to the charge of shameless hypocrisy by appearing to spurn the money that he so conspicuously sought to accumulate throughout his career:

³⁵ Voltaire, '*Candide ou L'Optisme et autres contes*', ed., Pierre Malandain (Paris: Pocket Classiques, 1998), p. 163.

³⁶ Arnold Bennett, *The Human Machine* (London: New Age Press, 1908), pp. 73 – 83.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

Anybody who really wishes to talk simple truth about money at the present time is confronted by a very serious practical difficulty. He must put himself in opposition to the overwhelming body of public opinion, and resign himself to being regarded either as a *poseur*, a crank, or a fool. The public is in search of happiness now, as it was a million years ago. Money is not the principal factor in happiness. [...] There can be no doubt whatever that money does not bring happiness.³⁸

However, the allegations that, as a columnist, he was basted in self-regard and driven mainly by cupidity are undermined by his liberalism, his commitment to charity and tolerance in daily life, and his support of the rights of young women to a full education. Taken in aggregation, his self-help manuals provide him with the tools by which he is able to theorise a pathway to personal fulfilment. Mental equilibrium becomes an object of spiritual reverence facilitating the journey to a personal nirvana through daily readings of stoics and philosophers, such as Marcus Aurelius or Epictetus.³⁹ In this quasi-transcendental odyssey, spiritual cleansing is stimulated by intellectual curiosity and a willingness to embrace innovation.

Against this backdrop, it is clear that his self-help manuals were no disconnected, commercially driven jottings. As popularised, psychological therapies, they were so potent that they were welcomed even by medical practitioners, as Bennett recorded in his Journal when visiting America in November 1911: ‘Number of doctors. Two said that my books “Human Machine” and “How to Live on 24 Hours a Day” were regularly prescribed to patients. One said they had “changed his whole life”.’⁴⁰

However, his metaphysical preoccupations do not imply any abandonment of more earthly and mundane priorities. Significantly, given his career trajectory, he rejects in *The Reasonable Life* the disempowerment of provincial stultification in favour of triumphant Darwinian restlessness:

³⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 88.

⁴⁰ *Journals II*, 15 November 1911, p. 33.

To obtain a passably true notion of what happens to the mass of mankind in its progress from the cradle to the grave, one must not attempt to survey a whole nation, nor even a great metropolis, nor even a very big city like Manchester or Liverpool. These panoramas are so immense and confusing that they defeat the observing eye. It is better to take a small town of, say, twenty or thirty thousand inhabitants – such a town as most of us know, more or less intimately. The extremely few individuals whose instincts mark them out to take part in the struggle for success can be identified at once. For the first thing they do is to leave the town.⁴¹

These convictions are of seminal importance because they reveal in part why Bennett chose to explore the lives, not just of those who lived in the Five Towns, but also of those who abandoned them, such as Richard Larch in *A Man from the North*, Sophia Baines and Cyril Povey in *The Old Wives' Tale*, and Denry Machin in *The Regent* (1913), and they also shed light on the cultural and aesthetic imperatives which informed his realist representations in his novels and stories.

It is through journalism such as this that Bennett appealed directly to a literate and aspiring readership with its metropolitan and urban anxieties and frustrations. These he addressed in articles which he collected in *How To Live on 24 Hours A Day* (1908):

Philosophers have explained space. They have not explained time. It is the inexplicable raw material of everything. With it, all is possible; without it, nothing. The supply of time is truly a daily miracle, an affair genuinely astonishing when one examines it. You wake up in the morning, and lo! your purse is magically filled with twenty-four hours of the unmanufactured tissue of the universe of your life! It is yours.⁴²

These articles, like those in *Literary Taste: How to Form It*, exploit the psychology of envy and guilt and when collected and published as a volume they brought him more letters of appreciation than all of his other books put together. As he recorded in his journal in September 1909, his book's popularity enhanced his reputation as a writer and philosophical sage:

⁴¹ Arnold Bennett, *The Reasonable Life: Being Hints for Men and Women* (London: A.C. Fifield, 1907), p. 41.

⁴² Arnold Bennett, *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* (1908; repr. New York: Doran, 1910), p. 16.

Thomas Seccombe [lecturer in history at East London College] took three meals with us on Wednesday and Thursday. [...] He gave me some curious proofs of the popularity of “How to Live on 24 Hours a Day”. For instance, he was in a hotel one day and a motor party came in for lunch, and after lunch a young man of the party picked up the book, said its title was funny, began to read it, and couldn’t be got away therefrom into the motor.⁴³

His articles appealed to the increasing numbers of office workers who were disenchanted with the monotony and shallowness of their daily working lives, promising them that rigorous time management would generate multiple opportunities for aesthetic fulfilment through music, art, architecture, science and literature.⁴⁴ It was, ironically, a recalibrated *modus vivendi* in which Bennett knowingly transformed leisure and independence into servitude and labour. More significantly, the ideological genes of many of the characters which inhabited his light and serious fiction, from William Shakespere Knight in *A Great Man* (1904) to Edwin Clayhanger, can be located in the aspiration to self-improvement which Bennett endorsed. Finally, it should be recognised that the popular success of this book was a key driver in establishing Bennett’s reputation and credentials not just in Britain, but in America too. Writing to Frederick Marriott from Philadelphia on 22 November 1911, Bennett was justifiably jubilant:

It may interest you to know that I could have got scores & scores of engagements to read extracts from *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day* at from £75 to £100 a night. In fact I could have paid for 3 Lanchester autos by showing my face to audiences.⁴⁵

Political Journalism and feminist polemics

Bennett’s commitment to his work as a journalist can also be seen in his relationship with politically left of centre periodicals, such as the *New Statesman* which had been

⁴³ *Journals I*, 19 September 1909, p. 320.

⁴⁴ *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*, pp. 56 – 70.

⁴⁵ *Letters II*, 22 November 1911, pp. 293 – 94.

established in 1913 by Sydney and Beatrice Webb.⁴⁶ On 25 March 1915 he had agreed to become a director of this weekly, and from October 1916 to April 1919 he wrote without any fee, as he had done for the *New Age*, a column of Observations under the pen name of Sardonyx.⁴⁷ As Adrian Smith correctly suggests:

Bennett found this new commitment satisfying for at least three reasons: it fulfilled a propagandist role (how can we improve the war effort?); following his break with the *Daily News*, it offered a fresh opportunity, at least in theory, to address a national audience; and finally, it helped boost the *New Statesman's* circulation.⁴⁸

It is not surprising that Bennett wrote primarily as a political and social polemicist in the *New Statesman*. Where Alfred Orage, the editor of the *New Age*, had embraced not just left of centre politics, but literature too, the Webbs, on the other hand, viewed culture primarily as an unavoidable and distracting necessity for attracting and then engaging readers in the propagation of a collectivist political project. Through the *New Statesman* Bennett became a celebrated columnist and one anxious to demonstrate a concern for women's welfare and for their equal treatment as employees:

When one sees in a munition factory men and women working in contiguous bays upon exactly similar jobs, and the women admittedly doing their job exactly as well as the men, one cannot help thinking that both bays might well be occupied by women. I am assured that there is not the slightest difficulty in getting female labour when the price paid is anywhere near satisfactory.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Bashir Abu-Manneh, *Fiction of the 'New Statesman' 1913 – 1939* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), p. 1.

⁴⁷ Adrian Smith, *The 'New Statesman': Portrait of Political Weekly 1913 – 1931* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 99 – 100.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 99 – 100.

⁴⁹ Arnold Bennett, 'Observations', nos. 1 – 114, *New Statesman*, vols 8 – 14 (28 October 1916 – 19 April 1919), signed Sardonyx, VIII, 28 October 1916, pp. 84 – 85.

In addition, he frequently engaged in gender polemics, complaining proleptically of the shortages and poor treatment of military nurses in tones which were later replicated in his presentation of Nurse Smaith in *The Pretty Lady*.⁵⁰

Bennett's articles in the *New Statesman* expose some elements of his ambivalence towards the casual toleration of social inequality by an economically privileged hegemony.⁵¹ He demonstrates anger and contempt for those who are profiteering from the War and for the political and military incompetence which prolongs it.⁵² The desensitised crassness of post-war civil bureaucracy provokes particularly astringent disparagement.⁵³ On the other hand, at times of civil crisis, such as the General Strike in 1926, Bennett retreats behind reactionary redoubts from where he demonstrates that he has little sympathy with the strikers, an intolerance of insurgent social and political upheaval which is captured by Abu-Manneh:

According to Bennett [...] the "underdogs" have revolted against the authority of the government and will have to be beaten. There is no sympathy towards the miners here, even though their position was widely acknowledged as just by the liberal press and by the *N[ew] S[tatesman]* itself.⁵⁴

The significance of this observation is that it adumbrates the political compromises which Bennett accommodated in his *New Statesman* articles. On the one hand, he was comfortable in his role as an anti-military, egalitarian, feminist and Socialist, on the other hand he wrote as a Government propagandist who was appalled by any political or industrial agitation which threatened the fabric of social stability. Nothing better demonstrates the consecrated conservatism of manners and custom which regulated strands of Bennett's social and personal life.

⁵⁰ 'Observations', 2, VIII, *New Statesman*, 4 November 1916, pp. 106 – 07.

⁵¹ 'Observations', 58, X, *New Statesman*, 29 December 1917, pp. 303 – 04.

⁵² 'Observations', 41, IX, *New Statesman*, 4 August 1917, pp. 419 – 20.

⁵³ 'Observations', 98, XII, *New Statesman*, 28 December 1918, pp. 257 – 58.

⁵⁴ Abu-Manneh, *Fiction of the 'New Statesman'*, p. 52.

As well as his political journalism, Bennett also wrote as a muted feminist in the essays collected and published in *Our Women: Chapters on the Sex-Discord* (1920). Here his polemics are aimed at a clique of the most affluent and influential women and at those who try to imitate them. In complaining that even in the 1920s the married woman was an economic slave and in advocating that men should celebrate women with independent and forceful personalities, he was returning to the issues of social justice which he had first explored in his early fiction in novels such as *Whom God Hath Joined* (1906), *Hilda Lessways* (1911), and *These Twain* (1916):

Do I seriously lay it down that the married woman of to-day is an economic slave? I do, in the majority of cases. And I add that this condition of hers colours the whole of her marriage for her. Ask the young woman who gives up a salaried situation for a husband whether she does not feel the shackles.⁵⁵

His egalitarian values are most prominent in his reprise of the stance he took in *The Pretty Lady*, when he declines sympathy for the shallow, insincere lives and affectations of the wealthy society women who treat the arts as a convenient tool for their personal aggrandisement.

In contrast, it is undeniable that in his journalism Bennett could at times appear reactionary, chauvinistic and anti-feminist. Adopting, for example, a deliberately tendentious disjunction in *Our Women*, he claims that no theory of suppression can palliate women's failure to achieve greatness in philosophy, music, science, art and literature:

And the truth is that intellectually and creatively man is the superior of woman, and that in the region of creative intellect there are things which men almost habitually do but which women have not done and give practically no sign of ever being able to do.⁵⁶

He appears to adopt an even more reactionary position in his suggestion that it is the duty of women to look charming for their men. However, even though his feminist

⁵⁵ Arnold Bennett, *Our Women: Chapters on the Sex-Discord*, p. 163.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

credentials are frequently questioned, there can be no doubt that he was a passionate advocate of economic liberation for women:

My point is that, in order to abolish the economic slavery of women, every girl ought to be able to earn her own living. Further, she ought for a period actually to be able to earn as much money as would suffice to keep her in decency and independence if she had no other resources. To do this she must be brought at a comparatively early age into contact with the realities of the world.⁵⁷

It was a theme which preoccupied him and one to which he persistently returned not just in his novels, but also in short stories such as ‘Myrtle at 6.00 a.m.’ and ‘The Woman Who Stole Everything.’⁵⁸

As a coda to this section of the chapter, it should be noted that in one of his articles, collected in *The Savour of Life* (1928), Bennett conclusively repudiates the charge that he was patronising in his professional relationships with women. It is undeniable that he had exhibited a mordant hostility in his accusations at the start of his career as an editor that, as journalists, women were unreliable, inattentive to detail, and prolix.⁵⁹ What is usually overlooked, however, is that Bennett attributed their failures to a lack of adequate training. By the time he published the article ‘Editing a Woman’s Paper’ in *The Savour of Life*, it was impossible to misinterpret his admiration for the modern professional woman journalist:

In every way women journalists are far more expert than they were. Further, women have furnished to the world some of the most brilliant journalists in existence. I say nothing of the women-novelists. Any mediocrity with impudence and a freely-wandering mind can concoct a novel that people will read; but a woman who can produce a column of mingled expertise, sense, and stylistic brilliance, with a beginning and an end, really counts on this earth – where men still have the semblance of power.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

⁵⁸ Arnold Bennett, *The Night Visitor and Other Stories* (1931; repr. New York: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 185 – 203 and *The Woman Who Stole Everything and Other Stories* (London: Cassell, 1927), pp. 9 – 80.

⁵⁹ *Journalism for Women*, pp. 12 – 20.

⁶⁰ Arnold Bennett, *The Savour of Life: Essays in Gusto* (London: Cassell, 1928) p. 150.

Nor should these comments be read as a belated recantation of the criticisms which he had appeared to endorse in *Journalism for Women* (1898), some of which were little more than self-promoting commercial bluster, because his real opinion of the commercially talented female journalist can actually be seen as early as March 1902 in a letter written to Ida Meller, a former colleague and editor at *Woman*:

Tillotsons are in want of a fashion writer to do their syndicate column & arrange for drawings for it, & they asked me to recommend someone to them. Naturally, I recommended you, as the most reliable, capable, & business-like lady journalist that it has been my fortune to meet. You will hear from them immediately, & they have asked me also to write to you. I needn't tell you that they are able to pay well.⁶¹

Things That Have Interested Me (1921, 1923 and 1926)

On 19 February 1920, Bennett wrote to his agent, James Pinker, with a suggestion for a volume of articles and journalistic ephemera:

I enclose some items from a sort of journal, of various lengths. I also enclose a copy of a description of a prize fight, also from a journal, which I gave to the *New Statesman*; & which you will probably like. These impressions deal with both life and the arts. They are of all lengths up to 2,000 words. They are certainly as interesting as *Books & Persons*.⁶²

It was from such sources and other articles published, *inter alia*, in the *Daily Express*, *Sunday Pictorial* and the *London Mercury*, that the three volumes of *Things That Have Interested Me* were published by Chatto and Windus in January 1921, October 1923 and February 1926.

These articles tell us much about the views, attitudes and opinions which shaped the contours of Bennett's craft as a writer of prose fiction. As a forensic dissector of social injustice, he had little time for aristocratic extravagance and dissipation and was keen to reanimate the issues which he had explored in *Whom*

⁶¹ *Letters II*, 12 March 1902, p. 167.

⁶² *Letters I*, 19 February 1920, p. 278.

God Hath Joined (1906) to illustrate the cruelty of the legal system in its denial of compassionate justice to those who could least afford the costs of divorce:

It seems that poor people who take advantage of the law enabling the impecunious to get divorce cheaply *are* put at a serious disadvantage because they are poor people. If they have sinned themselves, they must confess it – and seriously injure their prospects of getting a decree, whereas Court officials are expressly forbidden even to ask rich petitioners whether they have sinned.⁶³

Given that Boots' circulating library had refused to sell *The Pretty Lady* on the grounds of its immorality, it is not surprising to see that, as a libertarian, he championed the work of Félicien Rops, whose aquatint, *Pornocrates*, he had referred to in his novel:

Still more about the censorship. In June last a firm of picture-dealers in London, very honourably known, ordered from Amsterdam fifteen etchings by Felicien Rops at a total price of £127. Last month the consignment had not reached these chaste shores, but the picture-dealers, after long inquiry, had learnt that it had been held up by the British Post Office, on the ground that some of the etchings were "indecent."⁶⁴

Neither is it surprising, to see that he cultivated a virile anti-clericalism through his persistent fusillades at the commercial insincerities of organised religion (just as he had done in his *Five Towns* fiction). In his view the doctrinaire supremacy of the *Sermon on the Mount* with its emphasis on the propagation of kindness and charity had been studiously avoided by the Christian churches and chapels.⁶⁵ Not that Christianity's exhortations to personal abnegation succeeded in stifling Bennett's obsession with luxury. The result was that his willingness to explore and defend in his fiction the sybaritic temptations of exclusive shops and hotels, as well as his own conspicuous commitment to accumulating and enjoying wealth, left him further exposed to unfair charges of materialist hypocrisy and greed.

⁶³ *Things II*, p. 55.

⁶⁴ *Things*, p. 254.

⁶⁵ *Things III*, p. 271.

At other times in these articles, despite, or because of, his eagerness to embrace modernity and radical subversion of complacent aesthetics, he is impatient with the intolerant snobbery of highbrow culture with its patronising rejection of the best-selling author.⁶⁶ There are in excess of one hundred and thirty articles in the three volumes of *Things That Have Interested Me*, but none has greater resonance than that entitled ‘Is the Novel Decaying?’ (1923). Here Bennett unpacked some of the basic tenets of the novelist’s craft:

The foundation of good fiction is character-creating, and nothing else. The characters must be so fully true that they possess their own creator. Every deviation from truth, every omission of truth, necessarily impairs the emotional power and therefore weakens the interest. I think that we have today a number of young novelists who display all manner of good qualities – originality of view, ingenuity of presentment, sound commonsense, and even style. But they appear to me to be interested more in details than in the full creation of their individual characters.⁶⁷

This was, as Bonnie Kime Scott suggests, the stance which Woolf was later to attack in ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’ when she announced the Modernist counter cultural abandonment of Edwardian materialism, celebrated the possibilities for liberating the author from the constraints of narrative convention and argued for an aesthetic renaissance to reflect the semiotics of everyday life.⁶⁸

Collectively, *Things That Have Interested Me* confounds the caricature of Bennett as an exhausted volcano which tainted perceptions of him after 1918. His willingness to grasp modernity, for example, can be seen in his defence of popular culture and its commodified mass entertainment, a topography which he had already explored in *The Price of Love* (1914).⁶⁹ At the same time his social conscience is

⁶⁶ *Things II*, pp. 72 – 73.

⁶⁷ Arnold Bennett, ‘Is the Novel Decaying?’ *Cassell’s Weekly*, 2 vols (21 March – 17 October 1923), 28 March 1923, p. 47 and *Things III*, pp. 191 – 95.

⁶⁸ Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 12.

⁶⁹ *Things II*, pp. 202 – 03.

revealed by his compassion for those whom industrialisation has entrapped, as can be seen in his description of his visit to a coal pit:

Yes, this was a highly up-to-date pit. Luxury was increasing everywhere. The masters had "powerful and luxurious" motor-cars, and splendid residences in unspoilt rural surroundings. The miners had the latest appliances for saving their lives. Something agreeably ironic about this.⁷⁰

The articles which were collected in *Things That Have Interested Me* show a clear consistency with those that he wrote for the *New Statesman*, for in both cases the irony of his value system did not escape him. He was aware that he enjoyed and, to a large extent, admired the trappings of luxury and fame which he had earned through his career as writer and dramatist. These were perceptions, however, which sharpened rather than blunted his social conscience and emerged in his last novels, such as *Accident* (1929) and *Imperial Palace* (1930).

New Age: Jacob Tonson's 'Books and Persons' (1917)

Despite his early success as a novelist, Bennett never neglected his journalism. In March 1908, just after the publication of *The Old Wives' Tale*, he had begun to write a column without payment in the *New Age* magazine (under the pseudonym Jacob Tonson) which he was to continue for the next three years and which was entitled 'Books and Persons'. His widely read and admired columns were influential, not least because of his ability to champion unknown, neglected or unappreciated Continental writers. It was, as Stefan Collini has observed, one of the first steps which would propel him along the path to becoming, as a critic and literary tipster, one of the most powerful cultural arbiters of London literary life.⁷¹

⁷⁰ *Things*, pp. 70 – 71.

⁷¹ Collini, *Absent Minds*, p. 93.

New Age was a periodical which suited him: radical, highbrow, yet appealing to a cross-section of the literate reading public, from army officers and colonial governors to board-school teachers and shop assistants.⁷² Under its new editor, Alfred Orage, the paper became the dominant weekly review of politics, literature and the arts, increasing its circulation from October 1907 onwards from 5,000 to 20,000 a week.⁷³ Its prestige was in no small part attributable to the popularity of Bennett's 'Books and Persons' columns and to the orchestrated confrontations which they cultivated. For example, Bennett's article 'Why I am a Socialist', which was published on 30 November 1907, was a testament to his adherence both to the left-wing of the Liberal party and his contempt for the hegemonic governing classes.⁷⁴

Whilst declaring that he had decided to adopt the point of view of the creative artist rather than the journalist, Bennett nonetheless wrote his Jacob Tonson columns to discuss newspapers, travel, censorship and European news, as well as literature.⁷⁵ They reveal his admiration not just for Conrad, Galsworthy, Wells and Forster, but for French writers – especially Maupassant.⁷⁶ His most admired role models were deliberately selected from the major nineteenth-century Russian novelists; in particular he admired Chekhov who he felt had achieved absolute realism in his work and whose art, he believed, was concealed by the superficial simplicity of his writing.⁷⁷ Nor were his celebrations of talent and originality confined to fiction. For instance, he introduced his readers to Henri Becque (who had died at the end of the

⁷² Drabble, *A Biography*, p. 165.

⁷³ Carol DeBoer-Langworthy, *The New Age*, Volume 2 (October 31, 1907 to April 25, 1908): An Introduction, The Modernist Journals Project, Brown University and the University of Tulsa <http://modjourn.org/render.php?id=mjp.2005.00.003&view=mjp_object> [accessed 20 December 2015]

⁷⁴ Arnold Bennett, 'Why I am a Socialist', *New Age*, II, 30 November 1907, p. 90.

⁷⁵ DeBoer-Langworthy, *The New Age: An Introduction*.

⁷⁶ *Books and Persons*, p. 9, pp. 109 – 16, pp. 214 – 17, pp. 292 – 93 and p. 117.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

nineteenth century completely unknown in England) as a premier modern French author and one of the greatest of all nineteenth-century dramatists.⁷⁸

His eagerness to embrace modernity is most clearly apparent in his scarcely concealed contempt for the insular Metropolitan indifference to Roger Fry's exhibition of Neo Impressionist paintings in December 1910. In conflating the possibilities for radical innovation in both art and literature, Bennett demonstrated that he was no intellectually lethargic reactionary:

Supposing a young writer turned up and forced me, and some of my contemporaries – us who fancy ourselves a bit – to admit that we had been concerning ourselves unduly with inessentials, that we had been worrying ourselves to achieve infantile realisms? Well, that day would be a great and a disturbing day – for us.⁷⁹

It was as if, at the end of the Edwardian age, Bennett had presciently identified the challenges which awaited him from Joyce, Ford, Lawrence and Woolf. His comments can be seen too as a natal moment in his career – a point when he began to conceptualise the possibilities for experiment in both art and literature, an awakening that resulted in his Modernist innovations in *The Pretty Lady* and *Riceyman Steps*.

In his *New Age* journalism, Bennett relished his self-appointed role as authoritative cultural moderator. In an article published in July 1908, he simultaneously praises Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), whilst bemoaning the success of E. C. Booth's *The Cliff End* (1908) as one of the novels of the literary season; in so doing he refines his analysis of the *sine qua non* for success in writing prose fiction:

Story-tellers born and accomplished do not tell poor stories. A poor story is the work of a poor story-teller. And the story of "The Cliff End" is merely absurd. [...] I really believe that composition, the foundation of all arts, including the art of fiction, is utterly unconsidered in England.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 255 – 56.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 285.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

With its sniping at stylistic infelicity, this review serves as a calibrated reference point for the crafting of fiction which was his preoccupation just at a time when he had completed *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), and was preparing to begin work on *Clayhanger* (1910).

Bennett's *ex-cathedra* judgements in the *New Age* are often summary and can be abrasive; in dismissing the works of Mrs. Humphry Ward, he complains that whilst her novels were skilfully constructed, they are not works of art and pander only to the gullible and uneducated and to their obsessions with privileged, self-regarding social hierarchies.⁸¹ Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope are all expeditiously dismissed as clubmen, unlike George Meredith who is extolled as a courageously sincere literary man:

Between Fielding and Meredith no entirely honest novel was written by anybody in England. The fear of the public, the lust of popularity, feminine prudery, sentimentalism, Victorian niceness – one or other of these things prevented honesty.⁸²

In the same liberal vein, he laments the death of the neglected Swinburne, an incomparable artist spurned by an ungrateful nation ill at ease with his iconoclastic sensuality.⁸³

In these articles we see Bennett, too, as the radical subversive. With Swiftian astringency and as a victim himself of circulating library prudery, he articulates an anti-bourgeois critique through his impassioned opposition to the censorship of books on both moral and practical grounds. The decision of the free public libraries in Hull to ban Wells' *Ann Veronica* (1909) was absurdly ill judged in his opinion, firstly because the novel was not pornographic or even indecent, and secondly

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 50 – 52.

⁸² Ibid., p. 135.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 129.

because it only succeeded in stimulating a demand in the local bookshops where none had existed previously.⁸⁴

The remonstrative tendency in Tonson's persona does not confine itself to fiction alone. In an article on how to succeed in journalism, he provides a caustic disquisition on the power of the advertising department in which he makes the claim that those who acquire editorial power are usually those who have secured the greatest commercial revenues for the paper. He is openly contemptuous of any proposal for a National Theatre and argues passionately that the Authors' Society has proven to be far more beneficial for the art of literature than the frequently mooted Academy of Letters, which he brands as the brainchild of the deplorable Metropolitan dilettanti.⁸⁵

Neither is he willing to conceal his inured commercial carapace. He unashamedly declares that artists seldom produce their best work unless they need or want money, and that like washerwomen they cannot live on and sustain each other. With declarative consistency he argues that the artist's first duty is to please the public. It is a recognition which leads Bennett to accept with equanimity and without demur that this might oblige the writer to adopt what he refers to as Anthony Trollope's clockwork method of writing.⁸⁶ Nor is he slow to recognise that this financial intoxicant threatens the writer's integrity and industry by reducing him to a competitive capitalist:

When once an artist has "tasted" the money of art, the desire thus set up will keep his genius hard at work better than any other incentive. It occasionally happens that an artist financially prudent, after doing a few fine things, either makes or comes into so much money that he is wealthy for the rest of his life. Such a condition induces idleness, induces a disinclination to fight against artistic difficulties.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 185 – 89.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 233.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 148.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 253.

The paradox is that when he wrote this article in October 1910 he lacked the capacity or willingness to foresee that within a decade elements of this charge would be levied against him.

What is also highly significant in the *New Age* journalism was Bennett's ability to distinguish discrete fiction reading publics and to recognise the imperatives for a market response to their tastes. At the top of his taxonomy he identified a metropolitan élite consisting of prosperous subscribers to circulating libraries.⁸⁸ His journalism was in part fashioned by his acceptance that this influential and conservative clique, isolated from its contemporaries, did not want to see its prejudices challenged:

Chief among its characteristics – after its sincere religious worship of money and financial success – I should put its intense self-consciousness as a class. The world is a steamer in which it is travelling saloon. Occasionally it goes to look over from the promenade deck at the steerage. Its feelings towards the steerage are kindly. But the tone in which it says “the steerage” cuts the steerage off from it more effectually than many bulkheads.⁸⁹

Bennett's angulation of the steamer metaphor is carefully positioned to capture the social apartheid of Edwardian and Georgian England with which he was always fascinated and to which he constantly returned in post-war fiction as diverse as *Mr. Prohack* (1922), the experimental *Riceyman Steps* (1923) and the underrated *Accident* (1929).

As a writer, Bennett was ambivalent in his attitude towards this elect, despising it for its snobbishness, dullness and arrogant contempt for the artist, and arguing that it did not provide material for the best novelists. This was the basis of a fundamental paradox which confronted him, which he never resolved and which left him exposed to the charge of hypocrisy. It was that his prosperity and reputation

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 88 – 89.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

depended to a large degree on this culturally dominant class and that he was phlegmatically willing to cater for its tastes in his fiction, journalism and drama. As Bennett acknowledged, it was ironic that it was the same class which had made novel-writing an occupation capable of providing a professional writer like him with his livelihood: ‘If you happen to be a literary artist, it makes you think – the reflection that when you dine you eat the bread unwillingly furnished by the enemies of art and progress.’⁹⁰ Below this élite, Bennett discerned an ‘enlightened crust’ of readers which consisted of lower middle-class professionals. It is significant that he believed that the lack of dedicated commercial outlets, especially in the industrialised regional conurbations, meant that the needs of this sub-class, and those underneath it, were frequently neglected. It was a critical audience for Bennett and not just for him: more than ten years after he had written this article, Michael Joseph’s *Journalism for Profit* (1924) readily acknowledged that respectable newspapers and periodicals had become totally dependent on fulfilling the needs and tastes of this immense middle and lower-class market.⁹¹

The Evening Standard: ‘Books and Persons’ (1926 – 1931)

Bennett’s journalistic career reached its apogee in 1926. At the beginning of November of that year he had written to Lord Beaverbrook to inform him that he wished to accept his invitation to undertake a weekly series of articles on books for the *Evening Standard*.⁹² On 17 November 1926, the newspaper contained a prominent display which announced that it would begin publication the next day of a feature unique in London journalism:

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

⁹¹ Michael Joseph: *Journalism for Profit* (London: Hutchinson, 1924), quoted in Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 181.

⁹² Drabble, *A Biography*, p. 313.

Mr. Arnold Bennett, the famous novelist, who years ago earned fame as a literary critic, has consented to resume the role, and will contribute to our columns a weekly causerie of current literary events, discussed with the candour and pungency that mark all his published work⁹³

It is not difficult to see why Beaverbrook was keen for Bennett to write for the *Evening Standard*. Both men were close friends, they had worked together at the Ministry of Information during the war and Beaverbrook had not only provided Bennett with much of the background material for *Lord Rainingo* (1926), but had also paid for its serialisation in the *Evening Standard*. However, Beaverbrook's interest was not just in the celebrated novelist and critic. Bennett had consolidated his celebrity throughout the 1920s, so much so that he had become a public figure and his journalism accounted for much of his popularity.⁹⁴ Beaverbrook knew that he could rely on him to increase the weekly sales of his newspaper.

Bennett's first article appeared on 18 November 1926 and thereafter he continued without a break, bringing and making the literary news until his death.⁹⁵ He rarely read the entire book which he was reviewing, wrote quickly and was very well paid, earning up to £3,500 per annum. According to Pound, his reviews became so influential that they were responsible for increasing the British sales of both Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) and Lion Feuchtwanger's *Jew Süss* (1925), so that both became best sellers.⁹⁶

Bennett tolerated his power and influence with a casually assumed indifference. However, his obvious pride in his work for the *Evening Standard* belies the cavalier attitude he affected when, during his final illness and a few weeks before his death, he wrote to his sister, Tertia, to tell her that he was unable to do any work except his weekly article which he always regarded as more of a 'lark' than an actual

⁹³ Quoted in *The Evening Standard Years*, p. xix.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁹⁵ Drabble, *A Biography*, p. 313.

⁹⁶ Reginald Pound, *Arnold Bennett: a biography* (London: Heinemann, 1952), p. 323.

labour.⁹⁷ It is true, of course, that he was able, as his journal entries show, to write his columns quickly and without inconvenience.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, it remains indisputable that he valued, and was always committed to, his *Evening Standard* reviews.

Not surprisingly, given the extent of his success, he frequently attracted professional rivalry and envy. One of his most vituperative detractors was Wyndham Lewis who disparaged him as the ‘Hitler of the book trade’, criticised him for his ‘Tipster Technique in Literary Criticism’ and reviled him for his servility because ‘he would praise any book put under his nose, whose author, or whose backers, would be liable to write him a “snooty” letter’.⁹⁹ After Bennett’s death, Queenie Leavis took up the critical cudgels in *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932). For her, Bennett had degenerated into a synecdoche for cultural malaise. Her *parti pris* denunciation of what she saw as the systematic overthrow of minority élite values relied on a stark premise – that the conspiracy against highbrow literature was orchestrated by a herd mentality which was obsessed with undermining qualitative distinctions in literature through the deification of the inferior and the popularisation of the mediocre. Her cultural script was embossed by her conviction that the majority of the newly empowered but fragmented mass market had acquired the reading habit without developing any critical intelligence. In consequence, the proprietorship of literary taste had been contracted to an élite minority:

The modern magazine, then, while being very much more ‘readable’ for the exhausted city worker than it ever was, has achieved this end by sacrificing any pretension to be literature; nor does it merely set itself to amuse and soothe. It is quite explicitly defiant of other standards and ambitions. And by accustoming the reading public to certain limited appeals and a certain

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 365.

⁹⁸ *Journals III*, 15 October 1927, p. 238.

⁹⁹ Wyndham Lewis, quoted in *The Evening Standard Years*, p. xxvii.

restricted outlook, it has spoilt the public for fiction in book form of a more serious nature.¹⁰⁰

The end result was cultural and social entropy. As for Bennett, she complained that his *Evening Standard* articles were idiomatically couched in the values of the copy writer. In recoil from them as representatives of the debased contemporary review, she deprecated his deplorable influence as a moulder of public opinion.¹⁰¹

Some of Bennett's *Evening Standard* articles return to the furrows which he had repeatedly ploughed earlier in his career. He regularly complains, for example, that novels are too expensive and, therefore, unaffordable and that booksellers are amateurish. When writing about one of his most frequent topics, censorship, he complains of the pharasaical Anglo-Saxon mind which, mired in its hypocrisy and dishonesty, hates to acknowledge intimate, if embarrassing, truths about the private lives of the writers which it purports to admire, such as Shelley and Byron.¹⁰² Some of his reviews present his opinions on the detective novel and crime fiction, a genre which he was always prepared to defend against the prejudices of artistic snobbery. At times, he can appear as a hackneyed recycler of his own value judgements. His admiration for the Russian novelists of the nineteenth century had been well bruited by this stage of his career, and in arguing that the twelve finest novels ever written were all Russian he appears to offer little in the way of the radical or the innovative. However, these judgments should be read as constituents of a meticulously constructed wider discourse in which in a later article he perceptively suggests that Russian novelists were preoccupied with the psychology of the individual, while the French novelists, especially Balzac, were more interested in social inequalities.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 32.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁰² “‘Pharasaical’ Anglo-Saxon Mind that Hates the Truth”, in *The Evening Standard Years*, 2 June 1927, pp. 53 – 55.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, ‘The “Cowardice” of Thackeray’, 10 March 1927, p. 31.

Both of these positions are mapped on prominent co-ordinates in Bennett's own fiction.

Many of his articles allow him to return to familiar ground in order to theorise a structured aesthetic for the professional novelist's craft. In his review of Italo Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno* (1923), he is at his most assertive when arguing that the alchemy of good fiction transcends mimetic reportage:

The business of fiction, as of poetry, is not to report life but to transform it, heighten it, make it more shapely, more beautiful, more harmonious in design, while avoiding the impossible and adhering to fundamental truth. If your verdict on a novel is: "That *couldn't* have happened," the novel, as such, is likely to be bad. If your verdict is, "It might have happened, had life been less haphazard and untidy than it is," there is a fair chance that the novel is good.¹⁰⁴

In an opinion such as this, with its echoes of Sir Philip Sidney's definition of poetry as 'an art of imitation', Bennett reveals himself as an unobtrusive polymath; he was completely familiar with Sidney's poetics, as he had demonstrated in *Literary Taste: How to Form It* (1909).¹⁰⁵

In *obiter dicta* he proclaims that the most abundant and richest material for fiction is to be found in the everyday world, that the first job of the novelist as a craftsman is to tell a story and that the essential prerequisite for a successful writer is an all-encompassing compassion for, and empathy with, humanity – a conviction which he had first recorded over thirty years earlier.¹⁰⁶ At other times, he writes with retrospective expansiveness about the war novel. He praises *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and, despite the shortcomings of its translation from German, Ludwig Renn's *War* (1929) which, he believed, was ruthless and savage in its description of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 'The True-To-Life Novel is Not the Best', 20 March 1930, p. 358.

¹⁰⁵ Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 25.

¹⁰⁶ 'Too Much Love!', 18 September 1930, p. 412, 'Two Good New Authors in One Week', 26 July 1928, p. 180, 'Slack and Self-Centred Youth', 7 February 1929, p. 240, in *The Evening Standard Years*, and *Journals I*, 15 October 1896, p. 19.

the horrors of armed conflict.¹⁰⁷ On other occasions, he demonstrates an incisive and discerning critical originality. Writing in 1999, the contemporary novelist and journalist William Boyd described *Her Privates We* (1929) by Frederick Manning as ‘an extraordinary and unique novel – the finest to have been written about the First World War’.¹⁰⁸ Bennett in his review of the novel (then under the original title of *The Middle Parts of Fortune*) had already arrived at this conclusion sixty years earlier:

The title is explained by a well-known passage from *Hamlet*. It is not a satisfactorily descriptive title – save in a sense savagely ironic – and can only be attributed to the secondary effect of a poor pun. Never were men less in the favours of fortune than the heroes of this book. But what an inspiring and beautiful book! Assuredly I have read no book which gives so complete, fine and true a picture of military life in the trenches before an attack, and of military life “over the top” and through the enemy’s wire, than this book presents.¹⁰⁹

In his *Evening Standard* columns, Bennett effortlessly switches personae. He appears, at times, as a fractious elder statesman, as for example when he complains about the dearth of talent in new writers. In reviewing Mary Borden’s book of stories *Four o’ Clock* (1926), he observes that:

She has two faults, unhappily too common among young or youngish novelists who devote themselves to the portrayal of smart or high-brow circles. The first is that she describes her circles without any background of the general life. [...] The second is that she rarely writes natural dialogue.¹¹⁰

On other occasions, he resumes the role of a literary mentor for aspiring authors besprinkling shibboleths, mediated by his professional longevity and experience, for guidance and edification: nearly all good novels include a large portion of autobiography; the first task of the novelist is to tell a story; every novel should have

¹⁰⁷ ‘Finest German Post-War Novel Yet Translated’, in *The Evening Standard Years*, 6 June 1929, pp. 274 – 76.

¹⁰⁸ William Boyd, *Bamboo: Non-fiction 1978 – 2004* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), pp. 179 – 85.

¹⁰⁹ ‘A Tale of the Private’s War’, in *The Evening Standard Years*, 23 January 1930, p. 341.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ‘Plain Words to Our Younger Novelists’, 25 November 1926, p. 3.

a main theme which can be stated in ten words.¹¹¹ He is quite clear in his mind that no artist should ignore the mercenary considerations of his work, as is illustrated by an article in June 1927 which refers to the death at nearly 80 years of age of ‘Francis Grierson’:

To me he seemed to be ashamed of earning money by his pen and even of being interested in money. [...] No artist can rightly be only an artist. When he has finished his day’s work of sincere creation he must be a merchant. Therefore he ought to learn how to be a merchant efficiently – that is to say, how to sell his goods in the largest possible numbers and at the highest possible price consistent with honesty.¹¹²

Bennett has been described at this stage of his career as a Jekyll and Hyde writer, that is to say a serious novelist who was aggressively middlebrow in his *Evening Standard* columns, where he variously described himself as ‘a mere student of letters’ and as a lowbrow writer for ‘the man in the literary street’.¹¹³ His reviews occasionally reveal passive aggressive scintillas of self-justification as, for example, when he claims in November 1926 that the older generation of writers can still eclipse their younger rivals. However, he was always keen to engage in the debates on the nature of intellectualism and the role of the novelist which reached their climax in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The arch antagonist of the middlebrow reviewer was Virginia Woolf and Bennett’s sparring with her became a focal point for the cultural polemics of the post-war decades. Occasionally, there is a touch of ironic mockery in his criticism of her work. He denies that there is any friction between them, whilst simultaneously referring to her as the Queen of the Highbrows. In addition, he demonstrates no great

¹¹¹ Ibid., ‘The True-To-Life Novel is Not the Best’, 20 March 1930, pp. 357 – 59, ‘Two Good New Authors in One Week’, 26 July 1928, p. 180 and ‘Margaret Kennedy’s New Novel about the Dilettante Class: “The Writing is Nearly Faultless, But...”’, 27 October 1927, p. 95.

¹¹² Ibid., ‘Artistic Parasites: Authors’ Stage Rights’, 9 June 1927, p. 56.

¹¹³ Quoted in *The Evening Standard Years*, p. xxv.

subtlety or finesse when he damns her work with faint praise. Commenting on *To the Lighthouse* (1927), he observes:

It is the best book of hers that I know. Her character drawing has improved. Mrs. Ramsay almost amounts to a complete person. Unfortunately she goes and dies, and her decease cuts the book in two. [...] A group of people plan to sail in a small boat to a lighthouse. At the end some of them reach the lighthouse in a small boat. That is the externality of the plot.¹¹⁴

Bennett is prepared to accept that Woolf is a capable writer, despite her idiosyncratic abuses of grammar, but whilst apparently recommending *A Room of One's Own* (1929), he simultaneously rejects its central thesis which is that it is 'necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on it if you are to write fiction or poetry'.¹¹⁵ At other times, his views are more hostile and curdled with overt disparagement. He was unimpressed with *Jacob's Room* (1922) and completely confounded by *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) which he thought was marred by lifeless characterisation, gauche construction and thematic sterility:

I failed to discern what was its moral basis. As regards character-drawing, Mrs. Woolf (in my opinion) told us ten thousand things about Mrs. Dalloway, but did not show us Mrs. Dalloway. I got from the novel no coherent picture of Mrs. Dalloway. Nor could I see much trace of construction, or ordered movement towards a climax, in either *Jacob's Room* or *Mrs. Dalloway*. Further, I thought that both books seriously lacked vitality. These three defects, I maintain, are the characteristic defects of the new school of which Mrs. Woolf is the leader. [...] Logical construction is absent; concentration on theme (if any) is absent; the interest is dissipated; material is wantonly or clumsily wasted, instead of being employed economically as in the great masterpieces.¹¹⁶

The cardinal differences between Bennett and Woolf are captured in these sentiments. Her focus was on the fractured, impressionistic impulses of daily life and their control over human psychology and behaviour. Although not hostile to Woolf's priorities, Bennett focused more on creating conflicted characters and viewing them

¹¹⁴ 'A Woman's Political Romance and a Striking First Novel', in *The Evening Standard Years*, 23 June 1927, p. 59.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 'Queen of the High-Brows', 28 November 1929, p. 327.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 'Another Criticism of the New School', 2 December 1926, p. 5.

through the prism of their environments and possessions. He found it difficult to admire or appreciate *Mrs. Dalloway*, not so much because of what he considered to be Woolf's shapeless narrative, but more because her characters were cold, austere and unsympathetic.¹¹⁷

However, there were other occasions when Bennett was quite prepared to acknowledge Woolf's talent. He did not care for *Orlando* (1928), which he dismissed as a highbrow lark, but he conceded that in this novel she had written some of the most accomplished fiction of the modern age. Even so, it is difficult to repudiate Stefan Collini's argument that Bennett gradually became one of the 'most prominent of a whole clutch of reviewers and commentators who found it convenient to focus their hostility to the over-fastidious sensibility and social-cum-cultural superiority of "the intellectual" in general on this supposedly etiolated and affected, but increasingly successful, author of "difficult" novels'.¹¹⁸

Notwithstanding his occasional deferential protestations in his private correspondence with T. S. Eliot, these reviews reveal that he was not intimidated by the Modernists. As he was an admirer of Eliot's early poems, Bennett's declaration that he failed to see the beauty of *The Waste Land* (1922) is surprising. So is his admission that he was unimpressed with *Ash Wednesday* (1930).¹¹⁹ James Joyce's *Anna Livia Plurabelle* (1930), he concluded, was incomprehensible.¹²⁰ However, none of these criticisms signifies that he was intellectually repelled by modernity. For example, he demonstrated radical sympathies in his appreciation of the achievements of Radclyffe Hall in *The Well of Loneliness* (1928):

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

¹¹⁸ Collini, *Absent Minds*, p. 117.

¹¹⁹ 'Thousand Argue About the Modern Novel', in *The Evening Standard Years*, 12 December 1929, p. 331 and 'The War Story of the Ordinary Man', 8 May 1930, p. 374.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 'Back to *Riceyman Steps*', 12 June 1930, p. 384.

Nature has no prejudices, but human nature is less broadminded, and human nature, with its deep instinct for the protection of society, can put up a powerful defence of its own limitations. *The Well of Loneliness* is not a novel for those who prefer not to see life steadily and see it whole.¹²¹

Bennett's inclination for the heterodox surprise is graphically captured in this critique, where Matthew Arnold's High Victorian poem 'To A Friend', with its encomium to the integrity of Sophocles' moral vision, is juxtaposed with a *risqué* 1920s novel. What is equally incongruous is the gap between Bennett's role as he saw it, as a cultural commentator, and the role of the Victorian artist and cultural arbiter as represented by Arnold. (Where he was obsessed with the perfectibility of a dominant culture, Bennett was more concerned with filtering his cultural arbitrations by observing, absorbing, shaping and presenting life as it appeared to him.) Unimpressed by *The Well of Loneliness*, the editor of the *Daily Express*, James Douglas, took a different view from Bennett:

We must protect our children against their specious fallacies and sophistries. Therefore we must banish their propaganda from our book-shops and libraries. I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel.¹²²

The implacability of Douglas' denunciation of perverts determined to undermine Christianity presents an inadvertent encomium to Bennett's moral enlightenment and tolerance.

Bennett was incisive, too, in selecting for favourable review experimental novels such as *The Castle* (1930), which he admired because of its complexity and because of Kafka's technical accomplishment and artistry.¹²³ He held both D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce in high esteem. In his view, *The Virgin and the Gypsy*

¹²¹ Ibid., 'My Brilliant but Bewildering "Niece"', 9 August 1928, p. 185.

¹²² James Douglas, *Sunday Express*, 19 August 1928, p. 10, quoted in, 'The Well of Loneliness as an Activist Text' in *Radclyffe Hall: A Life in Writing*, Richard Dellamora – Richard Haney Foundation Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2011), p.194. ProQuest ebrary. Web 30 December 2015.

¹²³ 'Dying Author's Wish Ignored', in *The Evening Standard Years*, 3 April 1930, p. 363.

(1926) was a scintillating, first-rate novella of provincial life, and he regarded both *The Dubliners* [sic] (1914) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) as works of genius.¹²⁴

Bennett believed that it was a cardinal function of the literary critic to stimulate interest in good writing and because of this conviction he was consistently provocative and opinionated in his *Evening Standard* articles. As a result, he could appear deliberately patronising, as in his verdict on the afflictions of women as literary critics:

To say that women are not creative is manifestly absurd as regards imaginative literature. But it does not appear so absurd to me to say that they are not good critics. Women, through some decision of nature's, suffer as a sex from emotional instability. [...] Emotional instability is not a sure foundation for good judgment in literature, or in anything else.¹²⁵

As a counterpoint to this apparently chauvinistic prejudice, however, it should be remembered that he had shown few such reservations about women's abilities to perform as first-class journalists.

Afterword

Arnold Bennett wrote for money and to please his public, but he always regarded his journalism as a serious enterprise, never as an inferior supplement to his other work. The fiction on which the rump of his neglected reputation remains cannot be understood without an appreciation of it. As a fledgling journalist, he was at times impatient with lack of opportunities when he was an Editor, but he was never seriously tempted to sacrifice any component of his integrated career as critic, novelist, dramatist, journalist and lifestyle guru.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 'Is the Modern Novelist Going Too Far?' 16 October 1930, p. 421 and 'The Oddest Novel Ever Written', 8 August 1929, p. 292.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 'But Have They Read Them?' 11 December 1930, pp. 437.

He was always an ambitious man and he coveted not just fame and wealth, but also recognition as an artist and craftsman. His journalism is important because it functions as a relief map pointing to the most significant contours of the literary landscape between 1900 and 1930, and because it gives the lie to the accusation that he was, in essence, little more than a vain, acquisitive and materialistic writer. His journalism is also significant because it reveals the diversity of writers and critics who influenced him as both a novelist and theorist. French and Russian novelists, philosophers such as Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and Schopenhauer, and poets and cultural critics, such as Matthew Arnold, feature prominently in this lengthy and heterogeneous list.

As a proselytiser, he sought to bridge the cultural gap between highbrow and middlebrow audiences. In pursuit of this aim, he clearly set out to define the characteristics of good fiction for his readers so that he could help them to develop critical percipience and discriminating taste. At times, he could be summary and acidulous in his critical judgements, particularly in his dismissive contempt for formulaically stale and hackneyed fiction, but his articles and essays are important because they open up our understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of his political affiliations and moral sympathies, revealing him as a left wing Liberal and Fabian Socialist who could not stomach any threat to civil stability from industrial agitation and civil unrest.

Although he is often described as a patronising chauvinist, his journalism proves that this accusation is a canard; on the contrary, he consistently articulated modulated feminist polemics. The commercial exploitation of women appalled him, and he was an energetic campaigner for fairer employment opportunities and better education, especially for young girls. In addition, he was a strident opponent of the

social and matrimonial injustices to which married women were subjected. All of these concerns were incorporated into his fiction and short stories, but they were only one part of the ethical package which impelled him as a journalist to argue for greater social justice.

Bennett was receptive to innovation, and his articles also show that, as far as literature was concerned, he was unafraid of the experimental challenges of Modernism. In his role as literary critic and resolute adversary of cultural intolerance, he was revered towards the end of his career as a *non-pareil* of influence and taste. Unsurprisingly, his popularity sowed the seeds for the attacks which began to undermine him in his lifetime and which destroyed his reputation after his death.

Bennett had no concerns about the commodification of his journalism or his fiction; his craft straddled disparate markets, and he was able to operate simultaneously as aesthetic theorist, innovative artist and popular tradesman. His ability to infiltrate bourgeois aspirational culture was amply demonstrated by the popularity of his professional primers, self-help manuals and pocket philosophies. In *Our Women*, Bennett declared that if he could choose his own epitaph, it would be: 'He tried to destroy illusions.'¹²⁶ This chapter argues that, in his journalism, he achieved this goal as an articulate, disputatious and influential polymath.

¹²⁶ *Our Women: Chapters on the Sex-Discord*, p. 67.

CHAPTER TWO

THE REGIONAL NOVELIST AND THE FIVE TOWNS FICTION

I am now writing the third and last volume of my Clayhanger series. I have been cursed by readers over the entire civilised world for not writing it sooner. I didn't know enough about life to write it any sooner. I had to spend a year or two in learning. Also I was ill....It will be published next year if I'm alive. And I will tell you this – it will be the last volume I shall ever write about the Five Towns. I am going to write about London. I've published several novels about London, and I'm going to publish some more. London is a far better subject than the Five Towns. And also I'm going to write about the Continent – or, rather, about the English on the Continent. There's a rich subject for irony.¹

Article written by Arnold Bennett for *The Daily News* – published on 30 July 1914.

I don't comprehend your general objection to 'provincial novels', seeing that the majority of all the greatest novels in the world are provincial.²

Arnold Bennett in a letter to Lucie Simpson written from the Hotel de quai Voltaire, Paris on 18 June 1903.

Arnold Bennett's reputation today rests largely on his regional fiction, but his work on his Five Towns novels only encompassed half of his career. As the first epigraph of this chapter reveals, he grew tired and disillusioned with the Potteries after fifteen years of writing about them, and professionally abandoned them after he had published *Hilda Lessways* in 1916, just as he had physically abandoned them in 1889 when he had left them to live in London.

He was fortunate to begin his career just at the point when regional fiction had achieved popular public acceptance. The growth of the regional novel in the late nineteenth century had been inexorable and was a product of an expansion of the

¹ Arnold Bennett, *Daily News*, 30 July 1914, quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 74.

² *Letters II*, 18 June, 1903, p. 177.

reading public, the increased circulation of newspapers in the 1890s and the demise of the three-volume novel from the middle of the 1890s.³

The mapping of a consistent fictional topography was really Trollope's invention, and in this he foreshadowed both George Eliot and Thomas Hardy.⁴ Hardy, for whom Bennett had the highest regard, was the first to project a series of local novels, and his achievements were made possible by his knowledge of the factual history, tradition and folklore of his Wessex artefact.⁵ Like Bennett's, his plots were intimately interwoven with one or more of the local trades, and like Bennett's his themes were not circumscribed by region, but suffused by his determination to consider the workings of universal forces as they affected all humanity.

English regional fiction can best be understood through its common thematic and generic characteristics, whether rural or urban; these include a detailed description of a setting or region which bears an approximation to a real place, characters of usually middle-class or working-class origins and an attempt, however vestigial, at realism in dialogue. The quintessential regional novel valorises a culture which is non-transferable and is neither a mimetic portrait nor a sociological discourse, but more a cultural construct with a keen eye for people and their work and for the microclimates in which they live.⁶

Despite its middlebrow popularity, regional fiction has frequently been stigmatised and forced to negotiate a strident hostility. One of the main reasons why it has been so susceptible to disparagement is because of its predisposition to

³ K. D. M. Snell, 'The Regional Novel: Themes for Interdisciplinary Research' in ed., K. D. M. Snell, *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland 1800 – 1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 23 – 26.

⁴ Phyllis Bentley, *The English Regional Novel* (New York: Haskell House, 1966), pp. 19 – 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶ Snell, 'The Regional Novel', p. 1.

celebrate marginality by embracing localised heterocosms which have not been arbitrated by a metropolitan and metrocentric cultural élite.⁷ In effect, it has been subjected to crude assaults by intolerant hegemonists keen to silence those whom they defined as purveyors of the second-rate. It was not surprising, given her attitude to middlebrow fiction, that by the 1930s one of the most egregiously critical antagonists of regional fiction was Q. D. Leavis who scoffed that, whilst enduring literature was universal, regional writers were little more than unlettered shock troops laying siege to tradition, authority and civilised standards of taste.⁸

This chapter will demonstrate that Bennett operated in his Five Towns fiction as a subversive because he exulted in an anti-centralist stance in his endorsement of the view that political, economic, cultural, social and gendered constructs could achieve universal appeal when they were interpreted against an intensely localised urban industrial background. In the case of the Five Towns, it was one which was little more than eight square miles. As an ideologue, however, he was a contrarian. Whilst he aligned himself at the beginning of his career with those regional novelists who operated as detached, cultural anthropologists, his viewpoint shifted after he had become alienated and displaced by social mobility from the people and landscapes of his youth.

Bennett was a complex man and his own early and premature disavowal of realism in January 1899, before the publication of any of his regional novels, shows him to be an artful chameleon:

The day of my enthusiasm for “realism”, for “naturalism”, has passed. I can perceive that a modern work of fiction dealing with modern life may ignore realism and yet be great. [...] My desire is to depict the deeper beauty while abiding by the envelope of facts. At the worst, the facts should not be

⁷ Ibid., pp. 48 – 49.

⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

ignored. They might, for the sake of more clearly disclosing the beauty, suffer a certain *distortion* – I can't think of a better word.⁹

Although he eventually turned his back on regionalism, he never totally abandoned realism: any projection of him as merely a realist, however, would be seriously flawed. He was the most versatile of writers whose fiction was devoted to much more than unravelling the skeins of provincial bourgeois life. In addition, he was both an author who recorded the ordinary (which is no dubious praise) and a writer who was fascinated by women and their expectations and experiences of life.

This chapter will demonstrate that Bennett was in thrall to the romance and the transcendent beauty inherent, as he saw it, in the interplay between disfigured industrialised conurbations and the individual lives which they sustained. It will show that his regional writing functioned in reaction to the upheaval of modern life, and it will demonstrate that he sought to engage the literary market by registering the tectonic impacts of rapid change on those indigenous communities which he sought to represent. In so doing, it will challenge a fundamental flaw in Bentley's analysis of his work – her argument that he only rises above the blinkered limitations of his regional enclave in *The Old Wives' Tale*:

The histories of Edwin Clayhanger and his wife [...] are not so much the stories of an individual man and woman who happened to live in the Five Towns, as the story of two interesting types which the Five Towns threw off in the course of its evolution, and what the Five Towns did to them. Only in *The Old Wives' Tale* does Bennett's account of human nature transcend the local and become universal.¹⁰

Thus it will demonstrate one of Bennett's most significant achievements – the success of his project to delimit localised boundaries by demonstrating the capacity of individuals leading unexceptional lives in sequestered communities to contend

⁹ *Journals I*, 3 January 1899, p. 84.

¹⁰ Bentley, *The English Regional Novel*, p. 32.

with, and in some cases triumph over, the universal constraints of the human condition.

The shaping of the alchemic process

By the end of the 1890s, when he was beginning to turn his thoughts to the Five Towns as a source for his full-length fiction, Arnold Bennett had already set a course which would provide him with acclaim and wealth as a professional writer. He openly admitted that he wanted to earn money and to be famous, and this is why he was accused later in his career and posthumously of degenerating into a bloated literary capitalist. When he prepared to immerse himself in the Five Towns, he did so as a versatile graphomaniac. At the beginning of the twentieth century, he had established himself as an experienced and jobbing journalist who responded to the interests of his reading public by producing marketable and saleable copy. He was also an author who could respond enthusiastically to the commercial demands of editors for formulaic serial fiction, as well as a writer who had thought deeply about his craft and who had been influenced not just by contemporaries like George Moore, but also by those he considered to be the supreme artists of eighteenth-century English fiction and by nineteenth-century French and Russian novelists. Finally, he was an unfledged, nascent dramatist, ambitious for fame, recognition and wealth who was busily working on collaborations with established dramatists like Eden Phillpotts and Arthur Hooley.¹¹

One of his most distinguishing features in the first half of his career, as the second epigraph to the chapter suggests, was that he never shunned what others may have considered as the segregated backwaters of provincial life. This is because he

¹¹ *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 121 – 22.

was sustained by the conviction that any place or object could be transformed through fiction into something which was intrinsically interesting, as he made clear to Frank Harris in 1908:

What *you* want in life and in art is the *expensive* – I mean the spiritually expensive. I want it too. But not much of it (I did it in *Sacred & Profane Love*). At bottom I regard your attitude as flavoured with a youthful sentimentality. At bottom I am proudly content with the Pentonville omnibus. Why not? If I cannot take a Pentonville omnibus and show it to be fine, then I am not a fully equipped artist. (And I am).¹²

The provincial region with which Bennett is most closely associated is, of course, the Potteries in which he spent his childhood and youth. At the time he began to write his early fiction he was unabashed by their ugliness, and his fascination with them can be seen in his wry reflections on their latent but immanent allure:

The towns are mean and ugly in appearance – sombre, shapeless, hard-featured, uncouth; and the vaporous poison of their ovens and chimneys has soiled and shrivelled the surrounding greenness of Nature till there is no country lane within miles but what presents a gaunt travesty of rural charms. Nothing could be more prosaic than the aspect of the huddled streets; nothing more seemingly remote from romance. Yet romance dwells even here, though unsuspected by its very makers – the romance which always attends the alchemic processes of skilled, transmuting labour.¹³

The repetition of the word ‘romance’ and its contrast with the unappealing streets expose the submerged preoccupations of Bennett’s psyche. They reveal that in his regional fiction he wished to foreground his respect not just for the dignity of labour, but also for the paradoxes which bound beauty and passion to mundaneness, ugliness and emotional repression. It was an alchemic process which, as an artist, Bennett sought to evoke in his regional fiction.

His coyly understated pride in his appropriation of the unattractive Five Towns topography can be seen in his letter to St. John Adcock in February 1911:

¹² *Letters II*, 30 November 1908, p. 239.

¹³ James Hepburn, ed., *Arnold Bennett: Sketches for Autobiography* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), p. 38.

And I shall also be much obliged if you can find room in your special number to point out that the name of ‘The Five Towns’, for the Staffordshire Potteries, was invented by me, & is not the proper name of the district. The district is constantly referred to by my fictional name for it, as though it were the real name, even in the district itself; and also by other novelists sometimes. For instance, H.G. Wells, in *The New Machiavelli*, lays a number of important scenes in the Potteries, which he calls the ‘Five Towns’. The town of Burslem he sometimes calls by its proper name, & sometimes by my adaptation of it – Bursley. I do not want this statement, though, to come from me.¹⁴

As this chapter will illustrate, however, his affections for the region were neither unconditional nor permanent, but even when he had become alienated from the Five Towns after he had achieved international *réclame*, he never lost his respect for the people who lived there and who worked in the local industries.

Some of the catalysts which shaped his work were fortuitous. His return to the Potteries from London in August 1897 to condole with his sister, Tertia, following the death by drowning of her fiancé, was an epiphany for him, as he noted in his journal on 10 September 1897:

During this week, when I have been taking early morning walks with Tertia, and when I have been traversing the district after dark, the grim and original beauty of certain aspects of the Potteries, to which I have referred in the introduction to “Anna Tellwright”, has fully revealed itself to me for the first time. [...] Down below is Burslem, nestled in the hollow between several hills, and showing a vague picturesque mass of bricks through its heavy pall of smoke. If it were an old Flemish town, beautiful in detail and antiquely interesting, one would say its situation was ideal. It is *not* beautiful in detail, but the smoke transforms its ugliness into a beauty transcending the work of architects and of time.¹⁵

It is clear that, for Bennett, Burslem’s secreted contamination and the human activities which it sustained possessed an inherent beauty capable of stimulating his fascination with the passionate lives that flourished in its subfusc bleakness.

The most enduring influences on his regional writing were less adventitious, however, and were in the main writers whom he admired and respected. The letter

¹⁴ *Letters II*, 4 February 1911, p. 273.

¹⁵ *Journals I*, 10 September 1897, pp. 46 – 47.

which he sent to H. G. Wells in October 1897 reveals Bennett's pioneering conviction that the autochthonous Potteries and the dark splendours which impinged on and shaped the lives of its inhabitants could be depicted by means of an English variant of French naturalism:

I am quite sure there is an aspect of these industrial districts which is really *grandiose*, full of dark splendours, & which has been absolutely missed by all novelists up to date. [...] I trouble you with all this because you are the first man I have come across whom the Potteries has impressed, emotionally.¹⁶

As an inexperienced professional writer, he had no doubt that the prominent nineteenth-century French novelists, along with Turgenev and Tolstoy, had set a standard for all aspiring craftsmen and masters of fiction. He believed that the de Goncourts, Flaubert and Maupassant all shared, to some degree, Turgenev's austere technique, and he particularly admired the latter two and Zola because of their impartial, impersonal presentment of life. Having read these authors carefully and extensively, he felt that he had learned from the French novelists that beauty lay not inherently in the matter of fiction, but in the manner in which it was presented:

As regards fiction, it seems to me that only within the last few years have we absorbed from France that passion for the artistic shapely presentation of truth, and that feeling for words as words, which animated Flaubert, the de Goncourts, and de Maupassant, and which is so exactly described and defined in de Maupassant's introduction to the collected works of Flaubert. [...] An artist must be interested primarily in presentment, not in the thing presented.¹⁷

His determination to create beauty from his regional landscapes by stylistic and generic adaptation of his favoured French novelists energised much of his Five Towns fiction. He always felt that he could write with greater fluency and ease whenever he had been reading Balzac, whom he freely acknowledged in his Letters and Journals to be a source of inspiration, so it is not surprising to discover that, in

¹⁶ *Letters II*, 10 October 1897, p. 90.

¹⁷ *Journals I*, 11 January 1898, p. 68.

terms of plot and character development, there are clear links between the two misers in *Eugenie Grandet* (1833) and *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902). What particularly impressed him though was Balzac's talent for blending atmospheric evocation with economy of construction:

Balzac thoroughly enjoyed building up the social atmosphere of a place – and taking his full time over the business. Witness “Ursule Mironet”, in which a third and more of the book is “preparation”. “The Country Doctor” contains, strictly speaking, no “story”; the sole concern is a change of atmosphere.¹⁸

As for Maupassant, Bennett envied his ability to select intrinsically interesting subject matter and to write convincing dialogue, as the letter that he sent to his friend George Sturt in November 1895 demonstrates:

I find a novel the damnedest, nerve shattering experience as ever was. [...] Conversations are the very devil to me – at present; I eschew them all I can, & when I can't avoid jaw, Keep (sic) it short and *trés select*. This is à la Maupassant, who could, however, do conversations *à merveille*, when he felt that way.¹⁹

In addition, the passionate appreciation which he had conceived for Turgenev, whose art was embedded in its economy and spareness, was most graphically encapsulated in another letter written to Sturt a few months later in March 1896:

Turgenev, having conceived his story, deliberately strips it of every picturesque inessential, austere turns aside from any *artfulness*, and seeks to present it in the simplest, most straightforward form. That is why he can tell in 60,000 words a history which George Eliot or Thomas Hardy would only have hinted at in 200,000. He is the Bach of fiction.²⁰

With regard to English writers, Bennett admired Stevenson, Kipling and Gissing (because he had demonstrated an artist's talent by exploring the hidden, unsuspected and recondite beauty of unattractive places).²¹ The greatest Irish influence on him at

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30 May 1899, p. 92.

¹⁹ *Letters II*, 11 November 1895, pp. 25 – 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8 March 1896, p. 38.

²¹ *Fame and Fiction*, p. 201.

the start of his career was George Moore.²² Bennett was passionate in his admiration of him and pugnaciously determined to shield him from criticism:

The press, whilst witnessing faithfully enough to the extraordinary power and merit of his work, assumed an attitude of pained reproach, confronted him with arguments in which recur those notorious phrases, “photographic realism,” “nose in the gutter,” and “true mission of art,” and would on no account explicitly acknowledge his entire probity.²³

His prickly defence of Moore exposes a vulnerability. Whilst he wrote as a realist in his Five Towns fiction, he wanted to be recognised as something more than a documentary observer of his surroundings or a social problem novelist. It was the artist’s cachet to which he aspired.

He accepted without demur Moore’s idiosyncratic style which left him blind to the conventions of punctuation and composition because these faults, he believed, were overshadowed by his affinity with the French writers through his feeling for, and delight in, the use of words.²⁴ For this reason he did not hesitate to proclaim *A Modern Lover* (1883) as the first realistic novel in England, *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) as of first importance, and *Esther Waters* (1894) as a masterpiece.²⁵ However, all three, in his opinion, were surpassed by *A Mummer’s Wife* (1885) in which Moore offered an austere credo that ‘from life at its meanest and least decorative could be drawn material grand enough for great fiction.’²⁶ Bennett’s spirited support for Moore reconfigured itself as inspiration for his own work. He had reviewed *A Mummer’s Wife* for *Woman* in the mid-1890s, and such was his enduring respect and admiration for Moore that over twenty years later he wrote to him to say:

and I wish also to tell you that it was the first chapters of *A Mummer’s Wife* which opened my eyes to the romantic nature of the district that I had blindly

²² *Letters II*, 28 January 1896, p. 34.

²³ *Fame and Fiction*, pp. 233 – 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 259 – 62.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249 and p. 263.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

inhabited for over twenty years. You are indeed the father of all my Five Towns books.²⁷

All of these writers influenced his commitment to regional literature and to the development of his literary credo and tastes. These were certainly eclectic and changed over the years, but it is not difficult to detect their impact on him and his early Five Towns fiction. It was this impact, more than his apparent obsession with the commercial imperatives of authorship, which stimulated his reflections on the aesthetics of art and fiction. Even as a callow writer, he was committed to artistic eclecticism and clear that literature should be approachable, uncontrived and unpretentious, as he demonstrated with his teasing proposition in *Fame and Fiction* (1901) that a great novel could be written to unite middlebrow and élitist readerships:

There is a theory that the great public can appreciate a great novel, that the highest modern expression of literary art need not appeal in vain to the average reader. And I believe this to be true – provided that such a novel is written with intent, and with a full knowledge of the peculiar conditions to be satisfied; I believe that a novel could be written which would unite in a mild ecstasy of praise the two extremes – the most inclusive majority and the most exclusive minority.²⁸

What Bennett actually sought in his bonding project was to create a unity which would transcend the local and fuse together the tastes and intellectual receptors of his provincial and metropolitan readerships.

The Artist in search of his audience

Bennett's first attempt as a professional writer to exploit, albeit tangentially, the Five Towns for his fiction occurred with the publication in 1895 of his short story 'A Letter Home'. In its depiction of the decline in fortunes and the lonely and

²⁷ *Letters III*, 24 December 1920, p. 139.

²⁸ *Fame and Fiction*, p. 16.

unremarked death of a destitute man in London, it clearly demonstrated his ability to fashion an original narrative out of a derivatively Hardy-esque turn of plot, but its unevenness can be seen in his inability to escape from a maudlin Victorian sentimentality in which the dying Willie Hancock's letter to his mother undercuts and detracts from the story's more austere Hardy-esque strains:

DEAR MAMA, You will be surprised but not glad to get this letter. I'm done for, and you will never see me again. I'm sorry for what I've done, and how I've treated you, but it's no use saying anything now. If Pater had only lived he might have kept me in order. But you were too kind, you know. You've had a hard struggle these last six years, and I hope Arthur and Dick will stand by you better than I did, now they are growing up. Give them my love, and kiss little Fannie for me. WILLIE²⁹

His determination to publish the story in *The Yellow Book*, where it appeared in 1895, was part of his careful strategy to establish himself not just as a saleable commodity, but as an avant-garde literary novelist too. It showed that he was already prepared to immerse himself in the ambience of high art and culture, and it also highlighted his self-important confidence because as an unrecognised and virtually unpublished author, he was seeking to place his work alongside fashionable aesthetic luminaries and contributors, such as Max Beerbohm, Henry James and George Gissing.

There is, of course, an irony in Bennett's decision to turn to the Five Towns as the inspiration for his serious fiction, because in his personal life he had deserted them as a young man for the more expansive attractions and opportunities in London. It was a decision which he was never to regret and one which was shared by Richard Larch, the protagonist of his first novel, *A Man from the North* (1898).³⁰ Bennett had defected from the Potteries in 1889 and only ever returned for fleeting visits. His purpose in writing his first novel was not to illuminate provincial life, but

²⁹ Arnold Bennett, *Tales of the Five Towns* (1905; repr. *Tales of the Five Towns, including The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1964), pp. 146 – 47.

³⁰ Arnold Bennett, *A Man from the North* (1898; repr. Leek: Churnet Valley, 2007), pp. 1 – 2.

to explore the psychology of the metropolitan suburbs by exposing ‘a few of the hardships and evils of the life of the young celibate clerk in London’.³¹ The novel was partly autobiographical but, in contrast to Bennett’s, Larch’s attempts to reject the stultification of provincial life and to succeed in the metropolis as a novelist met with crushing disappointment.

Although it was a commercial failure (Bennett claimed that he earned just one sovereign more than he had paid to have the manuscript typed), it stood him in good stead when he decided to write about the characters and lives of the inhabitants of the Five Towns, and it forced him to confront the commercial obligations of the fiction market. In pursuing this goal, he was impelled by a determination to eschew the dandyism of technique, an impulse which led him to abandon temporarily the affectation of the ‘*écriture artiste*’, which he had adopted when writing *A Man from the North*.³²

The main consequence of his failure with his first novel was that his *modus operandi* matured quickly. In turning to the Five Towns for his source material, he thought not only in terms of discrete novels, but also of trilogies and sequels (at the root of which was a Darwinian appreciation of the impact of social class and community on the opportunities and life choices of individuals). The parturition of the Five Towns fiction, however, sometimes involved hard labour. *Anna of the Five Towns*, for example, took seven peristaltic years to write and its title was changed four times. A highly disciplined professional, Bennett wrote many of his novels either very quickly or according to obsessively inflexible deadlines, so at first sight the delay might seem to suggest that he was reluctant to commit himself to Staffordshire as a potential source for his fiction. This was not the case. One of the

³¹ *Letters II*, 31 January 1897, p. 75.

³² Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p. 154.

reasons why he repeatedly abandoned early drafts of his first major novel was so that he could focus on other more immediately profitable work as a journalist and on the confection of potboiling serials (between 1900 and 1907, he wrote and published seven of them).³³

The main reason for the lengthy gestation of the novel, however, was that Bennett wished to write serious literature with artistic merit and wide appeal. This ambition was at the root of his several redraftings, and in them can be seen his debt to his English and French mentors, particularly Balzac, who ‘held that the novel would have no permanence until it concerned itself with everyday persons and themes’.³⁴ Bennett never forgot that as a professional he was writing for two distinct audiences – the magazine reading and the book buying public. Although it was the latter audience for which he wrote his serious fiction, his purpose as an artist and craftsman was to portray in most of his Five Towns novels the emotional depths and psychological complexities that could be found in those who lived in ordinary urban and suburban communities.

Exposing and sermonising: first trilogy – *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902),

***Leonora* (1903) and *Sacred and Profane Love* (1905)**

When Bennett wrote to George Sturt on 31 January 1897, he disclosed one of his most cherished ambitions as a novelist:

Yes, I have known all along that a novel must have a purpose; to look at the matter from another side, it must ‘expose’ some aspect of existence in which the author is deeply interested. But it musn’t be didactic – at least it must only teach in the same way as experience teaches. All of which is platitude. My novels will all have purposes. [...] Of course I use ‘expose’ in the French sense.³⁵

³³ *Letters I*, pp. xiv – xvii.

³⁴ W.M. Conacher, ‘Arnold Bennett and the French Realists’, *Queen’s Quarterly*, 56 (1949), p. 409.

³⁵ *Letters II*, 31 January 1897, p. 75.

To some extent this was a disingenuous claim because his intention in writing *Anna of the Five Towns* was unashamedly to expose and condemn the psychological repressions and economic inequities of patriarchal power. This is scarcely surprising because even from the beginning of his career, he had always been confident about his ability to write convincingly about women. It was an artistic self-assurance which is revealed most clearly in his preface to *The Book of Carlotta* (1911), the American edition of *Sacred and Profane Love* (1905), the third novel of his first trilogy:

Although nobody suspected the fact, this novel was planned as the third part of a trilogy of novels dealing chiefly with women. An author may, if he chooses to keep quiet about it, safely write as many trilogies as he likes without being accused of the crime of pretentiousness, for the public will never of its own accord attempt to establish a relationship between three different books produced at different periods and offered for sale in different bindings. The first part of the trilogy was *Anna of the Five Towns*, which presented the uncultivated woman of the lower middle-class. The second part was *Leonora*, which presented the cultivated woman of the middle-class. And this third part (originally entitled *Sacred and Profane Love*) presents the woman of genius – who belongs neither to the middle class nor to any other class, but simply to her genius and to the passions of her own heart. The first book was tragic, but not necessarily so. The second avoided tragedy, by the beneficence of chance. It was inevitable that the third should be intrinsically tragic.³⁶

Anna of the Five Towns is in essence a psychological study of a young girl in her physical environment, and of her partial liberation from her emotional and material confinement. An integral element of Bennett's representation of her life was his attention to the intimate sociology of English provincial culture. He claimed that he wrote it as an observer of 'moeurs de provence' under the influence of Flaubert and Maupassant, but it was Balzac's influence which was unmistakable.³⁷ As Louis Tillier has noted, of all his novels, *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) is indebted most closely to a parent novel, which is *Eugenie Grandet* (1833).³⁸ Both

³⁶ Arnold Bennett, *The Book of Carlotta: Being a Revised Edition (With New Preface) of Sacred and Profane Love* (New York: George Doran, 1911), p. vii.

³⁷ *Letters II*, 18 February 1896, p. 36.

³⁸ Louis Tillier, *Studies in the Sources of Arnold Bennett's Novels* (Paris: Didier, 1969), pp. 26 – 29.

novels had young girls as their central characters and, as Margaret Drabble has shown, both young girls suffer at the hands of their dominating fathers.³⁹ Bennett's purpose in this novel was to show that life for women always entailed self-sacrifice and resignation. Thus, his feminist sympathies (at other times, muted, tepid and ambivalent) are focussed on the women who are the inexorable victims of patriarchal power. He achieves this in *Anna of the Five Towns* by psychologising the perpetuation of subjection and oppression:

This surly and terrorizing ferocity of Tellwright's was as instinctive as the growl and spring of a beast of prey. He never considered his attitude towards the women of his household as an unusual phenomenon which needed justification, or as being in the least abnormal. The women of a household were the natural victims of their master: in his experience it had always been so. In his experience the master had always, by universal consent, possessed certain rights over the self-respect, the happiness, and the peace of the defenceless souls set under him – rights as unquestioned as those exercised by Ivan the Terrible.[...] He did as his father and uncles had done.⁴⁰

Bennett progressively unfolds the complex psychic layers of the young Anna Tellwright. Ascetically impassive and resigned to spiritual melancholy, she is a woman born into the wrong environment and like Hilda Lessways susceptible to emotional and intellectual contradictions.⁴¹ For example, she hates her father for his domineering and uncharitable surliness, but can still find the compassion to love him in her heart.⁴²

Through his artful reticence, Bennett abandons his jurisdiction as omniscient narrator and, at times, obliges his reader to engage in a quasi-metafictional deconstruction of his text. For example, when Henry Mynors emerges from the Sunday school yard and speaks to her half-sister, Agnes, the encounter is an

³⁹ Drabble, *A Biography*, p. 95.

⁴⁰ Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 127.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

epiphany for Anna, since she realises for the first time in her life that she is loved.⁴³ However, whilst Bennett discloses that this is one of the three tumultuous moments of her life, he refuses to reveal the other two. In response to his reticence, the reader is compelled to enter Bennett's creating chamber in search of the other disparately significant events which will determine her life course, and these include Mynors' proposal of marriage, her first and only experience of personal liberation on the Isle of Man holiday, her decision to defy her father by burning Titus Price's bill of exchange, and her farewell to Willie Price, misguidedly assured that he would prosper in Australia.

By contrast what Bennett chooses to demonstrate unambiguously is that her willingness to accept marriage to Henry Mynors is a representative surrender to the repressive forces which perpetuate female subservience in the Five Towns. In submitting to a marriage with the respectable Mynors, she confirms acceptance of her subjugation, but only at the expense of the man she loves, Willie Price. Donald Stone suggests that her heroism rests on her ability to accept her lot and thereby transcend it, but Bennett's adherence to a French realist model is grimly unforgiving in its inevitability because the whole of Anna's adult life is moulded by her pragmatic resignation in her choice of husband and in her refusal to cross social and financial boundaries.⁴⁴ The tragic element of Anna's life arises in essence from her economic servitude (her inheritance provides her with a simulacrum of freedom and power, whilst denying her any possibility of exercising it independently, since her father continues to regulate her expenditure), from the fact that her life has been

⁴³ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁴ Donald S. Stone, 'The Art of Arnold Bennett: Transmutation and Empathy in *Anna of the Five Towns* and *Riceyman Steps*,' in eds, Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle: *Modernism Reconsidered*, Harvard English Studies 11 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), cited in Geoffrey M. Harvey, 'Narrowing the Abyss: Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns*', in *Études-Anglaises*, 60:1 (Jan – March 2007), p. 32.

marked out for her by Tellwright and Mynors, and from her resigned acceptance of her oppression as a childless wife.

Frequently assuming the polemicist's mantle in his regional fiction, Bennett writes as a religious sceptic in *Anna of the Five Towns*, where his distaste for the spiritual rigidities and hypocrisies of Wesleyan Methodism are evident. He discredits the Methodists with trenchant subtlety by demonstrating that they do not hold the naturally reserved and spiritually sceptical Anna in high esteem:

Anna felt, as she had often felt before, but more acutely now, that she existed only on the fringe of the Methodist society. She had not been converted; technically she was a lost creature; the converted knew it, and in some subtle way their bearing towards her, and others in her case, always showed that they knew it.⁴⁵

Bennett's distaste for organised religion is particularly apparent in his comments on the sanctimoniously cold charity of the Methodist entrepreneurs who never allow their religious convictions to interfere with their commercial and capitalist interests, even if this means the financial ruin and disgrace of their fellow tradesmen. Bennett does occasionally balance these filiations by his affectionate presentation of the generous and charitable Mrs. Sutton, but most frequently Bursley's Methodist orthodoxies are riddled with hypocritical cruelty, cupidity and fear. The Sunday school superintendent and embezzler, Titus Price, has no hesitation in dismissing a young girl pupil for stealing a Bible, the cornet player at the Revival is all too eager to supplement the collection by selling signed photographs of himself, and when news of Titus Price's embezzlement and suicide emerges, Mynors' sole anxiety is to preserve the reputation of the Wesleyan Connexion.⁴⁶ Thus, Religion is a tool which enables Bennett to illustrate the cultural praxis of the Potteries – the pervasive and Darwinian exploitation of the weak and defenceless by the strong and powerful.

⁴⁵ *Anna of the Five Towns*, p. 57.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 19 – 20, p. 72 and p. 184.

Bennett also makes use of space and place to establish the material, cultural and industrial fragmentation of the Potteries. Hillport House, the residence of Mrs. Clayton Vernon, is an opulent game reserve for Bursley's social élite. The description of Lansdowne House, the home of the Suttons, underscores their opulence and social standing and is placed in taut counterpoise to the physical austerity and emotional repressions of Tellwright's house, where the hermeneutics of Anna's clinically spotless kitchen point to her pre-arranged fate as wife and domestic helpmeet. In contrast to these arenas, Titus Price's factory at Toft End is filthy, decrepit and decaying. An apt symbol of his failure as an industrialist and manufacturer, it stands in marked contrast to Mynors' model potbank in Bursley.⁴⁷

Bennett also foregrounds The Priory, Price's house, in order to explore the marginalisation of the economically weak and socially powerless. Sarah Vodrey, Price's servant and drudge, dies there after his suicide, having worked without pay for her last two years. Her blighted life is captured in Bennett's artful economy:

The next day Sarah Vodrey died – she who had never lived save in the fetters of slavery and fanaticism. After fifty years of ceaseless labour, she had gained the affection of one person, and enough money to pay for her own funeral.⁴⁸

If *Anna* was indebted to Balzac, *Leonora* was, in part, a Flaubertian derivative. Wilfrid Whitten was alert to this when he celebrated Bennett's achievement in creating credible characters who retained their individualities, despite the oppressively enclosed and spiritually stultifying communities in which they lived:

And it is Leonora herself, with the charm and menace of her forty years, in whom the spirit of life throbs with a troubling persistence. It is Leonora, for whom the Five Towns is at once too much and too little, too stifling and too arid. She feels that one cannot think for ever in wedges, that one does not

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 223.

know life because one has become used to people, that there are feelings and emotions outside the dominance of routine. Leonora, still beautiful in her perturbing femininity, feels all this acutely, just as Emma Bovary felt it; but, unlike Emma, she has the strength of austerity in her blood.⁴⁹

Bennett was able to write his second Five Towns novel very quickly – most of it in little over four months.⁵⁰ His purpose in *Leonora* was not only to produce a study of domestic tyranny, but also to portray the awakening of repressed sexual passion and the thirst for independence in a woman thwarted by social and domestic accidie. Whilst the Stanways enjoy a more elevated social position than the Tellwrights, John Stanway and Ephraim Tellwright share many similarities. They are comparably selfish, insensitive and egocentric. Indeed, Stanway not only dominates Leonora, but he also seeks (unsuccessfully) to control the lives of his three maturing young daughters.

Bennett's *leitmotif* in this novel is psychologically driven and captures the tension between Leonora's passive acceptance of her domestic obligations as a respectable Five Towns matron and the awakening of her physical desire for Arthur Twemlow, the man whom her husband had cheated out of his inheritance:

John had not returned from Dain's, but Twemlow said he could not possibly stay, as he had an appointment at Hanbridge. He shook hands with restrained ardour. Her last words to him were: 'I'm so sorry my husband isn't back,' and even these ordinary words struck him as a beautiful phrase. Alone in the drawing-room, she sighed happily and examined herself in the large glass over the mantelpiece. The shaded lights left her loveliness unimpaired; and yet, as she gazed at the mirror, the worm gnawing at the root of her happiness was not her husband's precarious situation, nor his deviousness, nor even his mere existence, but the one thought: 'Oh! That I were young again!'⁵¹

Not surprisingly, Ibsen's influence is clearly detectable in *Leonora* because Bennett judged him, in terms of artistry, to be Turgenev's equal.⁵² Leonora Stanway is

⁴⁹ Wilfred Whitten, 'A Novel of the Week', in *T.P.'s Weekly*, 20 November 1903, quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 176 – 77.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵¹ Arnold Bennett, *Leonora: A Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1903), pp. 108 – 09.

⁵² *Fame and Fiction*, p. 223.

trapped in an unfulfilling marriage in which her domineering and dishonest husband views her as a possession. She is frustrated with her life, despite the consolation of three youthful and exuberant daughters, but she is in every sense living in a doll's house (her husband, as John Lucas remarks, even refers to her as Nora).⁵³ The difference is that Bennett recoils from Ibsen's austere radicalism. Unlike Nora Helmer, Leonora Stanway is not obliged to desert her husband; his suicide provides her with an escape from her marriage and fortifies her determination not to abandon her three daughters.

Bennett regarded *Leonora* as serious literature. He valued it far more highly than his potboiling serials, thought that it was superior to *Anna of the Five Towns* because he had provided Leonora with more psychological depth, and believed it was the type of novel which would both make and retain his reputation. As he told James Pinker, his agent:

It cannot be too clearly understood that though one may do lighter work for the sake of a temporary splash etc. & for relief, it is the *Leonora* type which is & will be the solid foundation of the reputation. It is *Leonora* and *Anna* which will be talked of 20 years hence, when people will wonder why they attracted so little notice at the time. This is certainly my opinion, but it is also the opinion of a number of other persons well able to judge, as you are no doubt aware.⁵⁴

Despite his achievements, he faced criticisms even from his close friends that the plot, particularly Stanway's suicide, was contrived. Bennett would accept none of them. For him, as he made clear to Wells, Stanway's death was the type of Hardy-esque coincidence which was part of the fatalistic fabric of life:

We should never be able to agree about the death of the husband. I take it you object to it because it is a *sort of coincidence* & because it solves (anyhow apparently) the difficulty of Leonora. I must talk to you some time about coincidences in fiction & in life. The fact that this death solves a difficulty is to me entirely beside the point. It is a part of the inmost scheme of my book. I seem to think that the novelists who would object to it that it was too timely,

⁵³ John Lucas, *Arnold Bennett: A Study of His Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 66.

⁵⁴ *Letters I*, 24 April 1904, p. 49.

are too proud to take the genuine material of life as they find it. Or they are afraid to. Because life is simply crammed full of such timelinesses. Personally, I think the stuff after the husband's death the best part of the book.⁵⁵

The third novel in Bennett's first trilogy is particularly important because it undermines the frequent accusation that he readily compromised his artistic integrity by reverting as a default to predictable and conservatively formulaic writing. *Sacred and Profane Love* demonstrates an eagerness to experiment, as he made clear to his agent, Pinker, in May 1904: 'I may tell you that *Carlotta* will be somewhat sexual (but never indiscreetly so), & I will bet anybody £5 it sells as many as *Anna* and *Leonora* put together.'⁵⁶ In his bawdy novella, *Sacred and Profane Love* (1905), Bennett attempts to present, through Carlotta Peel's own voice, and not through an omniscient narrator's, an affluent and independent woman who is uninhibited by her sexual passion. He may be attempting to demonstrate an untapped technical virtuosity, whilst remaining loyal to his Pentonville philosophy, but *Sacred and Profane Love* represents the nadir of his Five Towns fiction. Of all of his novels, this is the one which has encountered the most enduring hostility and indifference. Even Bennett himself came to the conclusion in retrospect that it was very green work. The reviewer in *The Pall Mall Gazette* was unsparing in his dissection of its shortcomings:

The title of Mr. Bennett's new novel is a triumph in the art of misdescription. It suggests associations which have no part at all in the crude and mundane story which he has condescended to put on paper. We say 'condescended,' because the book is not worthy of a serious novelist as the writer can claim to be, but only of a certain notorious type of authoress which its readers will easily identify. It is, in brief, a 'shocker'. [...] There is no doubt a market for such 'thrilling realism'; but one would rather see it left to those who cannot produce anything better.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Letters II*, 24 August 1903, pp. 179 – 80.

⁵⁶ *Letters I*, 21 May 1904, p. 52.

⁵⁷ Unsigned review in *Pall Mall Gazette*, 23 October 1905, quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 193 – 94.

With its tendentious assumption that the boundary between serious and trivial work was a gendered one and that Bennett had consented to professional emasculation in producing a sensational novella, this was a coded judgement which revealed as much about the critic's prejudices as about the weaknesses of Bennett's work. Even so, it is the case that, although he was trying to depict Carlotta as a powerful, sensual and impetuous woman, he failed. The cause of this was not his decision to innovate by writing the novel in the first person and from Carlotta's point of view. The flaw in his experiment was that, with its melodramatic tensions, it was more suited to the sensational serial trade rather than the serious fiction market. Nonetheless, his attempts to develop as a writer in this novella are significant because they represent, in the form of the sexually charged Carlotta Peel, his embryonic facility for exploring a new dynamic of gender relations, one which he later developed in the emotionally volatile and subversively passionate *Hilda Lessways*.

Bennett's willingness to accept the challenge of change and innovation explains why he was resiliently confident about *Whom God Hath Joined* (1906), which he thought was 'rather original and rather good, and quite unlike anything I had done before'.⁵⁸ It was a tendentious social problem novel, and he wrote it as advocacy for a more liberal divorce law. It is neglected today – ironically it even failed to make an impression on the publisher, A. T. Nutt, who had commissioned it, but in it Bennett diversifies, as a polemicist, in order to confront the problematics and futile cruelties of marriages which have collapsed or grown stale.

In order to capture the quintessence of prosperous middle-class life in the Five Towns (Charles Fearn and Lawrence Ridware, both of whose marriages crumble, are employed in the same firm of solicitors), his novel is again hewed and

⁵⁸ *The Critical Heritage*, p. 32.

crafted out of the mundane. He captures, in particular, the embarrassment and humiliation of public divorce; the court scene in which Phyllis Ridware, as co-respondent, lies about her relationship with Emery Greatbatch and exacts revenge on her husband, Lawrence Ridware, by revealing his illegitimacy, is exemplary in its portrayal of condign, retributory malice:

‘As to just cause for suspicion,’ Phyllis went on, not in response to a further question, ‘In the relations between the sexes my husband was always extremely suspicious. You see he himself is an illegitimate child.’ She spoke deliberately, in her low, clear voice, playing the while with the glove that hung on the rail. And she faintly smiled.⁵⁹

As in *Leonora*, the plot of *Whom God Hath Joined* turns on a fortuitous coincidence. The Ridware case collapses because of the sudden discovery that it should have been heard in a Scottish rather than an English court. This does not undermine the novel, however, because as John Lucas has noted, Bennett’s success can be seen in his coded revelation of the psycho-sexual cause of the marriage’s destructive tension:

It is clear enough that what he has in mind is their sexual incompatibility and it is *this* which induces the mutual hatred they come to feel for each other. In providing this sub-text, as it were, Bennett seeks to make an entirely credible study of the psycho-pathology of an unfortunate marriage, one whose realism is derived from the most advanced ‘scientific’ accounts of sexual types that contemporary thought could offer.⁶⁰

Bennett’s forte in this novel can also be seen in the way in which he contrasts the misalliance of the Ridwares with the more complex and turbulent viewpoints of those who are most affected by the destabilisation of the Fearnses’ marriage: Charles Fearn (the philandering patriarch), Renée Souchon (his passionate lover whom he summarily rejects after his infidelity is discovered), Annunciata Fearn (the daughter who discovers his infidelity), and Alma Fearn (his wife who sheds her

⁵⁹ Arnold Bennett, *Whom God Hath Joined* (London: David Nutt, 1906), pp. 351 – 52.

⁶⁰ John Lucas, ‘The Marriage Question and *Whom God Hath Joined*’, in *Cahiers Victoriens & Édouardiens*, 24 (1986), p. 43.

subservience, demonstrating a dignified and unanticipated strength as she sacrifices her personal liberation):

Alma surrendered. Alma forgave; she forgave unconditionally, but she forgave with proud dignity, and Fearn poured out humiliation on himself [...]. And nearly everybody ultimately succeeded in behaving as though nothing had happened. Charles Fearn certainly succeeded. Rumour had his name again between her scandalous teeth ere a year had elapsed. But he was very discreet, and very attentive to his wife; and he never began to vary from the path of rectitude till he had reached London, where all things are hid.⁶¹

The last sentence of this novel is a compressed spring of the issues which Bennett sought to expose throughout his Five Towns fiction: the accommodations and compromises of personal relationships, deceit and subterfuge in marriage, moral hypocrisy, betrayal of trust, and the whispering enticements of heterodox metropolitan alterity. They were the preoccupations which remained with him for the whole of his career.

A reputation established: *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908)

In its fundamental conceit, *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), the most important artistic achievement in Bennett's career, is a disquisition on the nihilism and bleak inexplicability of life. Its origins were recorded in the Preface to the American edition of 1911, and are to be found in a Parisian cafe restaurant in November 1903, an occasion when another customer, an old woman, behaved idiosyncratically, to the amusement of the waitresses and other diners:

I reflected, concerning the grotesque diner: 'This woman was once young, slim, perhaps beautiful; certainly free from these ridiculous mannerisms. Very probably she is unconscious of her singularities. Her case is a tragedy. One ought to be able to make a heartrending novel out of the history of a woman such as she.' Every stout, ageing woman is not grotesque – far from it! – but there is an extreme pathos in the mere fact that every stout ageing woman was once a young girl [...].

⁶¹ *Whom God Hath Joined*, pp. 415 – 16.

And the fact that the change from the young girl to the stout ageing woman is made up of an infinite number of infinitesimal changes, each unperceived by her, only intensifies the pathos.⁶²

It offers more than just a clear marker of Bennett's most persistent preoccupations in his regional fiction – the coexistence of romance, immanent beauty and industrialised ugliness – because it breaks free from geographical boundaries in that virtually the whole of Book Three is set in France. Whilst juxtaposing the lives and experiences of two sisters, Constance and Sophia Baines, in the second half of the nineteenth century, it simultaneously subsumes several other contrasts, interweaving strands of youthful aspiration, entrepreneurial energy, solipsistic ambition and economic power with illness, enfeeblement, generational conflict, and social disempowerment. It is of canonical significance because in it Bennett drew on the discourses and interventions which he had incubated in his earlier fiction and deployed others which he would develop more fully in the second half of his career.

As Peter Preston has argued, the novel iterates the psychological tensions inherent in explorations of personal autonomy – the ontological challenges of self-identity, self-definition and self-discovery – but it also confronts the unforgiving eschatology of time and fate.⁶³ Set in this context, Bennett's panoramic social history and family chronicle focuses on the generational conflict of the professional and commercial middle classes and the drudges who serve them. It also focuses on the loss of individual power and authority. John Baines, the archetypal Victorian paterfamilias, loses his health and his business, his wife loses her matriarchal control over her daughters, the drapery business which Constance and her husband, Samuel Povey, inherit prospers then fails, and in the most abrading irony of the whole novel the physically handicapped Dick Povey emerges in the new century as the unlikely

⁶² Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale* (New York: Doran, 1911), p. vi.

⁶³ Peter Preston, 'The Old Wives' Tale and the Fiction of 1908', in Papers of the Arnold Bennett Society Annual Conference, Stoke-on-Trent, June 2008, p. 31.

Edwardian harbinger of entrepreneurial innovation and modernity, just as his father's cousin, the undistinguished and civic nonentity Samuel, had done a generation before him.⁶⁴

The Old Wives' Tale made Bennett's reputation and confirmed his position as a middlebrow regional writer, but his interpretation of provincial life and culture in this novel sheltered many tonal complexities and some contradictions. Bennett refused to invest the banalities of Victorian provincial life with a retrospective numinousness, as he energetically scoured among the ugliness and disfigurement of nineteenth-century industrialisation. The Five Towns, and Bursley in particular, are frequently projected in an ambivalent, even unattractive, light since their coyness, restrictions, pettiness and ugliness are compared unfavourably with the speciously energising and uninhibited metropolitan freedoms of London and Paris. When Sophia Baines returns to visit her sister, Constance, after her long exile in France in Book Four she is appalled and revolted by Bursley's physical and cultural squalor. In tokenised contrast, her gift to Constance of the ornate Parisian umbrella and her ostentatiously groomed companion, the pet poodle, Fossette, are important signifiers of the cosmopolitan liberation which she has apparently enjoyed on the Continent.

Populated in places by parodic morality tale caricatures, such as the chemist Charles Critchlow and his future wife Maria Insull, Bennett's Five Towns are at times pits of joylessly energised repression and secrecy. The Baineses' neighbour, Critchlow, is so irredeemably selfish and devoid of emotional warmth that the relish of his life is his enjoyment of the sufferings and misfortunes of others. He appropriates the invalid John Baines as a companion in misfortune, and his Thursday afternoon conversations with him are conducted in his bedroom in lugubrious

⁶⁴ Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale: A Novel* (1908; repr. ed. by John Wain, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 594 – 95.

seclusion. Without a scintilla of human affection or empathy, he is unabashed in his condemnation of Sophia for neglecting her duty when her father dies of a choking fit. In the light of his callous self-obsession, it is not surprising that Maria Critchlow, the Baineses' indispensable assistant prior to her marriage, attempts to commit suicide following a nervous breakdown. Nor is it surprising that Critchlow's instinctive response to the news of Constance's death is merely gratified self-satisfaction that he has outlived her.

At times, the Five Towns are enfolded in cloaks of intrigue and exclusion. At the opening of the novel in the mid-1860s, Bennett locates Bursley firmly in the secret labyrinth of central England and shrouds the town in mystery and isolation which conspire to endorse and legitimise the austere inflexibilities of patriarchal power structures.⁶⁵ Even the impromptu architecture of the Baineses' shop provides a trope for the reticence and concealment that pervade Book One. The girls' bedroom is a cavern where they retreat for refuge and comfort and the shop's concealed corners impose boundaries which intimidate, subdue and ultimately disappoint them:

The Baineses' shop, to make which three dwellings had at intervals been thrown into one, lay at the bottom of the Square. [...] There were no curtains to any of the windows save one; this was the window of the drawing-room, on the first floor at the corner of the Square and King Street. Another window, on the second storey, was peculiar, in that it had neither blind nor pad, and was very dirty; this was the window of an unused room that had a separate staircase to itself, the staircase being barred by a door always locked. Constance and Sophia had lived in continual expectation of the abnormal issuing from that mysterious room, which was next to their own. But they were disappointed. The room had no shameful secret except the incompetence of the architect who had made one house out of three; it was just an empty, unemployable room.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 37 – 39.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 40 – 41.

The Old Wives' Tale reveals much of Bennett's approach to his craft, whilst at the same time providing the fingerposts to indicate the subsequent direction of his career. Bennett was always fascinated as a writer with issues of modernity and change, and in *The Old Wives' Tale* these are frequently nurtured in elided metaphors of transport and travel. Through them he references the cultural and social disruptions of railways, bicycles, hot air balloons, electric trams and the internal combustion engine.⁶⁷ The semi-feral reputation of the navvies who intrude into the community to construct the new railway line serve as an oppressing prolegomenon of the external forces which are preparing to invade and reshape the commercial and social contours of Five Towns' life. Whilst the railway is an agent of intrusive modernity, its construction disfigures the local landscape, providing from the outset challenging auguries for Sophia Baines' nascent but ultimately doomed relationship with her future husband, Gerald Scales. Her dalliance with him is vicariously spattered and defiled with the mud and marl which clings to his boots following her assignation with him at the railway bridge in Book One. As Bennett remarks: 'The encounter was as far away from Sophia's ideal conception as Manchester from Venice.'⁶⁸

Mobile capitalism, with its disruptive and intrusive energies, is brought into Bursley's concealed labyrinth by Scales, the commercial traveller. As an itinerant outsider, he champions and embodies an amorality which subverts the values of John Baines' generation. An opportunistic philanderer, he is a manipulative and unscrupulous liar who reveals in Book Three that he is promiscuously at ease in the world of the Parisian *demi-monde*. His rootlessness serves as a proxy for his irresponsible impulsiveness and for his betrayal of Sophia. In essence he is little

⁶⁷ Preston, 'The Old Wives' Tale and the Fiction of 1908', p. 30.

⁶⁸ *The Old Wives' Tale*, pp. 146 – 47.

more than an impulsive spendthrift, duplicitously eloping to London and Paris in order to seduce her, and callously rejecting her in his impoverishment for the sensual allurements of a Parisian prostitute.⁶⁹

From a complementary yet contrasting perspective, Constance's son, Cyril Povey, is, like Scales, an itinerant and destructive force. That he will ultimately disappoint his parents' respectable ambitions for his adolescence and adulthood is precluded in their anxieties when his school moves from Bursley to Shawport Hall:

The removal of the Endowed School to more commodious premises in the shape of Shawport Hall, an ancient mansion with fifty rooms and five acres of land round about it, was not a change that quite pleased Samuel or Constance. They admitted the hygienic advantages, but Shawport Hall was three-quarters of a mile distant from St. Luke's Square – in the hollow that separates Bursley from its suburb of Hillport; whereas the Wedgwood Institution was scarcely a minute away. It was as if Cyril, when he set off for Shawport Hall of a morning, passed out of their sphere of influence. He was leagues off, doing they knew not what.⁷⁰

As he matures into the embodiment of the modern young man with his watch chain, tailored collars and crafted boots, Bennett plots his defects with adept irony:

He was a good man, amazingly industrious – when once Constance had got him out of bed in the morning; with no vices; kind, save when Constance mistakenly tried to thwart him; charming, with a curious strain of humour that Constance only half understood.⁷¹

Driven by his talent as an artist, he is determined to break free from Bursley and seize the opportunities provided by his scholarship to Art School in south Kensington but, having broken free from the mental and emotional stultification of life in Bursley, he is insensitively reluctant to respond to his mother's emotional dependence on his infrequent visits and sporadic letters. Nor, like his aunt, as Bennett indicates with mordant asymmetry, does he ever harbour intentions of relinquishing his independence:

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 368 – 71.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 234.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 302.

‘What do *you* suggest?’ Cyril asked, with impatience in his voice against this new anxiety that was being thrust upon him.

‘Well’, said Sophia, ‘what should you say to her coming to London and living with you?’

Cyril started back. Sophia could see he was genuinely shocked. ‘I don’t think that would do at all,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘Oh! I don’t think it would. London wouldn’t suit her. She’s not that sort of woman. I really thought she was quite all right down here. She wouldn’t like London.’ He shook his head, looking up at the gas; his eyes had a dangerous glare.⁷²

Like Cyril, once free of the Five Towns, most of Bennett’s characters do not seek to return.

The Old Wives’ Tale also reveals Bennett’s continuing commitment to a realism which he was not unwilling to disparage, but one which was buttressed by his respect for Darwinian imperatives. An important part of his achievement in the novel is to demonstrate that the commercial, economic, social and political lives of the Five Towns are continually rejuvenated by the same agents which weaken them. Just as Samuel Povey and Constance once represented the future of the drapery trade in Bursley, so their energies and enterprise are corporately appropriated forty years later by the Midland Clothiers Company which rents their shop, repudiates their business model, and relies on affordability and discounted promotions for stimulating customer interest. In its aggressive and profit-driven business model and in its commercial over-writing of the landscape, the company demonstrates that Edwardian capitalism and commerce had little respect for the protocols of a more conservative commercial age:

The Midland Clothiers Company had no sense of the proprieties of trade. Their sole idea was to sell goods. Having possessed themselves of one of the finest sites in a town which, after all was said and done, comprised nearly forty thousand inhabitants, they set about to make the best of that site. They threw the two shops into one, and they caused to be constructed a sign compared to which the spacious old ‘Baines’ sign was a postcard. They

⁷² Ibid., pp. 543 – 44.

covered the entire frontage with posters of a theatrical description – coloured posters! They occupied the front page of the *Signal*, and from that pulpit they announced that winter was approaching, and that they meant to sell ten thousand new overcoats at their new shop in Bursley at the price of twelve and sixpence each.⁷³

Bennett's novel is also irradiated with a synthesis of power and angst. Potent and exotic symbols in Book One unite the shooting of the elephant which has escaped from the Wakes with the demise of John Baines. The elephant's death provides, on its simplest level, both a communal attraction and distraction which Samuel Povey, Constance and even Mrs. Baines are unable to resist. It is their absence from the shop as they join their Bursley neighbours to observe and wonder at its corpse that provides, then tempts, Sophia with the opportunity to indulge in emotional foreplay with Gerald Scales, and it is the reason for her absence from her father's bedroom when he chokes to death.

As Kurt Koenigsberger has suggested, the elephant, as an avatar of the exotic, can be decrypted as a champion of British Imperial exhibitionary culture, with all the attendant angulations of self-aggrandisement and subjection.⁷⁴ Its execution lubricates the allusion to John Baines' death and to all that he personifies. Just as there is no dignity in the violent death of the elephant which is forced to its knees by main force and shot, so the infirm Baines dies ignobly – neglected and choking to death. By symbolically fusing the death of the animal with Baines' demise, Bennett legitimises the overthrow of the hierarchies that looming endorse the authoritarianism of both Victorian patriarchy and Imperial dominance. Shot because of its madness and uncontrollable violence, the elephant emblematises aggressive repudiation of Imperial triumphalism: leached of his power, Baines is

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 601 – 02.

⁷⁴ Kurt Koenigsberger, 'Elephants in the Labyrinth of Empire: Modernism and the Menagerie in *The Old Wives' Tale*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 49:2 (Summer 2003), pp. 143 – 44.

beaten by the progress of Time and the infirmities which it confers. The significance of his death is seismic, since it symbolises nothing less than the end of an epoch:

Mr. Critchlow and the widow gazed, helplessly waiting, at the pitiable corpse, of which the salient part was the white beard. They knew not that they were gazing at a vanished era. John Baines had belonged to the past, to the age when men really did think of their souls, when orators by phrases could move crowds to fury or to pity, when no one had learnt to hurry, when Demos was only turning in his sleep, when the sole beauty of life resided in its inflexible and slow dignity, when hell really had no bottom, and a gilt-clasped Bible really was the secret of England's greatness. Mid-Victorian England lay on that mahogany bed. Ideals had passed away with John Baines.⁷⁵

Bennett nurtured a lifelong fascination with the human consequences of industrialisation and, in particular, with its impact on urban and suburban underclasses. A conspicuous theme in *The Old Wives' Tale*, it was one to which, as a cultural anatomist and social historian, he persistently returned in his stories, journalism and plays, and in fiction as diverse as *The Pretty Lady*, *Anna of the Five Towns*, *Riceyman Steps* (1923) and *Imperial Palace* (1930). When Samuel Povey is summoned by his cousin to witness the murderous scene in his bakehouse shop, he confronts the drudgery and cheerless labour to which Daniel's night-time employees are subjected. Its effects scar him indelibly:

Daniel strode impulsively across the shop – the counterflap was up – and opened a door at the back. Samuel followed. Never before had he penetrated so far into his cousin's secrets. On the left, within the doorway, were the stairs, dark; on the right a shut door; and in front an open door giving on to a yard. At the extremity of the yard he discerned a building, vaguely lit, and naked figures strangely moving in it.

'What's that? Who's there?' he asked sharply.

'That's the bakehouse,' Daniel replied, as if surprised at such a question. 'It's one of their long nights.'

Never, during the brief remainder of his life, did Samuel eat a mouthful of common bread without recalling that midnight apparition. He had lived for half a century, and thoughtlessly eaten bread as though loaves grew ready-made on trees.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 112.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 246 – 47.

Bennett's acute observations of an imprisoned Victorian underclass range across all of the Baineses' domestic staff. Maggie, the family servant when Constance and Sophia are in their adolescence, is, like Elsie in *Riceman Steps*, imprisoned as a dehumanised drudge by her work in the cellar kitchen which Bennett compares to a cave.⁷⁷ Whilst the Baineses' servants are treated with neither indifference nor cruelty, they are nevertheless rewarded with condescension and suspicion and excluded directly from family intimacy. Amy, Constance's servant, is silently and insensitively reprobated for her gross solecism in weeping when Cyril Povey departs for Art School in London. Her assumption of familiarity and even equality is one which her employers deprecate for its presumption.

The ascendant, fractious servant of the late Victorian period is personified in Book Four by Maud, the fully developed incarnation of a newly empowered, increasingly self-confident proletariat casually prepared to threaten those in power; her studiously crafted insolence is a powerful articulation of her alienation from her employers:

She was a pretty and an impudent girl of about twenty-three. [...] Her motto was: War on employers, get all you can out of them, for they will get all they can out of you. On principle – the sole principle she possessed – she would not stay in a place more than six months. She liked change. And employers did not like change. She was shameless with men. She ignored all orders as to what she was to eat and what she was not to eat. She lived up to the full resources of her employers. She could be to the last degree slatternly. Or she could be as neat as a pin, with an apron that symbolized purity and propriety, as tonight.⁷⁸

Central to the positioning and experience of this underclass is Bursley's pyramidal social structure which is sustained by condescending bourgeois principles robustly endorsed by Mrs. Baines. In her value set, school teaching is a socially unsuitable occupation for Sophia, and she only consents to support her daughter's

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 171.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 558 – 59.

ambitions when she realises that she would be unable to control them, reluctantly allowing her to take up a post with the respectable, but, in her opinion, socially inferior, Aline Chetwynd. Her determination to thwart Sophia's nascent relationship with the commercial traveller Gerald Scales is similarly doomed to fail. A poor strategist, Mrs. Baines' gauche decision to exile Sophia, to Aunt Harriet and the prim respectability of Derbyshire, provides her with the perfect opportunity and incentive to elope with Scales. Undermined by endless conflicts with her two daughters, she is outpaced by both of them. She is unable to prevent Samuel Povey, her priceless but, in her opinion, socially unsuitable employee, from aspiring to marry her elder daughter, and fails, too, to prevent Constance from encouraging his interests. Conservative in her social, spiritual and religious outlook and indefatigably conscious of her breeding and status as a Syme from Axe, like her husband, Mrs. Baines is shorn of power by her daughters, declining at the age of 50 into ruined obsolescence, without ever realising, much less accepting, that her old wife's (sic) fate is not only shared with many of her servants, but also reserved for her daughters.

The unforgiving rigidity of Bursley's social taxonomy is also graphically captured in Bennett's revealing portrayal of Matthew Peel-Swynnerton. A scion of the affluent Peel family of earthenware manufacturers, Matthew is endowed by birth with social cachet and inherited wealth. With a penchant for both respectability and vice, he is also an urbane aesthete, but one who is resourceful and manipulative too, particularly when he entices Sophia to betray her identity in the Pension Frensham in Paris. Emotionally intelligent, he is able to inform Constance of his discovery with tact and discretion. Here Bennett reveals himself as a consummate ironist when he makes clear that Constance is both grateful to Matthew and in awe of him because of his impeccable family background and social position, whilst simultaneously

disclosing that her approval is conferred blindly without any suspicion of his bawdy recreations with Parisian prostitutes, or of his corruption of her son:

‘You’ve behaved very nicely over this,’ she said. ‘And very cleverly. In *every* thing – both over there and here. Nobody could have shown a nicer feeling than you’ve shown. It’s a great comfort to me that my son has got you for a friend.’

When he thought of his escapades, and of all the knowledge, unutterable in Bursley, fantastically impossible in Bursley, which he had imparted to her son, he marvelled that the maternal instinct should be so deceived. Still, he felt that her praise of him was deserved.⁷⁹

One of reasons why *The Old Wives’ Tale* is exceptional is because it provides a rare example of an unexpected and intrusive authorial bias in Bennett’s role as omniscient narrator when he boldly reveals that he always liked and admired Samuel Povey for his honesty and integrity. It is an unusual colluding confession because, in many respects, Samuel is undistinguished. He is given to bouts of suppurating hysteria when his amatory pursuit of Constance is threatened by Mrs. Baines, and he descends into monomaniac stubbornness as he orchestrates the unsuccessful battle to commute the death sentence which condemns his cousin, Daniel. The unimposing coffin in which he is buried emphasises his lack of presence and his failure to make a permanent mark on civic or commercial life.

Bennett emphasises, however, that he is a steady, responsible man of principle and a talented tradesman, whose creative virility is given licence when he and Constance rejuvenate the drapery trade in Bursley after they take over the Baineses’ business. Ambitious for his son, he tries to discipline Cyril but is appalled by his mendacity and dishonesty, and his reaction to his theft of money from the shop till is catalysed not just by outrage at the defiance of parental authority, but also by his shock that the theft has violated the most cardinal principle of the Five Towns’ commercial life:

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 478.

‘There’s no knowing how much money you have stolen,’ said Mr. Povey. ‘A thief!’

If Cyril had stolen cakes, jam, string, cigars, Mr. Povey would never have said ‘thief’ as he did say it. But money! Money was different. And a till was not a cupboard or a larder. A till was a till. Cyril had struck at the very basis of society.⁸⁰

Bennett excels, too, in his casually understated acknowledgement of the emotional turmoil which unsettles the equilibrium of Samuel’s psyche: it is, he reveals knowingly and succinctly, the Rabelaisian allegiances of his cousin, Daniel, which stimulate his repressed sexuality and result in the birth of his only child, Gerald.⁸¹

The Old Wives’ Tale provides Bennett with the perfect opportunity for self-immersion in the kind of text book psychology for which he was fêted by W. H. R. Rivers, and this he applies to communities as well as to individuals.⁸² In particular, he examines the primal allure of boorish mass hysteria through two executions, one in Stafford and one in Auxerre. The campaign to commute the death sentence imposed on Daniel Povey for the murder of his feckless wife is led by his cousin, Samuel. As an acolyte of Pan and crude forerunner of Denry Machin, in *The Card*, Daniel’s cultivated coarseness endears him to a Bursley community sustained by moral hypocrisy, with its casual acceptance of gendered prejudice and identity definition. Popular sympathy for him is stimulated because of his wife’s cardinal failings as a woman notorious for insobriety, child neglect and wilful contempt for patriarchal censure. By contrast, the exuberant vulgarities of her husband and murderer are approved, tolerated and indulged without demur.

In a mirror image, the public guillotining of Rivain, the murderer of his courtesan lover in Book Three, attracts huge interest when his execution takes place at Auxerre. State sanctioned death animates an atavistic bloodlust and feeds an

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 241.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 202 – 03.

⁸² ‘W. H. R. Rivers: Some Recollections’, in *Things II*, p. 6.

intensely charged communal voyeurism. What Bennett captures graphically in this episode is the morally fraught terrain on which the public canonisation of a man notorious for his depravity and violence hypnotically collectivises respect and admiration for his brutal infamy.⁸³

It is through the experiences of the two sisters, Constance and Sophia Baines, that Bennett maps most graphically the corrosive and debilitating consequences of Time's irrepressible force. Of the two sisters, Sophia the younger, mobilised by her determination to experience life beyond the confines of Bursley, is the more rebellious and fractious when the novel opens in its Victorian crinoline heyday in 1863. As a daughter, she is rebellious, disobedient and determined to fashion a life of fulfilled independence. Instinctively and intellectually sharper than her sister, she is appalled at the prospect of the servitude which awaits her as an employee in her parents' drapery shop. An impressionable young woman, she is also courageous and stubborn, and when she realises that Scales is little better than a philanderer she is determined never to accompany him to Paris unmarried and, above all, absolute in her refusal to return to the Bursley community from which she has been alienated.⁸⁴

It is her heterogeneously independent and inchoate feminist nature that fascinates most. That Sophia has inherited the Baineses' entrepreneurial genes cannot be doubted; she triumphs over the disfigured and exhausted courtesan, Madame Foucault, in Paris by commandeering her furniture and by renting out the rooms in the apartment which they shared, surviving as an energetic capitalist, courageous speculator, and independent businesswoman.

⁸³ *The Old Wives' Tale*, pp. 353 – 54.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

Bennett excels in the pregnant understatement with which he opens up access to her interior life. Although she is intellectually alert, her first meeting with Scales leaves her drunk with callow emotional vulnerability:

What had happened? Nothing! The most commonplace occurrence! The eternal cause had picked up a commercial traveller (it might have been a clerk or curate, but it in fact was a commercial traveller), and endowed him with all the glorious, unique, incredible attributes of a god, and planted him down before Sophia in order to produce the eternal effect. A miracle performed specially for Sophia's benefit! No one else in Wedgwood Street saw the god walking along by her side. No one else saw anything but a simple commercial traveller. Yes, the most commonplace occurrence!⁸⁵

Like her husband, she is a glib and resourceful thief and liar. Unlike Scales, however, she is imbued with a fundamental sense of honour and *amour propre*, and it is for this reason that she redeems his debts to his friend Chirac.⁸⁶

Bennett's revelation that the foundation of her character is a haughty moral independence opens further highroads into her fractured subconscious, and it is here that he introduces the psychological incursions which he developed in later novels such as *The Pretty Lady* and *Riceyman Steps*. Her fear of intimacy with Chirac takes the form of an emotional and mental struggle with her slivered subconscious will:

Morally she was his mistress in that moment. [...] Her face changed and hardened. 'You must not do that,' she said, coldly, unkindly, harshly. She scowled. She would not abate one crease in her forehead to the appeal of his surprised glance. Yet she did not want to repulse him. The instinct which repulsed him was not within her control. [...] Steeped in woe, Sophia thought wearily upon the hopeless problem of existence.⁸⁷

Jason Jones shrewdly argues that her inconsistent, fragmented and contradictory responses to Chirac's advances emphasise the emotional paradoxes which she is unable to resolve, and it is the case that the battle between her will and desire are suggestive of a refusal to risk intimacy because of fear of emotional commitment in

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 139.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 375 – 77.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 438 – 39.

another close relationship. The paradox which Bennett presents is that, in her confusion, it becomes apparent that what repelled her most was the dependent ardour of Chirac's emotional attachment to her.⁸⁸

Bennett illustrates with tragic irony that, despite her experiences in Paris, her life has been just as narrow and confined as Constance's, and its insularity is exposed by the unbridgeable cultural gulf that separates her from the urbane Dr. Stirling in Bursley and from the more literate and educated residents of the Rutland Hotel in Buxton which she and Constance visit.⁸⁹ By revealing, after her return to Bursley, that she longs for Paris, even though she never liked it, he also shows that her work at the Pension Frensham was an emotional displacement for her repressed sexual energies. It is among the physical and cultural squalor of the unprepossessing Five Towns that she is forced to mourn, and not just for her lost youth and opportunities, but also for the child she has never conceived.

Ultimately, the tragedy of her life is inseparable from that of Scales'. The sight of his corpse in Till Boldero's shop in Manchester, and the realisation that his life has been wasted overwhelms her:

Sophia then experienced a pure and primitive emotion, uncoloured by any moral or religious quality. She was not sorry that Gerald had wasted his life, nor that he was a shame to his years and to her. The manner of his life was of no importance. What affected her was that he had once been young, and that he had grown old, and was now dead. That was all. Youth and vigour had come to that. Youth and vigour always came to that. Everything came to that. [...] She saw him young, and proud, and strong, as for instance when he had kissed her lying on the bed in that London hotel – she forgot the name – in 1866; and now he was old, and worn, and horrible, and dead. It was the riddle of life that was puzzling and killing her.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Jason B. Jones, 'Revisiting "Mr. Bennett": Pleasure, Aversion, and the Social in *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Riceyman Steps*', in *English Literature in Transition (1880 – 1920)*, 46:1 (2003), pp .40 – 45.

⁸⁹ *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 528 and p. 549.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 577.

Her nihilistic reflections on the riddle of life complete her destruction and kill her, just as much as the stroke and the return journey from Manchester to Bursley in Dick Povey's car. Sophia is appalled at the inexplicability of Time's tragic dominion, and her teleological fatalism enables Bennett to emphasise his determination to eschew in this configuration of his regional fiction any trite appeasement of the high tragedy of everyday life. Like Scales, she was headstrong and paid for her emotional immaturity and impulsive deceptions with thirty years of melancholy and suppressed regret. Even from the perspective of her innately compassionate elder sister, the eschatology of Time has repaid the wayward Sophia with unforgiving and vindictive interest.

Constance is the more dour and serious of the two sisters. She is frequently shocked at Sophia's temerity, particularly at her rashness in extracting Samuel Povey's tooth whilst he is drugged with laudanum and asleep:

Five minutes later, when her hair was quite finished, Constance knelt down and said her prayers. Having said her prayers, she went straight to Sophia's work-box, opened it, seized the fragment of Mr. Povey, ran to the window, and frantically pushed the fragment through the slit into the square.

'There!' she exclaimed nervously. [...]

It was a revealing experience for Sophia – and also for Constance. And it frightened them equally.⁹¹

Her determination to reclaim the tooth from her sister is an apparently minor incident, but one which Jason Jones correctly asserts is charged with tensely erotic suppressions.⁹² The fragment of his body which she reclaims stakes out her emotional investment and proprietorial rights by denying her sister's capricious appropriation of her possession.

Although Constance is more prudent and serious minded than her sister, they share many similarities. Both are prepared to rebel against parental authority. In

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 67.

⁹² Jones, 'Revisiting "Mr. Bennett"', pp. 35 – 36.

Constance's case, she plots with Samuel so that she can engineer their engagement together, and the real beginning of her life follows her marriage to him after she has challenged and triumphed over the disapproval of matriarchal authority. As husband and wife, both embrace the supine inertia of life 'in the deep groove'.⁹³

At times, Bennett offers little protection to Constance, and does not shy from presenting her as a benighted, unambitious and incurious young wife and mother. Marriage and motherhood confirm her subordination; Bennett stresses, for example, the limitations of her mental and intellectual horizons by revealing that she had never visited Stafford, even though the county town was less than twenty miles from Bursley. She readily embraces subservience and deference, and is in awe of her sister when they are reunited after thirty-six years' separation. She is, too, less worldly and more easily exploited than Sophia. Critchlow, her neighbour and fellow shopkeeper, easily outwits her when he purchases the Baineses' shop at the auction of Mericarp's property; it is a loss which leaves her wretched and humiliated.

Nonetheless, Bennett shifts this perspective by stressing that she is a deeply loyal and affectionate young woman. Samuel's premature death transforms her into an emotional amputee: her affection for her son is selfless and unquestioning, its durability signified in her desire to please – whether through the artist's smocks that she meticulously stitches and embroiders for him or the straw frame which she lovingly and painstakingly fashions for his painting of the Landseer etching: 'The Stag at Bay'.⁹⁴ Although she is the essence of kindness and self-deprecation, she is not a foolish woman, and is capable of perceptive self-analysis. She recognises that she is unadventurously attached to Bursley, and understands fully that her leniency and indulgence of Cyril have energised and sustained his self-centred ambitions. His

⁹³ *The Old Wives' Tale*, p. 570 and pp. 590 – 91.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 282 and p. 284.

casual indifference to her feelings is, in many respects, the tragedy of her life. When he leaves her for London she experiences both bereavement and betrayal:

Her soul only kept on saying monotonously: 'I'm a lonely old woman now. I've nothing to live for any more, and I'm no use to anybody. Once I was young and proud. And this is what my life has come to! This is the end!'⁹⁵

At the end of her life Constance is reduced to a querulous and nervous old woman oppressed by incongruities (the death of her dog, Spot, the insubordination of her servant, Maud, and the threat to local identity and civic stability which is posed by the Federation movement), and afflicted and goaded by rheumatism and sciatica. Her experience of life is more insular than her sister's and because of this she is always a loyal admirer of Bursley as a civic and commercial entity. She never realises that in fighting the cause of civic independence, she is merely struggling against evolutionary forces which will overwhelm her and her community. Thus, Bennett's most significant artistic achievement in *The Old Wives' Tale* is his presentation of a ruthless Darwinian vision in which personal identities fade as the social contexts which nurture them collapse. The pitifully moribund fate of Sophia's pet dog, Fossette, at the end of Book Four, is an anthropomorphic signifier of the ineluctability of human atrophy and enfeeblement:

When the short funeral procession started, Mary and the infirm Fossette (sole relic of the connexion between the Baines family and Paris) were left alone in the house. The tearful servant prepared the dog's dinner and laid it before her in the customary soup-plate in the customary corner. Fossette sniffed at it, and then walked away and lay down with a dog's sigh in front of the kitchen fire. She had been deranged in her habits that day; she was conscious of neglect, due to events which passed her comprehension. And she did not like it. She was hurt, and her appetite was hurt.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 310.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 615.

Second trilogy: Family, power and generational conflict

The *Clayhanger* trilogy – *Clayhanger* (1910), *Hilda Lessways* (1913) and *These Twain* (1916) – is Bennett's extension and development of *The Old Wives' Tale*.⁹⁷ Set against mutating regional backcloths which range from early Victorian civic austerity through to the social cleansing of Bursley at the end of the nineteenth century, it focuses on family relationships, generational conflict, validation of self-identity and cultural definition. In the three novels, Bennett's perspectives on the Five Towns are never static, and he frequently presents them and the wider region as physically and morally marginalised. They are variously referred to as a filthy, vile, benighted backwater and as a small, rumour-soaked, introspective sub-region dominated and exploited by a powerful, politically conservative clique. Some of the region's irreducible inadequacies are most graphically summarised by Hilda Lessways in her contemptuous ruminations at the beginning of the 1880s:

In the Five Towns there was nothing. You might walk from one end of the Five Towns to the other, and not see one object that gave a thrill – unless it was a pair of lovers. And when you went inside the houses you were no better off, – you were even worse off, because you came at once into contact with an ignoble race of slatternly imprisoned serfs driven by narrow-minded women who themselves were serfs with the mentality of serfs and the prodigious conceit of virtue...⁹⁸

As in *The Old Wives' Tale*, Bennett does not shy away from the endemic urban ugliness and cruelty which was nurtured by high Victorian industrialisation. Elements of both are captured at the beginning of *Clayhanger* in a simple vignette. With the casual flicks of her whip, the anonymous young girl observed by Edwin on the canal towpath on his last day at school in July 1872 taunts her victim, a drudging

⁹⁷ Arnold Bennett: *Clayhanger* (1910; repr. London: Penguin, 1975), *Hilda Lessways* (1911; repr. London: Penguin, 1975), and *These Twain* (1916; repr. London: Penguin, 1975).

⁹⁸ *These Twain*, p.89.

cart horse labouring to pull his load. In doing so, she provides a synecdoche for the privations, disempowerment and stoical suffering of the district:

Thirty yards in front of each boat an unhappy skeleton of a horse floundered its best in the quagmire. The honest endeavour of one of the animals received a frequent tonic from a bare-legged girl of seven who heartily curled a whip about its crooked large-jointed legs. The ragged and filthy child danced in the rich mud round the horse's flanks with the simple joy of one who had been rewarded for good behaviour by the unrestricted use of a whip for the first time.⁹⁹

The suffering which the horse endures foretokens the cruelty which, Bennett subsequently reveals, was inflicted on the paterfamilias, Darius Clayhanger, during his childhood in the 1830s. His suffering and ignominy as a small boy are documented in the brutality and humiliation of his treatment as a child worker on the potbank and in the humiliation of his incarceration in the workhouse where the institutional clothing which he is forced to wear functions as an authorised assault on, and denial of, his identity:

And they were put into a cellar and stripped and washed and dressed in other people's clothes, and then separated, amid tears. And Darius was pitched into a large crowd of other boys, all clothed like himself. He now understood the reason for shame; it was because he could have no distinctive clothes of his own, because he had somehow lost his identity.¹⁰⁰

There, he is compelled to witness the terror and regulated physical violence by which submission and conformity to institutional authority are enforced. It is a formative experience that controls the remainder of his life.

Just as the Five Towns were shrouded in secrecy in the labyrinth of central England at the beginning of *The Old Wives' Tale*, so echoes of surreptitiousness, furtiveness and mistrust of modernity reverberate throughout *Clayhanger*. Darius's obsession for conducting his business affairs in secrecy is so pathologised that his son, Edwin, has little insight into his father's commercial operations and revenues

⁹⁹ *Clayhanger*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

until after his decline into ill health. This is not Edwin's only handicap, because Bennett also reveals that the collective inability of the Five Towns to educate its citizens is lamentable. Privileged to attend a reputable school in Oldcastle, Edwin is nevertheless thrown into the world with so little practical or academic knowledge that he is ashamed of his incapacitating ignorance which, as Bennett reflects, leaves him critically exposed to any demotic or popular sophistry.¹⁰¹

Lack of investment in education runs parallel with temporising under capitalisation in smaller businesses. Darius's workshop suffers from the cheeseparing improvisations which are common to the backward district and are mocked by Bennett's reference to the communal maxim: 'Make things do'.¹⁰² As an entrepreneur, he is reluctant to embrace modernity, and even when he invests in capital equipment is only prepared to do so half-heartedly, sparingly and injudiciously. The secondhand Demy Colombian steam printing-press which he buys from Manchester comes very close to wrecking his business when its weight and bulk threaten to crash through the unreinforced wooden floor joists of his printing workshop.¹⁰³

As in *The Old Wives' Tale*, however, Bennett contrasts the inadequacies of the Five Towns with their uniqueness. Whilst Bursley and Turnhill are especially characterised by anomic urban squalor, he subtly demonstrates when Edwin and Hilda visit Stockbrook on Christmas Day that rural poverty is just as oppressive:

More suave than a Dutch village, incomparably neater and cleaner and more delicately finished than a French village, it presented, in the still, complacent atmosphere of long tradition, a picturesque medley of tiny architectures nearly every aspect of which was beautiful. And if seven people of different ages and sexes lived in a two-roomed cottage under a thatched roof hollowed by the weight of years, without drains and without water, and also without freedom, the beholder was yet bound to conclude that by some mysterious

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 107.

virtue their existence must be gracious, happy, and in fact ideal – especially on Christmas Day, though Christmas Day was also quarter-day – and that they would not on any account have it altered in the slightest degree.¹⁰⁴

It is a perspective which is buttressed by Bennett's repeated references to the cultural diversity that flourishes in totemic defiance of those too insensitive to appreciate the inherently romantic characteristics of the Potteries. The crude and meretricious melodramas offered at Snaggs's Theatre, popularly known as the Blood Tub, may appear as ephemeral and inane distractions, but these dramas constitute a single generic strand in the Five Towns' cultural weave. Other threads are discernible in Bennett's presentation of the Dragon Inn as an exhilarating location for communal fulfilment. The concertina music, handbell ringing, and exuberant singing by the members of the Glee Party offer uncovenanted delights for the impressionable, adolescent Edwin on his first visit, and it becomes for him a place of psycho-sexual awakening, too, when the energetic clog dancing performed by Florence Simcox releases in him dormant and unfamiliar erotic stirrings.¹⁰⁵

In addition, Edwin's first visit to Lane End House, the home of the cultivated architect Osmond Orgreave, provides him with an entrée into an alien environment. Here he is introduced for the first time in his life to a domestic interior in which art is critiqued, music performed, and politics discussed and disputed. With its echoes of the cultural vitality which Bennett presents in his story 'The Death of Simon Fuge', this is a space which nurtures Edwin's aesthetic sensitivities. It is in every sense a brave new world for him, and in this phase of his education he is astounded to learn that the Five Towns are imbued with concealed beauty. His surrogate father, Osmond Orgreave, embodies all of the qualities which his father, Darius, lacks. He is educated, elegantly dressed, professionally astute and more importantly the architect

¹⁰⁴ *These Twain*, p. 389.

¹⁰⁵ *Clayhanger*, p. 88.

that Edwin wishes to become and never does.¹⁰⁶ Osmond's commentary on the beauty of the inchoate Sytch Chapel is not merely a cultural reference point for Edwin but also a catalytic awakening of impressions and values which remain with him for the rest of his life.

Bennett's portrayal of the Five Towns' spiritual orthodoxies is also finely modulated. His wry observation of the dependent piety cultivated by specious monotheistic authority can be seen in *These Twain* in the humorous interlude in which the young boys Peter Clowes, Bert Benbow and George Cannon unite in prayer in Edwin's garden, where they pray for God to deliver a pen-knife to George on the occasion of his birthday, and are rewarded for their incantations not by divine, but by human intervention:

The three boys, kneeling, and so disappearing from sight behind the wall, repeated together:

'O God! Please send George Edwin Clayhanger a two-bladed penknife.'

Then George and Bert stood up again, shuffling about. Peter Clowes did not reappear.

'I can't help it,' whispered Ingpen in a strange moved voice, 'I've got to be God. Here goes! And it's practically new, too!'

Edwin in the darkness could see him feeling in his waistcoat pocket, and then raise his arm, and, taking careful aim, throw in the direction of the dimly lighted yard.

'Oh!' came the cry of George, in sudden pain.

The descending penknife had hit him.¹⁰⁷

Throughout the trilogy, religion, and especially the contradictions, affectations and insincerities of its Methodist manifestation, is viewed as a pulsing hypocrisy. Edwin's sisters have little sympathy for Aunt Clara Hamps, whose benevolent insincerity and cruelty as the watchdog of society are fuelled by her lack of imaginative empathy.¹⁰⁸ Edwin resents and rejects what he sees as the tyranny of the Methodist circuit. He is particularly aggrieved at the obligation to attend Saturday

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁰⁷ *These Twain*, pp. 56 – 57.

¹⁰⁸ *Clayhanger*, p. 145.

Bible classes, which he views as an intrusion into his adolescent liberty, and he is outraged at his humiliation by the frosty reception given by members of the Young Men's Debating Society to his speech in defence of the liberal Bishop Colenso.¹⁰⁹ The conspiracy between Aunt Hamps and Reverend Peartree to suborn his support as District Treasurer of the Additional Chapels Fund revolts him and solidifies his secularist sensitivities.¹¹⁰ His rejection of traditional Christian liturgy is supported by Hilda, whose determination that Edwin should not take up his father's pew in chapel, and her confession that her parents were erratic in church attendance are designed to assert her independence from Aunt Clara's intrusive piety.¹¹¹

There are more benign elements in the Five Towns' spiritual life, but they are only seen rarely and perhaps most charitably in the selfless sincerity of the elderly Mr. Shushions. More than anyone he is responsible, as a former superintendent, for the development of the Sunday schools in the Five Towns. His philanthropy is scored by indelibly generous notations – his rescue of Darius and his family from imprisonment in the workhouse and his exertions to secure employment for his father, a radical agitator unable to support his family. His generosity, industry and self-sacrifice are all forgotten, however, at the celebration of the Sunday schools' Centenary, where he is mocked and abused because of his decline into senility.¹¹²

Bennett's preoccupation with the interactions of power and victimhood is also woven into this cultural tapestry. It is a point clearly noted by Andrew Lincoln whose proposition, that in *Clayhanger* 'with a few significant exceptions, the young, the poor, the elderly – those who are dependent – are treated either callously or with

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 127 – 29.

¹¹⁰ *These Twain*, pp. 39 – 40.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹¹² *Clayhanger*, pp. 233 – 38.

condescension', can be accommodated by all three novels in the trilogy.¹¹³ Both Maggie Clayhanger and Janet Orgreave sacrifice their independence for the interest of their parents and are condemned to forsaken spinsterhoods. Minnie, the maid who becomes pregnant by her lover, is dismissed and spurned by the devoutly unforgiving Aunt Clara Hamps with the magisterial sentence: 'I always knew that girl was a mopsy slut.'¹¹⁴ George Cannon's laconic and cynical dismissal of Florrie Bagster's seduction by Mr. Boutwood, exposes his callous conviction that women and young girls are sexual fair quarry.¹¹⁵ Cannon's wife, Charlotte, is callously jettisoned after their marriage.¹¹⁶ In turn, Hilda is deceived by Cannon's bigamous marriage to her, economically impoverished, and then shamed by the illegitimate child which is a product of their union. Darius, too, suffers physically and psychologically as the victim of a blighted, impoverished and brutalised childhood. Its repercussions are so extensive that the fatal decline of his health is precipitated by news of Shushions's lonely and impoverished death in the workhouse. As for Edwin, Bennett's discarded title for *Clayhanger*, 'A Thoughtful Young Man', was an apposite one, with its connotations of introspection and sensitivity.¹¹⁷ His ambitions to become an architect are ruthlessly crushed by the implacable opposition of his fractious and truculent father.¹¹⁸

As well as his explorations of blighted lives, Bennett particularly excels in the trilogy in his shrewd and painful observations of physical and psychological enfeeblement. In *Clayhanger*, Darius gradually loses his self-confidence, his independence, and finally his ability to feed himself. In the Five Towns' demotic he

¹¹³ Andrew Lincoln, 'The Sociology of Bennett's *Clayhanger*', in *English Literature in Transition (1880 – 1920)*, 27:3 (1984), p. 192.

¹¹⁴ *These Twain*, p. 333.

¹¹⁵ *Hilda Lessways*, p. 254.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹¹⁷ *Journals I*, 19 November 1909, p. 339.

¹¹⁸ *Clayhanger*, p. 144.

is 'laid aside', but he rages against the tragic condemnation of his fate. It is the ferocity of his struggle for life which draws compassion from Edwin, who is left to respond in awe and empathy: 'What an awful shame!'¹¹⁹

Just as Darius's death marks the end of an era in *Clayhanger*, so does Aunt Hamps' in *These Twain*. The end of her career as a moral hypocrite exposes the entire absurdity of her life, in which insincerity is concealed by a livery of social respectability. Here Bennett, just as he had done in *The Old Wives' Tale*, uses space and place to make his point. Whilst the ground floor of her house is presentable, the bare upper floor which is never seen reveals her self-righteous hypocrisy.¹²⁰ Although she takes genuine pride in the lives and achievements of her nephew, nieces and their children and often treats them generously, her besetting frailty, as Bennett cuttingly makes clear, was to place her religion above morality.¹²¹

In the same manner, the deaths of Osmond Orgreave and his wife are not just a record of change and transformation, but exposures of Bursley's concealed economic and social undercurrents. Cultivated, artistically sensitive, politically liberal, professionally respected and socially gregarious, the Orgreave family represents an open admonition to the provinciality of the Five Towns. It is only after the deaths of Osmond and Mrs. Orgreave, however, that Bennett reveals that the family's material success was a chimaera. Virtually penniless when he died, Osmond Orgreave sheltered his crippling debts behind a public mask which deceived all in the community, except, ironically, the uneducated but financially astute Darius Clayhanger. The financial and personal consequences of his extravagance, especially for his daughter Janet, are disastrous.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

¹²⁰ *These Twain*, p. 328.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

Against these backdrops, Bennett presents Edwin's and Hilda's struggles to define and realise their identities. Their searches bring them into conflict with their father and mother respectively and with the community and culture into which they were born. In charting Edwin's journey from childhood to successful middle-aged entrepreneur and husband, Bennett repeatedly draws attention to the symbolic importance of his possessions. The model schooner which he has sheltered in his bedroom as a source of boyish veneration is rejected as a symbol of outmoded adolescence as soon as he leaves school.¹²² Edwin's decision to purchase an alarm clock after Darius's physical breakdown is of totemic significance, since it demonstrates his assumption of full responsibility for the printing shop and his recognition that his managerial accountabilities require him to attend the works promptly and punctually each morning before his breakfast. Here, Bennett deploys Time as a trope for the despotic and unremitting force which controls and arbitrates the commercial opportunities and profitability of the printing business.¹²³ As a dipole, Darius's determination to give Edwin his watch, after his powers have begun to decline, is a potent reference point for his renunciation of his dwindling authority and power.¹²⁴ In the same vein, Darius's chair, with its dominating unwieldiness, is a symbol of intrusive parental authority, and it is highly significant that Edwin chooses to assert his independence as soon as his father's physical health has deteriorated by appropriating and removing it to his bedroom where he conducts his search for artistic fulfilment. There his space marks not just territorial independence, but intellectual freedom and growth as he retreats with his volumes of Byron and Voltaire. His decision at the opening of Book Four of *Clayhanger*, three and half years after Darius's death, to buy the books which appeal to him without fear of

¹²² *Clayhanger*, p. 48.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 341 – 42.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

censure from his father, is also a significant behavioural calling-card, and is energised by his newly-acquired independence.¹²⁵

In many respects, Edwin, as a sensitive, cultural outsider, is misplaced in the Five Towns community into which he was born. Through the slow passage of his late adolescence and early adulthood, his artistic and professional aspirations are incrementally crushed, as his apprenticeship to the printing business ensnares him. When he prevents the destruction of Darius's printing works by ensuring that the newly installed secondhand steam printing-press does not crash through the weakened flooring, his commercial value to the firm is ironically enhanced, and it is crushingly legitimised, too, when he is initiated into the arcana of the compositor's craft by Darius's oldest employee, James Yarlett.¹²⁶

Edwin's emotional maturity develops slowly from the infatuated physical stirrings occasioned by Florence Simcox, through tepid attraction to Janet Orgreave, to passionate love for Hilda Lessways. That Edwin meets her for the first time at the Orgreaves' house where he feels emotionally liberated is an epochal event; it is his first night time visit to any private house other than his Aunt Clara's.¹²⁷ It is also significant that he encounters Hilda just at the time when he is mourning for the loss of the career which he will never be allowed to pursue, and searching for the stability of an identity which will provide the ballast for his adult life.¹²⁸ Whilst his first impressions of her as an ugly woman are surprisingly inauspicious, his fragile ego is flattered and gratified by her appreciation of his religious scepticism, and new avenues of fulfilment open up for him through the physical contact which she

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 421.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

initiates when she squeezes his hand in the dark as they stand in the porch of Darius's incomplete new house in Bleakridge.¹²⁹

As a prelude to the tensions and disagreements which will intrude into their relationship, Bennett contrasts their conflicting responses to the hymns which are played at the Sunday schools' Centenary celebrations. Whilst Hilda is moved by the emotional strains of 'Rock of Ages', Edwin morosely reflects on the injustices of a violent, vengeful God.¹³⁰ However, he is attracted to her because of their shared emotional sympathies and intellectual values, particularly their mutual support for the striking potters.¹³¹ His self-esteem is boosted by her ability to excite his repressed passions, as much as her admission that he is able to influence her opinions and values.¹³² For Edwin, the most fundamental part of her appeal prior to their marriage is her incalculability as a woman enfolded in enigmas and layers of mysteries.¹³³

What is of special interest with the *Clayhanger* trilogy is that the second novel, *Hilda Lessways*, has been persistently undervalued. Bennett himself compared it unfavourably to the third volume, as can be seen in the letter which he wrote in January 1925 to L.G. Johnson:

With regard to your criticism of *These Twain*, I will only say that the restriction, the 'narrow-down', was intentional and deliberate, and part of the scheme as a whole. Compare the much more drastic narrowing down into domestic life at the end of *War and Peace*. I cannot remember whether I read *War and Peace* before or after I had planned *Hilda Lessways*, which I consider to be quite inferior to *These Twain*.¹³⁴

However, *Hilda Lessways* deserves to be recognised as a well-crafted, even innovative novel, particularly because in his presentation of an emotionally complex

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 286 and p. 289.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

¹³⁴ *Letters III*, 20 January 1925, p. 233.

and independent woman, and in his explorations of her internalised, psychological conflicts, Bennett demonstrates rudimentary stirrings of a determination to progress to more experimental engagements in his fiction.

Revolted by the predictability of domesticity, Hilda Lessways is an emotionally sensitive, wilful and discontented young woman. Her education has been more enriching than Edwin's, but like him she has a passion for literature and is particularly fond of Tennyson and Victor Hugo. Like Edwin, too, she is in many respects a misfit in her own community; her contempt for Turnhill is a product of what she views as its cultural aridity and social complacency. Her clashes of temperament and values with her widowed mother, Caroline Lessways, echo those of Edwin's with his father. Emotionally taut and unpredictable in her moods, even to her own mother, she is endowed, nonetheless, with many selflessly independent characteristics. For example, she is determined to assert her economic independence and to support herself by working for a living in a journalist's office:

Save for her desire to perfect herself in her duties, she had no desire. She was content. In the dismal, dirty, untidy, untidiable, uncomfortable office, arctic near the windows, and tropic near the stove, with dust on her dress and ink on her fingers and the fumes of gas in her quivering nostrils, and her mind strained and racked by an exaggerated sense of her responsibilities, she was in heaven!¹³⁵

Work is important to her because it provides her with an identity, and she approaches it with a religious ardour and pride. However, her vulnerability is emphasised by her reaction to Cannon's casual assault on the self-esteem which underpins her newly acquired independence. When he proposes that she accompany her mother to London to visit his impoverished half-sister, Sarah Gailey, his laconic observation that her work is inessential is a debilitating blow to the identity and persona she has created. Here, Bennett draws again on the parallels with *The Old Wives' Tale*. Just as

¹³⁵ *Hilda Lessways*, p. 60.

the independent and wilful Sophia is deceived and seduced by Gerald Scales, so the headstrong, impulsive and immature Hilda is emotionally and psychologically dazzled by George Cannon. Hilda is reluctant to criticise Cannon's fabrication of the newspaper's projected sales to a prospective advertiser, nor does she challenge his venality when he stifles its editorial criticism of property speculation in Calder Street in response to a commercial bribe. Neither does she appreciate the threat to her welfare and independence in Cannon's cynical reflection that in the newspaper industry: 'Business was business', even though his commercial enterprises are without exception fraudulent and corrupt.¹³⁶

Bennett's maturation as a writer can be seen by comparing Hilda with Anna Tellwright and the Baines sisters, mainly because Hilda is more complex.¹³⁷ Psychologically vulnerable, she suffers a nervous breakdown after the unexpected death of her mother at the Hornsey boarding house. Mentally and emotionally, she becomes the victim of a toxic malady compounded of guilt and self-recrimination and her punishment is a crippling disorientation which Bennett emphasises by exploring through her internalised ramblings the delirious fragmentation of her psyche:

She had known nothing of the funeral. She had not had speech with the relative. She was in bed, somehow. The day had elapsed. And in the following night, when she was alone and quite awake, she had become aware that she, she herself, was that epileptic shape; that that epileptic shape was lying in her bed and that there was none other in the bed. Nor was this a fancy of madness! She knew that she was not mad, that she was utterly sane; and the conviction of sanity only intensified her awful discovery. She passed a trembling hand over her face, and felt the skin corrupt and green. Gazing into the darkness, she knew that her stare was apelike.¹³⁸

In pursuit of the savour of life, Hilda is frequently exposed to metaphysical uncertainties. When her emotional energies are stirred following George Cannon's

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 100 – 01.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 11 – 18.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

declaration of his passion for her, Bennett's artful reticence reveals that the current of her powerful feelings is primarily charged with sexual energies, and not driven by love for him, and the profound physical and emotional impact which he exercises over her are revealed in her internalised angst:

She was now on the river, whirling. But at the same time she was in the small, hot room, and both George Cannon's hands were on her unresisting shoulders; and then they were round her, and she felt his physical nearness, the texture of his coat and of his skin; she could see in a mist the separate hairs of his tremendous moustache and the colours swimming in his eyes; her nostrils expanded in transient alarm to a faint, exciting masculine odour. She was disconcerted, if not panic-struck, by the violence of his first kiss; but her consternation was delectable to her.¹³⁹

In the same vein, the tragic bathos of her disappointment when she returns from honeymoon in Ireland is captured in the intimacies of her internalised discourse:

George had shut the door. She remembered the noise of its shutting. And that noise, in her memory, seemed to have transformed itself into the sound of fate's deep bell. She could hear the clang, sharp, definite. She realized suddenly and with awe that her destiny was fixed hereafter. She had come to the end of her adventures and her vague dreams. For she had always dreamt vaguely of an enlarged liberty, of wide interests, and of original activities – such as no woman to her knowledge had ever had. She had always compared the life of men with the life of women, and admitted and resented the inferiority of the latter.¹⁴⁰

These accumulated forays into the recesses of her psychological consciousness undermine the foundation of Virginia Woolf's attack on Bennett in 1924 – that *Hilda Lessways* most clearly exposed his slavish adherence to outmoded realism.

Throughout the whole of the second novel, as in *Clayhanger*, Hilda is obscured in paradoxes and enigmas. Her unpredictability manifests itself, in part, by her acute emotional intelligence. In response to Cannon's confession that he had married her bigamously, she accepts with equanimity that this catastrophe was, in fact, her adventitious deliverance from a lifetime of emotional servitude in a

¹³⁹ Ibid., pp. 233 – 34.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 255 – 56.

miserable marriage to him.¹⁴¹ When she discovers her pregnancy in Brighton she is prepared to accept her fate and the consequences of her sin with a resignation that, ironically, typifies the grim cultural stoicism of the Five Towns, preferring to be hated and scorned for infidelity rather than pitied as an unmarried mother of an illegitimate child. Her decision to accept enslavement to Sarah Gailey at the Brighton boarding house is her defiant gift of liberation for Edwin.

It is a feature of the trilogy that in the first two novels social, economic and commercial changes intrude incrementally, and are often unobserved. In *These Twain*, the transition to modernity is more urgent, and Edwin's new acquaintance, the District Factory Inspector, Tertius Ingpen, is one of its most iconoclastic heralds. With little respect for the Five Towns, he is positioned in opposition to the factory owners who ignore their obligations to their employees' health and safety, but whilst his professional values are progressive and liberal, he is both radical and reactionary in his personal morality. Ingpen's clandestine affair with a married woman appears to undermine his moral generosity and positions him apparently, like Gerald Scales, as just another exploiter of economically disempowered women. However, his affair is no mean-spirited exploitation of vulnerability, and Bennett retraces his path from *Whom God Hath Joined* with his revelation that her tragedy is her inability to divorce a husband who is permanently crippled with serious mental illness.¹⁴² For Edwin, Ingpen's affair is an expression of generosity and leaves him astonished that such a beautiful liaison could flourish in the Five Towns. Despite the sincerity of this relationship, however, Ingpen is no ardent feminist, and he frequently argues that women should confine their activities and interests to the domestic sphere. It is left to him to offer the most devastating repudiation of marriage:

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

¹⁴² *These Twain*, pp. 398 – 99.

‘What I won’t give up is my intellectual freedom. Perhaps I mean intellectual honesty. I’d give up even my intellectual freedom if I could be deprived of it fairly and honestly. But I shouldn’t be. There’s almost no intellectual honesty in marriage. There can’t be. The entire affair is a series of compromises, chiefly base, on the part of the man.’¹⁴³

It is a critique which Edwin ultimately rejects.¹⁴⁴

In *These Twain*, Bennett tries to capture the mood swings and intimacies of marriage by engaging Hilda and Edwin in conflicts of aspiration and ambition. For the abrasively independent Hilda, marriage is frequently seen as a battle in which victories are important and defeats are not forgotten.¹⁴⁵ Having experienced poverty in Brighton, she is fearful that her new prosperity will be undermined by what she sees as Edwin’s hubris in his plans to build a new printing works so that he can develop his lithography business.¹⁴⁶ At times, she can be petty and manipulative, as when she fabricates a quarrel over the printing of the programmes for her musical evening by unfairly accusing Edwin’s foreman, Jim Yarlett, of obstructing her wishes. The incident is part of a pattern in which she thoughtlessly appropriates his employees as her personal servants. The main resentment that she cultivates against Edwin as she approaches her fortieth birthday is his obsession with his work. Her sense of exclusion drives her social ambitions – she urges Edwin to engage in civic life and to acquire the prestigious Ladderedge Hall so that they can abandon Bleakridge. For his part, Edwin resents her interference in opening, in his absence, discussions with his sister, Maggie, about the sale of their house in Bleakridge, quarrels with Hilda over her rearrangement of the furniture for the musical evening, and is annoyed when she tactlessly reveals to their friends that he has lost money

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 401.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 415.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 74 – 76.

through the failure of the Palace Porcelain Company in which he had invested.¹⁴⁷ He is further plagued by apprehensions of political upheaval and by his fears that his marriage will fail. A philosophical acceptance of the proposition that success in marriage is dependent on goodwill and compromise arrives only with his awareness that Bursley has changed. By 1892, when the trilogy concludes, he recognises that he is being forced out of Bleakridge by inverted social cleansing.¹⁴⁸ To underscore the Clayhangers' transition to a new life, Bennett concludes the novel and the trilogy with the social triumph of Hilda's formal dinner party, and with her subjugation of Edwin to her will. As she concludes: 'It's each for himself in marriage after all, and I've got my own way.'¹⁴⁹

The interactions between Hilda and Edwin in *These Twain* are complex iterations, but what Bennett emphasises in the flux of their quarrels is that they could never be equal because of the economic disparities which separate them. The source of their frustration is to a large degree Hilda's recognition of her economic dependence and her indomitable refusal to be overwhelmed by it. 'I submit, and yet I shall never submit,' is her defining incantation.¹⁵⁰ At the conclusion of *These Twain*, the contempt which she feels for the insularity of the Five Towns is a portent of Bennett's determination to shed his regional loyalties and to move to his new manner and metropolitan novels.

Afterword

As a professional writer, Bennett needed to provide what the public wanted to read, and so at the beginning of his career he was perfectly willing, without troubling his

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 112, pp. 138 – 39 and p. 146.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 415.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 430.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 282.

artistic conscience, to work as a jobbing journalist and writer of sensational serials and short stories, whilst trying at the same time to write the Five Towns literary novels which would make him famous. When it came to his serious Five Towns fiction, his novels were especially influenced by his admiration for nineteenth-century French and Russian authors and by George Moore.

Bennett was fascinated with the interplay between romance, beauty and industrialisation, and in his regional fiction he demonstrated an artistic facility for transforming the commonplace into the sublime. Although he struggled to write his second novel, *Anna of the Five Towns*, it became his first success as a writer of full-length fiction. Thereafter, he was able to write further Five Towns novels by adopting a variety of personae: social critic, cultural anatomist, regional historian, symbolist, feminist, psychologist, sociologist and subversively liberal polemicist.

His regional fiction was a sophisticated construct because in it he aimed at complete fidelity to realism in his presentation of his provincial communities, whilst simultaneously embarking on phenomenological explorations of the mystery of human identity. It has frequently been suggested that Bennett declined after *The Old Wives' Tale*, but this chapter repudiates this assertion. In his second trilogy, as in his first, he was able to explore the emotional depths and psychological complexities of those who endured unexceptional lives in common place industrialised backwaters.

The Old Wives' Tale is his greatest achievement because it includes and subsumes the principal concerns of all his other major work: the decline of intellectual power, human enfeeblement, the challenge to, and overthrow of, entrenched power structures, the shift in cultural and moral values, the injustice of gender discrimination, the corrosiveness of stratified social prejudice, the latent complexities of the suppressed psyche, the spiritual dissimulation of organised

religion and the existential inexplicability of the human condition. All of these were circumscribed by his respect for the imperatives of Darwinian vitality.

He was proud of his Five Towns fiction, sometimes defensive and prickly when it was subject to criticism, and not always the best judge of it. He came to regret the high opinion which he held of *Sacred and Profane Love* when it was first published, and he was misguided to assume that *Leonora* would enjoy the same literary status and commercial success as *Anna of the Five Towns*.¹⁵¹ On other occasions, he showed more realistic powers of self-evaluation. When he published *Anna* he was confident that it would be respected twenty years later. D. H. Lawrence may have dismissed it out of hand in 1912, deriding what he saw as its gauche fatalism when he wrote: 'I hate Bennett's resignation. Tragedy ought really to be a great kick at misery. But 'Anna of the Five Towns' seems like an acceptance – so does all the modern stuff since Flaubert.'¹⁵² However, by the time he made these gibes the novel was already in its fourth edition.

Approximately eighteen months after he had declared a coy pride in his appropriation of a fictional topography, Bennett was preparing to sever the connections between the Five Towns and himself. *These Twain* provided him with a cathartic release from the tensions and discords of his own marriage, but by the middle of the war, he had become disenchanted with his regional artefact. Although he continued to produce fiction during the war, he was distracted on a number of fronts. He was active in his committee work, spending long periods of time away from his Essex country house, he had become a public servant and government apologist in London and abroad, the demands on his time and energies from

¹⁵¹ *Letters I*, 24 April 1904, p. 49.

¹⁵² *The Critical Heritage*, p. 22.

newspaper and periodical editors were intense and unrelenting, and his foundering marriage was not conducive to domestic tranquillity.

At the same time, he was acutely aware of, and stimulated by, the artistic and commercial challenges of writing more cosmopolitan and metrocentric fiction. He was always keen to experiment, and as he completed *These Twain* he was anticipating a move from one genre to another. Modernist stirrings could be found in his novel *The Pretty Lady*, and these spilled over into his post-war career. Not all of his Five Towns novels were successful (artistically or commercially), but his commitment to apotheosise the Pentonville omnibus, which had flourished in them, survived the war and remained with him until the end of his career.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONFLICTED CRAFTSMAN: POTBOILERS AND SERIALS

Among the many big business men which the profession of letters has produced in England during the past two decades, Mr. Bennett must in many ways be considered the most successful. He is the best all-round man we have – the Gordon Selfridge of the profession – a veritable universal provider of literary “merchandise.” When we consider the number and the variety of the things which he has done, and done efficiently, it is impossible to withhold from him the most ungrudging admiration.¹

Douglas Goldring, *Reputations: Essays in Criticism*, 1920.

Journalists who are not novelists accuse me about once a week of pot-boiling. The argument is not stated very clearly; but it seems to amount to this: first, that a man who has written long, realistic novels which have met with approval ought not, if he is a serious artist, to write anything but long serious novels; second, that a man who can make a livelihood out of writing novels ought to confine himself to novels, because if he goes outside them he will make more money. Personally, I cannot see that a writer ought not to write what he wants to write simply because the result of his doing so would be to increase his income. I write for money. I write for as much as I can get. Shakespeare and Balzac did the same.²

Arnold Bennett, *The Saviour of Life*, 1928.

The critical dismantling of Bennett’s reputation

Between 1898 and 1908 Arnold Bennett wrote and published nine sensational potboilers.³ All but one of them were serialised in established national periodicals, like *The Golden Penny*, *T.P’s Weekly*, and *Windsor*, and in more local publications, such as *The Staffordshire Sentinel*, in weekly or monthly instalments before subsequently appearing in book form. Most were written quickly in a matter of a few

¹ Douglas Goldring, *Reputations: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1920), p. 149.

² Quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, pp.7 – 8.

³ *Ibid*: pp. 18 – 38.

weeks; two of them, *The Sinews of War* (1906) and *The Statue* (1908), were collaborative endeavours written with his close friend and mentor, Eden Phillpotts.

In writing these potboilers, or entertainments as he referred to them, Bennett revealed that he was essentially a conflicted craftsman. He wished to be taken seriously as a gifted, even experimental, artist. Both his first short story which was published in the avant-garde *Yellow Book* and his first novel, *A Man from the North*, a story of the vicissitudes and disappointments of a deracinated provincial writer, made favourable impressions upon literary London and encouraged the callow writer's hopes that they could facilitate his acceptance by the metropolitan literary élite. His novel did not bring him financial reward, however, much less the security and reputation which he envied. The immediate consequence of this was that he turned to serial fiction in order to make money, completing two sensational novellas within the space of nine months (*Love and Life* in January 1899 and *The Gates of Wrath* in summer of 1899).⁴ Thereafter, the pattern for much of his career was set and fixed; in simple terms, it involved constantly weaving between serious fiction and sensational fantasias, journalism and drama.

Bennett wrote his serials as both conspirator with, and victim of, the publishing industry. When his novellas were sold to fiction bureaux he had no idea where and when they would be published, and this partly explains his willingness to amend or remodel his texts to suit the needs of magazine editors. His sensational potboilers have, however, inflicted grave, and for many terminal, damage to his reputation as a writer. A Greek chorus of lament and disapproval accuses him firstly of betraying his artistic integrity by abandoning his chosen models of excellence, the Continental novelists of Russia and France and English realist writers such as

⁴ *The Critical Heritage*, p. 35 and p. 22.

George Moore. In essence, the charge against him on this count, as Bennett acknowledged in a letter to Edward Garnett, in November 1908, is that he frittered away too much of his time and talents in satisfying ‘the fourth-rate tastes of Philistia’.⁵ Secondly, he is disparaged because of his shameless commercial cupidity and timorous obeisance to a profit-driven publishing industry. Finally, and most damaging of all, his serials and potboilers, on the rare occasions on which they have incited any comment, are despised as worthless exemplars of contemporary popular culture and epitomes of the bland prose and formulaically contrived plots of genre fiction. Even those who acknowledge Bennett’s achievements in his Five Towns and metropolitan fiction, dismiss these lighter works as unreadable or flawed beyond redemption. He is accused of writing them simply as a journalist, and one at that whose imagination and creativity were exhausted by over-production – by 1914 he had written 22 works of fiction and his light works outnumbered his serious ones by a ratio of two to one.⁶

The critical dismantling of Bennett’s reputation began in earnest in the 1920s, but it was not originally orchestrated by his *bête noire* Virginia Woolf and nor was it grounded, as was hers in 1924, on the argument that he and his contemporaries had become outmoded. Its roots can be partly found some four years earlier in the mordant subtlety of Douglas Goldring’s encomium. In his ironic reference to Bennett as the Gordon Selfridge of English letters, he portrayed him as an immiserated helot camped outside, but permanently excluded from, the fortified castle of pure Art. He dismissed Bennett as a brilliant second-rate mind, who had been ruined by his estrangement from the sources which had inspired him, by the commercial success of *The Old Wives’ Tale* (1908), and by his determination to prove that he had

⁵ *Letters II*, 23 November 1908, p. 232.

⁶ Allen, *Arnold Bennett*, p. 35 and p. 39.

rejected the influences of his provincial background. Comparing him to Selfridge, Goldring implied that Bennett had regressed in his serials from his serious fiction to paradigms of mechanical hack writing, designed not to satisfy his artistic conscience or to fulfil his literary ambitions, but rather to appease the demands of a middlebrow mass market.

It was a line of critical thought which has been pursued persistently ever since. Virginia Woolf subsequently conceived of Bennett as a ‘tradesman of letters’.⁷ The poet and critic Roy Campbell complained in his *Collected Essays* in 1928 that Bennett (accompanied by Wells, Shaw and Galsworthy) had sold ‘the experience of the human race’ for ‘a few patent bath taps’.⁸ Thirty years later even one of his admirers, the academic and critic James Hall, lamented that few readers were aware of the baleful inadequacies of the majority of his fiction.⁹ More recently, John Lucas has dismissed his sensational serials as dull, absurd, ludicrous and ineptly written.¹⁰

Some of the enduring damage to Bennett’s reputation was partly self-inflicted. With his casual and earthy braggadocio, he seemed to invite it even from close friends like Sturt:

I began the serial towards the end of October, & swore to do one instalment a week, which I did, though I nearly killed myself at first to keep my oath. [...] after the fourth instalment (17,000 words in a month) I seemed suddenly to conquer the trick of the thing. I have to report an immense increase of facility, not only for rotten but for decent stuff. I believe I could fart sensational fiction now.¹¹

On other less confidential occasions, as for example in his facetious autobiography, *The Truth About an Author* (1903), he appeared self-satisfied when boasting of the

⁷ D. J. Taylor, ‘J.B. Priestley: adventures of the “tradesman of letters,”’ *Guardian*, London, 9 November, 2012.

⁸ Roy Campbell, ‘Contemporary Poetry’ in Edgell Rickword, ed., *Scrutinies* (London: Wishart, 1928), p. 169, cited in John Batchelor, ‘Edwardian Novelists’, pp. 123 – 24 and endnote 6, page 148, in Harold Bloom, ed., *Edwardian and Georgian Fiction* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2005).

⁹ Hall, *Arnold Bennett: Primitivism and Taste*, p. 11.

¹⁰ Lucas, *Arnold Bennett: A Study of His Fiction*, p. 56 and p. 187.

¹¹ *Letters II*, 5 January 1899, p. 116.

mechanical cynicism with which he wrote his entertainments. He claimed, for example, that he wrote his first serial, *Love and Life* (1900), in 24 half days, simply by selecting and mixing indiscriminately those narrative elements which he knew would appeal to the tastes of serial fiction readers: wealth, luxury, feminine beauty, intrigue and catastrophe. His provocatively facetious quip that the seventy-five pounds that he earned for such insipid vacuity both destroyed the vestiges of his artistic conscience and inflated his confidence and ego does not present him in a sympathetic light.¹²

However, the actual truth about this author was more complex. His demystification and belittlement of the profession of writing involved spurious candour and an element of duplicity because, although he began *Love and Life* in September 1898, he did not finish it until January 1899 and, whilst his Journal entries indicate that it took him at least three months to complete, one of his letters to Sturt suggests that it took even longer. In addition, before it was published in book form as *The Ghost* in 1907, it was reworked extensively in the autumn of 1906.¹³ None of this suggests that he dismissed his potboiling fiction as worthless or innutritive.

Bennett's potboilers

Bennett was fully aware that the term 'potboiler' was loaded with pejorative innuendo and was accepted, by common definition, as a label for worthless, meretricious writing of little literary value, frequently written in haste, responsive to the demands and interdicts of magazine editors and primarily motivated by the prospects of financial gain, but he remained resolutely unembarrassed by his

¹² *The Truth About an Author*, pp. 106 – 13.

¹³ *Letters I*, 21 May, 1904, pp. 51 – 53.

frequent references to his willingness to write for money, as he made clear to the journalist W. D. Howells in March 1911:

Also I feel that it is my duty to reassure an observer so friendly as you are, on the subject of the pseudo-Arnold Bennett, author of unserious books. The need of money was the sole & sufficient explanation of those books. Although I flatter myself that I live to write, I should be ashamed if I did not write to live.¹⁴

In categorising his serials in recognition of their genre, he combined self-deprecation and smugness as he baited and antagonised the metropolitan artistic literati:

I had entered into a compact with myself that I would never “write down” to the public in a long fiction. I was almost bound to pander to the vulgar taste, or at any rate to a taste not refined, in my editing, in my articles, and in my short stories, but I had sworn solemnly that I would keep the novel-form unsullied for the pure exercise of the artist in me. What became of this high compact? I merely ignored it. I tore it up and it was forgotten, the instant I saw a chance of earning the money of shame. I devised excuses, of course. I said that my drawing-room wanted new furniture; I said that I might lift the sensational serial to a higher place, thus serving the cause of art; I said – I don’t know what I said, all to my conscience. But I began the serial.¹⁵

Bennett needed no excuses for his potboilers because he was never ashamed of writing them. That he was completely at ease in compartmentalising his work was a point which he emphasised when writing to his agent, James Pinker, in September 1911, in order to discuss the American publication of *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902):

If it is necessary to publish it to stop competition, I should like it *not* uniform with the others, and I *must* have in it a note conceived more or less in the following terms *This book, written about 1899, was one of the first stories which the author composed specially for serial publication, and which he has classified as ‘fantasias’, to distinguish them equally from his realistic novels and from his satiric novels.*¹⁶

Despite his aspiration to be recognised as an artistic author and his tendency to differentiate his potboilers by deprecating some of them as minor work, Bennett was not reluctant to express his pride in his serials, and he had no doubt that the

¹⁴ *Letters II*, 1 March 1911, pp. 274.

¹⁵ *The Truth About an Author*, p.106.

¹⁶ *Letters I*, 6 September 1911, p. 162.

discipline of writing them had provided him with a vital part of his literary apprenticeship, a point which he noted in a journal entry in January 1899:

If I gained nothing else last year, I gained facility. In the writing of sensational fiction I made great strides during the last few months, and with ordinary luck I could now turn out a complete instalment (about 4,000 words) after 3 o'clock in an afternoon.¹⁷

He regarded *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902) as a high-class artefact, even though it had been written to please the public. Nevertheless, when it was needed he leavened his pride with pragmatism. Thus, his gratification with his achievements in *Hugo* (1906) did not prevent him from forswearing his artistic temperament by rewriting, without rancour or complaint, those sections of it where the raciness of his plot might have proven unpalatable to his middle-class readers.¹⁸

In electing to describe seven of the serials which he produced between 1900 and 1910 as fantasias, Bennett had not chosen fortuitous labels, since he was deliberately employing them as conspicuous signifiers to assure editors and readers that they were imaginative improvisations on modern themes and modern times. Ostensibly, they were offered as bland pabulum, designed to appeal to a complicit audience which required and enjoyed a carefully structured narrative. In this context, Bennett wrote not as a priest of avant-garde Art, but as the panoptic, omniscient narrator, guiding and leading his readers through serpentine plots, surprising them with *coup de théâtres* and reassuring and rewarding them with the expected and timely triumph of virtue and decency. In this guise, he was, apparently, providing appropriate fare for a quintessentially passive audience of mass consumers. However, I shall contend in this chapter that some of his serials have been, injudiciously, misunderstood. They should not be dismissed *en bloc* as the readerly

¹⁷ *Journals I*, 2 January 1899, p. 83.

¹⁸ *Letters I*, 1 September 1904, p. 57.

or lisible (and by implication, superficial) texts identified by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) and *S/Z* (1970), that is to say undemanding, unmediated narratives amenable to a conventionally passive and receptive readership.¹⁹ Equally, they cannot be characterised as writerly or scriptible texts – openly challenging by means of radical dissonances, violating expected continuities, and forcing the reader to engage actively in producing substantive or alternative interpretations distinct from those conferred by an omniscient narrator. But what a carefully nuanced interpretation of his potboilers does reveal is that his readable sensational serials are seasoned with some writerly condiments.²⁰ In them he has skilfully assimilated elements of high and low literature through carefully sheltered critiques of social hierarchies, complex moral boundaries and manipulative power structures. They succeed in linking traditional narratives with subtle impromptus and invite alert readers to share, if they choose, his wry bewilderment and suppressed resentment of the material inequities and consumer fetishism of the Edwardian and Georgian eras. In them, he conspicuously rejects the ideological antinomy by which mass culture is positioned as antagonistic to highbrow Art – a punctuated equilibrium which is evoked by Frederick Jameson in his 1979 essay, ‘Reification and Mass Culture’:

The theory of mass culture – or mass audience culture, commercial culture, “popular” culture, the culture industry, as it is variously known – has always tended to define its object against so-called high culture without reflecting on the objective status of this opposition. As so often, positions in this field reduce themselves to two mirror-images, and are essentially staged in terms of value. Thus the familiar motif of *elitism* argues for the priority of mass culture on the grounds of the sheer numbers of people exposed to it; the

¹⁹ Roland Barthes: *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973; repr. translated by Richard Miller with a note on the text by Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) and *S/Z* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970) pp. 9 – 12.

²⁰ The affinities between Modernism and the popular fiction of the 1920s and 1930s are recognised by Laura Frost. Her argument is that clichéd popular fiction underpins Modernism’s supposedly innovative representations of sexuality and eroticism, in spite of the Modernist repudiation of this “badness”. Laura Frost, ‘The Romance of Cliché: E. M. Hull, D. H. Lawrence, and Interwar Erotic Fiction’, p. 98 in Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds, *Bad Modernisms* (London: Duke University Press, 2006).

pursuit of high or hermetic culture is then stigmatized as a status hobby of small groups of intellectuals.²¹

This chapter will also show how Bennett revealed his distaste for potboiling mediocrity by satirising the publishing industry in *A Great Man* (1904). It will also demonstrate that he operated in his serials as a trenchant social campaigner and covert political activist. Adopting such dissident stances gave him not just the freedom to explore the potential for a subversive counter narrative capable of exposing an Edwardian social malaise and a post-war society in search of an identity, but also the opportunity to reconfigure the shifting boundaries of highbrow and middlebrow Art.

I shall also show that his potboilers and serials do not stand in generic and artistic isolation from his more acclaimed fiction and that he was perfectly prepared to recycle in them thematic elements of his more serious work, such as generational conflict, patriarchal exploitation and thwarted feminism. In addition, I shall illustrate that many of them operate as thematic forerunners of his later fiction and that, in their connections with the works of Conrad and T. S. Eliot, some of them reveal shards of literary Modernism which reinforce Bennett's belief that the experimental and the popular were not inherently incompatible.

Frolic in mediocrity

Bennett's early success with potboilers such as *The Grand Babylon Hotel* were an important part of his professional rites of passage, helping him to develop professionally and shaping his views on the commercial imperatives of the literary market. In his novella, *A Great Man*, written in three months, published in May 1904

²¹ Frederick Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', *Social Text* (Duke University Press), 1 (Winter 1979), pp. 130 – 48 (p. 130).

and labelled as a frolic, he demonstrated an understanding of the potentially lucrative rewards of frangible mediocrity, by training his satirical sights on celebrity authorship and the publishing practices by which it was endorsed. Fittingly, his talentless hero, Henry Shakespere Knight, achieves fame and wealth by providing an undiscerning but eagerly receptive mass market with the dross and vacuous ephemera which it craves and admires.

In every respect, the literary dullard, Knight, is apt proof of Wordsworth's maxim that the child is father to the man. His prize winning school essay, '*Streets*', is pedestrian, leaden and fittingly mocked for its inadequacies by his rakish cousin, Tom Knight. Nor does Henry, as a young legal clerk with literary ambitions, appreciate the ironic aptness of his essay for the Regent Street Polytechnic Debating Society, '*The Tendencies of Modern Fiction*', an expression of his contempt for the 'stream of trashy novels constantly poured forth by the Press'.²² In contrast, his cousin Tom Knight, fretful, spoiled and malicious as a child, a common thief in his adolescence and a fraudster in his young manhood is, nonetheless, a gifted artist whose paintings are purchased by the Luxembourg Gallery in Paris and commissioned by Italian society ladies in Monte Carlo. Notwithstanding his personal peccadillos, the genetic lottery of fortune indiscriminately favours him, and he emerges as an original, if unattractive, creative talent.

A Great Man is a neglected novella. It is important because it demonstrates Bennett's distaste for the ultimate futility of potboiling mediocrity. In his crafted dystopia of Edwardian publishing practices, worthless trash succeeds because rapaciously fabricated sales figures are bolstered by aggressive advertising. The public demands value for money, and valorises narrative length over artistic merit.

²² Arnold Bennett, *A Great Man: A Frolic* (1904; repr. New York: Doran, 1911) pp. 58 – 59.

Celebrity status is confirmed honorifically, irrespective of artistic talent. Literary agents are the only prophylactics against the extortions of unprincipled and parochially incompetent publishers who fail to recognise the lucrative potential of the burgeoning American market. Press reviews are venal and commercially self-serving. The professional theatre is at the mercy of entrepreneurial poseurs, fraudsters and egocentrics. Knight becomes wealthy only because he writes what the public wants – an injunction which, not surprisingly, became the title of one of Bennett's own plays in 1909.²³

Despite Bennett's disingenuous claims, *A Great Man* is anything but a trifling frolic. It offers a serious critique of the aesthetic bankruptcy of an important constituent of the Edwardian literary world and it is too, in part, a muted *mea culpa* in which Bennett does not shy away from self-mockery. Henry Knight is so lacking in genuine inspiration that he is forced to consult a copy of a self-help manual, *How to Become a Successful Novelist*, the type of professional *vade mecum* which Bennett had already written and to which he was to return throughout his career.

All of this is juxtaposed with Bennett's self-appointed role as social critic and humanitarian campaigner. *A Great Man* provided him with an opportunity to confront the oppressions which impeded women from engaging as independent participants in the work place. The arousal of Henry's passion for the golden-haired Flossie Brighteye, the *nom de plume* of his fiancée and subsequent wife, Geraldine, is played out against her determination to earn her own living and maintain her economic independence, ambitions which are abandoned after her marriage. In addition, in the Paris scenes where Henry meets and socialises with the courtesan, Cosette, there is a foregrounding of the thematic discourses to which Bennett was

²³ Arnold Bennett, *What the Public Wants: A Play in Four Acts* (1909; repr. New York: Doran 1911).

attracted and returned throughout his career: wealth, extravagance, rakishness, gambling and the metropolitan *demi-monde*.

Serial manqué

Written in January and February 1908 whilst Bennett was at work writing *The Old Wives' Tale*, *Buried Alive* (1908) was intended originally for the serial market, as he noted in his Journal on 17 January: 'Tomorrow I shall have finished a quarter of the whole. I am deliberately losing sight of the serial, and writing it solely as a book.'²⁴ Sub-titled, *A Tale of these Days*, it operates as a humorous critique, not just of the commodified Edwardian art-world, but also of the commercial and social rigidities which endorsed it.

The duplex success of Priam Farll's two earliest paintings – the life-size policeman and the seascape with penguins – allegorises Bennett's moral queasiness with contemporary life, with its social repressions and its manipulative power structures. The life size painting of the constable provides a looming image of state oppression and intimidation. In fact, all references to the police force in this novella disparage the dominance of its intrusive authority. In counterpoint, Bennett presents the penguins as mute victims. Exploited as decorative items in the seascape painting, they are transformed into national fashion icons as a result of Farll's celebrity.

Edwardian England is deconstructed in this failed serial as a friable and anxious society, and one whose bulwarks are easily shaken. Alice Challice's reliance on her share income is shattered when the brewing company, Cohoon's, fails to pay its dividends. The social fabric had been torn apart by the British workman's newly

²⁴ *Journals I*, 17 January 1908, p. 275.

acquired temperance: 'Beer had failed'.²⁵ The seismic impacts of stock market failures and capitalist caprice are readily intelligible to a twenty-first century readership; the financial consequences for Alice and her fellow shareholders are Biblically punitive.

Bennett does not recoil from the social abrasions of what he views as a materialistic and brutalised society, and the novella's simple conceit, the mistaken assumption by the doctor on his valet's death that Farll is the servant and the deceased Henry Leek, his employer, allows him to view the Edwardian world from a position of subordinated anonymity. Those who are exploited, like the staff in the Elm Tree Tea Rooms, are so insensitised by their subjection that their instinctive response is to disdain the customers on whose patronage they rely for their livelihood, and when Farll tries to cash a cheque he is treated with summary suspicion by the bank clerks who, on the basis of his appearance, form an instant, but critically erroneous impression of his social and financial standing. Edwardian London is shown through these lenses as apprehensive, defensive and judgemental. It is one of the main reasons why Farll is attracted to Alice Challice, the widow seeking a husband through a matrimonial agency:

She was a living proof that in her sex social distinctions do not effectively count. Nothing counted, where she was concerned, except a distinction far more profound than any social distinction – the historic distinction between Adam and Eve. She was balm to Priam Farll. She might have been equally balm to King David, Uriah the Hittite, Socrates, Rousseau, Lord Byron, Heine, or Charlie Peace. She would have understood them all. They would all have been ready to cushion themselves on her comfortableness. Was she a lady? Pish! She was a woman.²⁶

Alice's equable tolerance, natural empathy and discreet curiosity entice him with the irresistible promise of refuge with her in an undemanding suburban anonymity.

²⁵ Arnold Bennett, *Buried Alive: A Tale of these Days* (1908; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 94.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

The driving force of the novella is Bennett's determination to expose the fragilities and hypocrisies of Edwardian Britain. Its ruling class – in the cameos which he presents in the Grand Babylon Hotel – is acquisitive, sinister, silently complacent and ensconced in a reactionary past. Even the legal system is part of a capitalist conspiracy which impedes and delays due process so that parasitical cliques of judges and advocates can batten on their extortionate fees. Its affluent captains of the Art industry indulge in the acquisitive accumulation of its cultural artefacts, because they value them primarily as sound commercial investments. Worst of all, the relationship between the artist and the dealer is abusive and exploitative:

When Priam Farll reflected that he had received about four hundred pounds for those pictures – vastly less than one per cent of what the shiny and prosperous dealer had ultimately disposed of them for, the traditional fury of the artist against the dealer – of the producer against the parasitic middleman – sprang in to flame in his heart. Up till then he had never had any serious cause of complaint against his dealers. (Extremely successful artists seldom have.) Now he saw dealers, as the ordinary painters see them, to be the authors of all evil!²⁷

But the real importance of this stillborn serial is that Farll's dilemma was Bennett's own *bête noire*. Both could appreciate that for an artist the satisfaction of creative fatigue and the striving for perfection provided intrinsically incomparable rewards. Both pursued wealth, status and fame. Both rejected England for expatriate liberation. Both wanted their work to articulate their identities. Both were driven artists unable to repress their creative energies. Farll could never fully reconcile these conflicting impulses and neither could Bennett.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 146.

Idyllic Diversion

When writing his serials Bennett was not averse to recycling his work, as he did with his ‘Idyllic Diversion’, *Helen with the High Hand* (1910). Completed in June 1907 and serialised in June and July 1909 in *The Star* and *The Staffordshire Sentinel* as *The Miser’s Niece*, this novella was a variant of *Anna of the Five Towns*, and designed ‘to be something which would please the serial public without giving the serious public a chance to accuse me of “playing down” – as in *The City of Pleasure*’.²⁸ It provided Bennett with another opportunity for rumination on the topography and amenities of the Five Towns and on the characteristics and characters which they nurtured. A relic of the nineteenth century, James Ollerenshaw is, like Ephraim Tellwright, a miser endowed with stubbornness, but gifted too with generosity, compassion, and a capacity for self-reflection. However, his great step-niece Helen Rathbone is no simulacrum of Anna Tellwright. Manipulative, stubborn, single-minded and Machiavellian in her determination both to choose a new partner for her widowed mother and to marry the man of her choice, she can clearly be read as a prototype for Hilda Lessways.

Even though the Ollerenshaw family is not the only one to be fractured by quarrels and feuds, this is superficially a gentler version of middle-class life in the Five Towns than the one Bennett presented in *Anna*. Even so, there are echoes of the social disjunctions on which Bennett always brooded. In this idyll, Mrs. Butt finds no palliative for her subjection as a slatternly servant in the mean and dispiriting conditions in which she has to work, and for which she recompenses herself by stealing Ollerenshaw’s carefully guarded China tea. Her impoverishment clashes with the vain, materialistic extravagance of Helen and her friend, Sarah Swetnam,

²⁸ *Letters I*, 21 September 1907, p. 96.

who are both enslaved by the fads and dictates of fashion. Their extravagances are replicated by the effete Emanuel Prockter (bedecked in blue suit, white waistcoat, gold tie and yellow gloves) for whom Helen affects a passionate attachment.

There are aesthetic and cultural disjunctions, too. The role of the urban park and its emblematic status as a collective and civilising amenity is contrasted with the divisive avarice of unrefined capitalism. Whilst Ollerenshaw is the owner of over three hundred properties in Turnhill and Bursley and accumulates the income which they bring, he has no scruples in seizing the goods of defaulting tenants and furnishing his own property with them. The aggressive individual enterprise which was prominent in *Anna of the Five Towns* is reflected too in the clash of values over Wilbraham Hall, the stately home at Hillport which Emanuel Prockter is determined that his stepmother and cynosure of Bursley's social life, Flora Prockter, should purchase:

To Mrs Prockter, Wilbraham Hall was the last of the stylish port-wine estates that in old days dotted the heights around the Five Towns. To her it was the symbol of the death of tone and the triumph of industrialism. Whereas James merely saw it as so much building land upon which streets of profitable and inexpensive semi-detached villas would one day rise at the wand's touch of the man who had sufficient audacity for a prodigious speculation.²⁹

Helen with the High Hand also hints at the generational conflict which Bennett was to explore in the *Clayhanger* trilogy when he reveals that in his relationship with his great-stepniece, Ollerenshaw is a simple *ingénu*. Helen 'was continually proving that as a student in the University of Human Nature he had not even matriculated.'³⁰ It is, however, the resilience of feminine guile and its sinuous capacity for self-preserving inventiveness that Bennett celebrates in this vignette of patriarchal power and wealth. Flora Prockter becomes the mistress of Wilbraham

²⁹ Arnold Bennett, *Helen with the High Hand: An Idyllic Diversion* (1910; repr. London: Chapman and Hall, 1912), p. 172.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 224 – 25.

Hall, but only after marriage to Ollerenshaw who has bought it for over £7,000, and Helen marries the man of her choice – the physically aggressive and gruffly temperamental entrepreneur, Andrew Dean, with whom she is content to live, on the terms of her choice, in a modest semi-detached house in Park Road, Bursley.

Collaborations: romances, mysteries, politics and international relations

Bennett's serials were characterised by their amorphous versatility as aesthetic frolics, social satires and derivative idylls. In other manifestations they were also the product of collaborative endeavours. In the early stages of his career, he had worked with Eden Phillpotts on short stories, plays and two full-length novels, *The Sinews of War* (1906) and *The Statue* (1908). His relationship with the older man was important because he viewed him as a mentor and because many of his values and working habits were shaped by him. He aspired to achieve Phillpotts' wealth and fame after he had met him, and even imitated him in recording in his Journal an annual total output at the end of each year. He had no doubt that Phillpotts was an accomplished craftsman, and was convinced that he was destined to become one of the most celebrated of English novelists. Initially, he was flattered by the established author's invitation to collaborate with him on a mystery story. Their joint enterprise was a productive one; Phillpotts provided the scenarios whilst Bennett, who believed that together they had produced sound and conscientious work, wrote the novels. However, the relationship between them was complex and, on Bennett's part, inconsistent. He especially took umbrage at what he considered to be Phillpotts' condescending and high-handed behaviour over the contract for *The Statue*.³¹ The schism which followed was permanent, despite a partial *rapprochement* between the

³¹ *Letters I*, 17 June 1908, pp. 102 – 03.

two some twenty years later. In its bitter aftermath, Bennett developed a defensively independent and revisionist carapace and took pains to distance himself from Phillpotts by emphasising that he had already published between 15 and 20 books before undertaking his first collaboration which, according to his claim, he had considered as only a light-hearted and remunerative side line.³²

In both collaborations, Bennett as writer blended the mystery story with the sensational thriller and conflated melodrama, domestic politics and international relations. Both novels were targeted at a bourgeois and educated audience. *The Statue* is set in the opulent country house of the financier Carl Courlander which is bedecked with fine art: the main staircase displays statues by Rodin, Barye and Gilbert, Courlander's private apartment boasts a Velasquez, Corot and a Delacroix, as well as an Étienne Derval desk, and his daughter, Millicent, is described as a calm, brooding model for Tennyson or Rossetti.³³ In similar vein, Bennett compares Mary Pollexfen in *The Sinews of War*, with the goddess Hygeia, as he describes her portrait which hangs in the Physique Club in London.³⁴ This novel, however, is calculated to appeal not just to the aesthetics of the cultivated bourgeoisie, but also to its fears and insecurities. In describing the Corner House for the destitute middle classes, Bennett observes that there can be nothing more tragic than gentility divorced from riches.³⁵ It is ironic, too, that part of the appeal of both these novels to the core values of contemporary readers would have come from the inflected discourse of colonialisation and imperial conquest which they embraced and which, from a twenty-first century perspective, would be viewed as casual, unreconstructed

³² *Letters II*, 1 March 1911, p. 274.

³³ Edén Phillpotts & Arnold Bennett, *The Statue: A Story of International Intrigue and Mystery* (London: Cassell, 1908), p. 50, p. 42 and p. 32.

³⁴ Edén Phillpotts & Arnold Bennett, *The Sinews of War: A Romance of London and the Sea* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1906), p. 78.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

and outmoded racism, especially the pantomime parody of the idiolects and speech patterns of Curtis, the Chinese valet, and the negro cook and factotum, Marse Coco.³⁶

In contrast, it is also undeniable that both books resonate with more positive connections to the present century. Bennett takes aim in *The Statue* against a litany of social injustice and malaise, including the harsh treatment of convicts in the Spartan environment of Dartmoor prison.³⁷ Viewed from this perspective, his anticipation of post-war satire appears more than serendipitous because the manner in which the convicts communicate with each other, by passing on messages during the hymn singing in the prison chapel, is replicated twenty years later in Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* (1928).

Bennett also excoriates the corruption of national Government. In *The Statue*, a foreign war, in this case between France and Germany, is fomented by an unpopular British Government which wishes to retain power through diverting public resentment of its shortcomings to the threats allegedly posed by a foreign aggressor. Its ministers are almost totally devoid of principle and act as venal, self-serving placemen, willing to sacrifice the interests of the country in order to maintain their own stipendiary privileges and social advantages.³⁸ Their Cabinet meeting exposes a collective hypocrisy and recriminatory cupidity in which they demonstrate their incapacity for placing the national welfare before their own. The language of their imperial patronage and their condescendingly hegemonistic assumptions are captured in the assertion of the prime minister: 'The destinies of this Empire,' said Lord Doncastle, rising, 'cannot be swayed by facile humanitarianism'.³⁹

³⁶ *The Statue*, pp. 180 – 85 and *The Sinews of War* pp. 50 – 53.

³⁷ *The Statue*, pp. 293 – 98.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 232 – 35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

The venality extends to the two financiers, Abraham Crampiron and Carl Courlander. Crampiron, Courlander's murderer, is prepared to foment a war between Germany and France in order to sustain a morally corrupt Government which is prepared to reward him with civic honours, in his case a peerage.⁴⁰ Added to this is the cavalier irresponsibility and incompetence of a popular Press which has little regard for the accuracy of its news reports.⁴¹ The City of London is also abraded by Bennett, with his focus on its parasitical predation. The financial triangle encompassed by King William Street, Cornhill and Gracechurch Street is a cauldron which generates more unearned money to the square yard than any other in the world.⁴² It is peopled with profiteering speculators and galvanised by fear and rumour. It would not be lost upon a modern reader that the description of the inchoate financial firestorm which ensues when the French begin to withdraw large reserves of gold from the Bank of England is suffused with threats of a precipitous national descent into financial paralysis and seismic social upheaval.⁴³

It cannot be argued that Bennett employs the demanding dissonances of scriptible fiction in these two novels, but neither does he sink into the comfortable rut of lisible and formulaic platitudes, preferring instead to indulge in disputatious and unexpected contrarities. For example, he raises provocative questions about state-sponsored violence. In *The Sinews of War*, Pollexfen, a double murderer, finds no rational distinction between his actions and those of Cabinet Ministers who commit the nation to what he views as the barbarism of an international war.⁴⁴ There is, too, intellectual friction, in Carl Courlander's rhetorical sparring with his son, Maurice, and in his defence of the nature and necessity of war, both reminiscent of

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 157.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp.195 – 97.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 90 – 91.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 238.

⁴⁴ *The Sinews of War*, p. 231.

the sinuous sophistry to be found in Andrew Undershaft's paean to the arms industry in Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1905):

'A thousand years hence, perhaps a hundred years hence, war will be barbaric. But to-day it is part of the scheme of things, an instrument of progress. And what harm does it do? A hundred thousand men killed! Two hundred thousand widows and orphans! What of that? It's nothing in the sum of human suffering. And let me tell you that of all the instruments of progress, suffering is the greatest. As for the dead, nature will soon replace them. Trust her!'⁴⁵

It is an evocation which cannot be regarded as fortuitous, given that both men were contributors to left-wing political journals, such as the *New Age* and the *New Statesman*. Bennett also satirises the irresponsibly careless and luridly inventive Press, most succinctly in the *Daily Courier's* boast: 'We spin you a yarn to-day. We give you the news next week.'⁴⁶ In addition, he declares his feminist sympathies. Like Hilda Lessways, Mary Pollexfen finds the energy and enterprise to assert her independence. In her case, she resists and rebuffs her father's domineering edicts, defying his refusal to allow her to embark on her chosen career as an actress.⁴⁷

Gothic romance

Despite the cultural capital which Bennett brought to his potboilers, they always remained susceptible to critical mockery. Edith Birkhead, for example, could not refrain from sneering at *Hugo* (1906), dismissing this fantasia as a modern travesty of a Gothic romance:

Early in his career Arnold Bennett fashioned a novelette *Hugo*, which may be read as a modernised version of the Gothic romance. Instead of subterranean vaults in a desolated abbey, we have the strong rooms of an enterprising Sloane Street emporium. The coffin, containing an image of the heroine, is buried not in a mouldering chapel, but in a suburban cemetery. The lovely

⁴⁵ *The Statue*, p. 38.

⁴⁶ *The Sinews of War*, p. 128.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

but harassed heroine has fallen, indeed, from her high estate, for Camilla earns her living as a milliner.⁴⁸

Owen Hugo's Emporium on Sloane Street is a gargantuan department store dedicated to satisfying the whims and demands of an insatiable metropolitan consumer culture. Given that Hugo is an urbane, Oxford educated man whose valet plays Chopin piano fantasias for his morning relaxation, this novella, not unexpectedly, genuflects to its targeted readership's abiding fascination with conspicuous consumption and material comfort. In fact, throughout *Hugo* there is abundant evidence of Bennett's sensitivity to the cultural virility of the educated and literate readership which he wished to entertain; the references to Boswell, *Tannhäuser*, *Fidelio* and Florio's *Montaigne* indicate that he was writing for cultivated readers with receptive, catholic tastes which included music, opera, art, popular thrillers and Gothic tragedy.

However, both Goldring and Birkhead failed to notice the novella's strength – its focus on the misogynistic exploitation of women in Edwardian society. Camilla Payne is objectified by Francis Tudor whom she marries, and is pursued by Hugo's obsessively jealous half-brother, Louis Ravengar – determined both to avenge the humiliation of her rejection of him as a suitor and to neutralise her capacity to reveal that he is a killer.⁴⁹ Like one of Bennett's later heroines, Lilian Share, she is forced to negotiate humiliation and compromise in order to survive and to seize such meagre independence as she can acquire. Like Lilian, she has strength of character but, unlike her, she refuses to prostitute herself for wealth and material comfort.

⁴⁸ Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance* (London: Constable and Company, 1921) cited in Matt Foley, 'The Gothic Imagination' (University of Stirling blog: 27 January 2010) <<http://www.gothic.stir.ac.uk/blog/The-Tale-of-Terror-1921/>>[accessed 20 December 2015]

⁴⁹ Arnold Bennett, *Hugo: A Fantasia on Modern Themes* (New York: F.M. Buckles and Company, 1906), p. 217.

With its unstable and monomaniacal villain, family feuds, fake corpse, and concealed crimes, part of the appeal of *Hugo* was to an archetypal potboiling readership. Bennett recognised the generic attraction of such a novella. He was quite willing, however, to indulge at times in affected disparagement of his work. The subtext of his letter to Violet Hunt, written in June 1906, makes clear that he was pleased with this novella, even though it had been produced as an unashamedly commercial artefact:

I distinctly warned you not to read *Hugo*. Yet you go & read it, & not only that – you tell me you don't like it. You are not expected to like it, though it is a passably good book of its kind. It is astonishing that I cannot keep my friends from reading the *un*-literature which I write solely in order to be in a position to offer myself a few luxuries.⁵⁰

His Gothic romances seemed to be particularly vulnerable to his affectation of critical disparagement. He complained to Pinker, for example, that *The Ghost* had 'no connection with his best work', even though he recognised that his modern fantasy was 'perfectly good & well-done marketable work.'⁵¹ In effect, what he had produced was a well-crafted ghost story in which, like the composer Sullivan Smith, he was giving the public what it wanted. Its quintessential Edwardian milieu, designed to appeal to the educated and literate, is inhabited by professional men, impresarios, spiritualists and opera singers:

I shall never forget my first sight of Rosetta Rosa as, robed with the modesty which the character of Elsa demands, she appeared on the stage to answer the accusation of Ortrud. [...] Such a face as hers once seen is engraved eternally on the memory of its generation. And yet when, in a mood of lyrical and rapt ecstasy, she began her opening song, "In Lichte Waffen Scheine," her face was upon the instant forgotten. She became a Voice – pure, miraculous, all-compelling.⁵²

⁵⁰ *Letters II*, 21 June 1906, p. 205.

⁵¹ *Letters I*, 4 March 1907, p. 77.

⁵² Arnold Bennett, *The Ghost: A Fantasia on Modern Themes* (1907; repr. *The Ghost: A Modern Fantasy*, Boston: Small, Maynard, 1911), pp. 18 – 19.

The tawdry brittleness and egocentric vacuity of this milieu are captured in Emmeline Smith's reception at the Gold Rooms in the Grand Babylon Hotel where the only object of the guests (mainly actors and artists) is the puff of self-promotion. It is ironic, given this context, that Rosetta is fully aware of the burdens of celebrity and the possessive claims which they engender in the admirers who pursue her:

‘Men of wealth, men of talent, men of adventure, men of wits – all devoted, all respectful, all ready to marry me. Some honourable, according to the accepted standard, others probably dishonourable. And there is not one but whose real desire is to own me.’⁵³

Bennett's principal interests in this book lie in the betrayal of women in marriage (Rosetta's mother is abandoned by her apparent protector, Sir Cyril Smart), the power of unrequited love, and the inevitable consequences of a corrosively destructive drive for personal revenge, and he presents these through the jealousy of the two opera divettes, Rosetta and Carlotta Deschamps and through Lord Clarenceux's ghost which is unable to rest easily because of Rosetta's rejection.

Clarenceux's malignant and ghostly oppressions of the narrator, Carl Foster, are carefully imbricated in a sequence of threats to his life. Bennett's skill as raconteur can be seen in the layered associations of his structured ambiguity with Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* (1898); it is never totally clear whether these threats are real, a by-product of Foster's mental deterioration, or a spiritual malaise:

As for you who are disposed to smile at the idea of a live man crushed (figuratively) under the heel of a ghost, I beg you to look back upon your own experience, and count up the happenings which have struck you as mysterious. You will be astonished at their number. But nothing is so mysterious that it is incapable of explanation, did we but know enough. I, by a singular mischance, was put in the way of the nameless knowledge which explains all. At any rate, I was made acquainted with some trifle of it. I had strayed on the seashore of the unknown, and picked up a pebble. I had a glimpse of that other world which [...] exists side by side with and permeates our own.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid., p. 203.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 276 – 77.

Clarenceux's love for Rosetta is so destructively intense that it has survived the grave and so the stark choice for Foster is between love for her or freedom away from her. Bennett's description of the bitter confrontation between Clarenceux and Foster is a deft portrayal of a tortured mind wrestling with spiritual and mental turbulence, and it raises questions about the potential influence of Bennett and Conrad on each other: Foster's disorientation is analogous to that experienced by the anonymous narrator of *The Secret Sharer* (1910):

Walking to the taffrail, I was in time to make out, on the very edge of a darkness thrown by a towering black mass like the very gateway of Erebus – yes, I was in time to catch an evanescent glimpse of my white hat left behind to mark the spot where the secret sharer of my cabin and of my thoughts, as though he were my second self, had lowered himself into the water to take his punishment: a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny.⁵⁵

In spite of the disparities between their fiction, both writers were engaged in a common purpose in these two novellas: the exploitation of the popular with the impressionistic in order to harness the lisible to the scriptible.

The detective novel

In his 1945 essay of the same name, George Orwell identified 'good bad books' as a distinctive literary sub-genre. By his definition these were the books which had no literary pretension or ambition, were escapist in nature, had little connection with real life, but which would be read long after more serious works had been neglected and forgotten. He offered the Raffles and Sherlock Holmes stories as exemplars.⁵⁶

Bennett was a lifelong admirer of Émile Gaboriau, whom he fêted as a supreme author – comparing him to Dumas in the skilful construction of his plots – so it is not

⁵⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Twixt Land and Sea: Three Tales* (1912; repr. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1966), p. 143.

⁵⁶ George Orwell, 'Good Bad Books' in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume IV: In Front of Your Nose, 1945 – 1950*, eds, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), pp. 19 – 22.

surprising that the ratiocinative appeal and intellectual challenge of detective fiction never deserted him.⁵⁷ He never aspired to rival Conan Doyle, but his creation of Cecil Thorold in *The Loot of Cities* (1905) places him in a line of continuity with A.J. Raffles, Horace Donnington and Romney Pringle.⁵⁸ The title of this book, which consists of six linked stories unified and independent of the seven others added to a revised volume in 1917, presents plaited connotations of violence, rapacity and stolen wealth.

The binaries of Bennett's craft as a novelist can be seen in work as apparently undistinguished as these stories. As with other serials, he never forgot that he was a serious writer, with the result that he consistently refused to condescend to his readers. This is most apparent in the choice of epigraph from Dante's *Il Paradiso*, with its erudition which would not have been lost on T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the collaborators on *The Waste Land* (1922), some twenty years later:

Pensa, lettore, se quel che qui s'inizia
non procedesse, come tu avresti
di più sapere angosciosa carizia.⁵⁹

It is also apparent in his choice of forename for Thorold's father - Ahasuerus. With its *recherché* derivation from the Old Testament Book of Esther, Bennett appears determined to reassure and impress his readers that he is a scholarly narrator and not merely an unlettered hack.

As all six stories were written for serialisation in the *Windsor* magazine, he also developed his understanding of their generic appeal and of the potential for commercial opportunities – as seen from the perspective of the magazine editors to

⁵⁷ *Journals I*, 26 February 1901, p. 110.

⁵⁸ Joseph A. Kestner, *The Edwardian Detective, 1901 – 1915* (1991; repr. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 107.

⁵⁹ Arnold Bennett, *The Loot of Cities: Being Adventures of a Millionaire in Search of Joy (A Fantasia); and Other Stories* (1905; repr. London: Thomas Nelson, 1917), p. 3. 'Think, Reader, if this tale I have begun/Broke off abruptly here, how thou wouldst fret/Wondering and wondering how it should go on.

whom they were sold. Founded in 1895, priced at 6d for the first twenty years of publication, and with an annual circulation of between 110,000 and 115,000, the *Windsor* was reputedly one of the most polished of the standard popular monthly magazines.⁶⁰ To a large extent, it owed its initial success to its second editor, David Williamson, who on appointment to the editor's position in 1896 extended its range and format. He recognised that the austerities of Sunday school piety would be unattractive to its target audience which was the aspiring middle class, so he ensured that its contents would include not just fiction, but also exotic adventures and ghost stories, as well as articles on education, sport, science, travel and exploration. The artwork, particularly the use of coloured plates, became one of its main features during the Edwardian age and, significantly for Bennett's mystery fiction, a popular and staple ingredient. In securing the publication of his work in the *Windsor*, Bennett was joining distinguished company, since it had already published several of Kipling's *Just So* stories (1902) and Rider Haggard's *Ayesha* (1905).⁶¹

The stories in *The Loot of Cities* are important because they reveal Bennett's essential dilemma and conflict as a writer. Whilst he noted in his Journal that they were all good 'on their plane', with the implication that they were all solid as inferior work, he nonetheless confessed that at times he had become bored when he was writing them.⁶² Such an admission could be read as definitive proof that he was breezily dismissive of the quality and value of his fantasias, because he frequently complained that the creative rigours involved in producing his serious fiction left him nervous, despondent and distressed, but never bored.

⁶⁰ Mike Ashley, *The Age of the Storytellers: British Popular Fiction Magazines, 1880 – 1950* (London: British Library, 2006), pp. 226 – 30.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 225 – 27.

⁶² *Journals I*, 27 November 1903, pp. 134 – 45.

However, the stories are significant because Bennett experimented with them to foreground the themes which he would develop later in his career, not just in his fantasias and melodramas, but in his serious fiction and in his lighter novellas, too. Thorold may enjoy the opulent comforts of club life, but his wealth leaves him spiritually bereft and tormented by the ennui of his sheltered existence and desiccated affluence:

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘What was I to do? I was rich. I was bored. I had no great attainments. I was interested in life and in the arts, but not desperately, not vitally. You may, perhaps, say I should have taken up philanthropy. Well, I’m not built that way. I can’t help it, but I’m not a born philanthropist, and the philanthropist without a gift for philanthropy usually does vastly more harm than good. I might have gone into business. Well, I should only have doubled my millions, while boring myself all the time. Yet the instinct which I inherited from my father, the great American instinct to be a little cleverer and smarter than someone else, drove me to action.’⁶³

The moral code which he develops and the ethical journey on which he embarks allow him to legitimise his dishonesty so that he can challenge the rapacity of the City with its corrupt speculation. Even though Bennett was unimpressed with *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), the Vanity Fair sharpsters and hucksters whom Thorold confronts owe a direct lineal descent from Christian’s tormentors and oppressors.⁶⁴ For example, Bennett describes the Count d’Avrec, an urbane and oleaginous fraudster, as a courtier who has perfected a bow like ‘a vertebrate poem’, and the Kursaal in Bruges is presented as a giant edifice commanding submission to the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure and prodigality.⁶⁵

Even darker concerns emerge in references to the corruption of the police in ‘The Algiers Mystery’, and to their conspiracies to murder Thorold to prevent him from revealing the extent of their corruption. Thus the stories as a collection are, as Joseph Kestner argues, tropes of Edwardian vanity, materialism, wealth, criminality,

⁶³ *The Loot of Cities*, pp. 150 – 51.

⁶⁴ *Journals III*, 18 February 1926, p. 118.

⁶⁵ *The Loot of Cities*, p. 64 and pp. 32 – 33.

greed, deceit and hypocrisy, and they presage an urgent warning for a twenty-first century readership when they hint at the ‘public implications of private malfeasance’.⁶⁶

Melodrama

There was a suggestion in the *Spectator* in January 1902 that *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902) was an overworked derivative from Anthony Hope’s Ruritania, and sardonic condescension, too, in the observation that Bennett was capable of more enduringly artistic work than unrelieved melodrama.⁶⁷ The charge levelled against him by the *Academy* was one which persisted: that this fantasia was a shallow, ephemeral and unsatisfying trifle. What the reviewer was prepared to concede, however, was that the aspiring craftsman had identified, and knew how to fulfil, the tastes of a readership absorbed by light melodrama:

This is a very amusing story of the *feuilleton* type. In calling it a fantasia on modern themes Mr. Bennett shows that he understands exactly what he has performed, and the kind of pleasure his performance is likely to give to discriminating readers.⁶⁸

Not that this fantasia should be dismissed with such constrained approval. Most of his potboilers reveal Bennett’s fascination with the corrupting influence of excessive wealth, and the warnings against it are cogently delivered by Felix Babylon after he has sold his luxury hotel to Theodore Racksole.⁶⁹ The coda to this sale is that it is now the financiers who are shoring up the decay and penury of the crumbling European royal houses.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Kestner, *The Edwardian Detective*, p. 108.

⁶⁷ Unsigned review in the *Spectator* 25 January 1902, quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 152.

⁶⁸ Unsigned review in *Academy*, 18 January 1902, quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 148.

⁶⁹ Arnold Bennett, *The Grand Babylon Hotel: A Fantasia on Modern Themes* (1902; repr. London: Chatto and Windus, 1971), pp. 23 – 25.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

It was also the novel which provided Bennett with the most direct incentives to continue with his serial fiction. He was both delighted and encouraged by the review which the book received in *The Graphic*:

I was able to estimate at its proper unimportance the circular which the *Graphic* people have issued about my serial: “The Grand Babylon Hotel”, to appear in the *Golden Penny*, which they sent me this morning, and which in a whirl of adjectives describes the thing as “the most original, amusing and thrilling” serial written this decade – the best thing of the sort since “The Mystery of a Hansom Cab”. Fancy writing a story as good as “The Mystery of a Hansom Cab”!⁷¹

What Bennett may not have known was that both he and Fergus Hume, the author of ‘The Mystery of a Hansom Cab’, harboured aspirations to become dramatists, were devotees of Gaboriau and researched their literary markets assiduously. What he did realise, however, was that he needed to professionalise his relationship with his publishers by engaging a competent literary agent. As an *ingénu* and on his own initiative, he had foolishly sold the novel to a syndicate, and then was forced to watch impotently as its sales soared. Even as early as 1904, it had been translated into Swedish, French, German and Italian.⁷²

The Gates of Wrath (1903) was one Bennett’s first serials. Its title page lists it as a melodrama, not a fantasia, and this reveals his flexibility with the genre with which he was experimenting. He captures the opulence and wealth of Edwardian middle-class England, which he locates in all its emblematic panoply on the Leas in Folkestone (a location to which he returned for his serious divorce novel *Whom God Hath Joined*:

The band in the large bandstand was performing “Soldiers of the Queen” – that deathless melody; and thousands of persons lounging in chairs were grouped in vast concentric circles round this musical hub. Thousands of others paraded to and fro [...]. If it had not been pathetic it would have been

⁷¹ *Journals I*, 18 January 1901, p. 109.

⁷² Drabble, *A Biography*, p. 84.

ridiculous, this nocturnal masquerade at the most fashionable pleasure resort in England.⁷³

It is Bennett's subtle reference to the masquerade which evokes the hypocrisy underpinning the mass consumerism and public social leisure of the Edwardian middle classes. In contrast to this scene, there is also a compelling description in the second half of the novel of the oppressive, brooding Five Towns, with their blast furnaces sighing outside Arthur Peterson's estate. The difference between this and the authentic Five Towns fiction is that there is no scintilla of the recondite beauty that Bennett admired in George Moore's work and contextualised in his own, rather a minatory chorus of threat and challenge to the inherited and luxuriant privileges of Peterson's life. As with his detective fiction, *The Gates of Wrath* succeeds in its morality tale reflections on the spiritual corrosiveness of inherited wealth; Arthur Forrest spurns his inheritance in favour of his art collection and philanthropy and only becomes a millionaire against his will, whilst mental instability impels Arthur Peterson to reject his wealth by converting it into coin and pouring it into a pond on his estate.

It is a fair criticism that for the most part the characters in this melodrama prefigure the flat stereotypes which E. M. Forster was later to identify in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), but the originality of the book is combined in Bennett's vestigial analysis of the psychological fragilities of the ruthless Marie Cavalossi and her fears for the irretrievable loss of her youth on the approaching *Dies Irae* of her fortieth birthday, fears which foreshadow the anxieties of Leonora Stanway.

Orwell argued in 'Good Bad Books' that it was possible to be moved, amused or excited by a book which it was impossible to take seriously as an

⁷³ Arnold Bennett, *The Gates of Wrath: A Melodrama* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1903), pp. 87 – 88.

intellectual construct. For him, this consideration was a reminder that art is not the same thing as cerebration.⁷⁴ He could well have had Bennett's *The City of Pleasure* (1907) in mind when he fashioned this projection. With its balloon ascents, theatre, concert hall, circus, panorama, lecture hall, menagerie, art gallery, circular bronze fountains and new tube station at the south end of Hammersmith Bridge, Bennett's temple of leisure in *The City of Pleasure* appears to apotheosise a twentieth-century Earl's Court exhibition. It deifies mass consumerism, and the fact that one of its principal characters, Pauline Dartmouth, is engrossed in Frank R. Stockton's *The Lady, or the Tiger* (1882), with its metaphysical teasing and moral ambiguities, establishes its impeccably middle-class credentials. Its president, Josephus Ilam, and its managing director, Charles Carpentaria, employ their talents and enterprise as purveyors of pleasure in their palace of entertainment. Both are practical men and, in the case of Carpentaria, a gifted musician and composer. The description of Carpentaria conducting the orchestra is an evocation of Bennett's ability to direct and control his audience, as well as a further illustration of his burgeoning ability to write with impromptu bravura:

By turns his baton was a sceptre, a pump-handle, a maypole, a crutch, a drumstick, a flag, a toothpick, a mop, a pendulum, a whip, a bottle of soothing-syrup, and a scorpion. By turns he whipped, tortured, encouraged, liberated, imprisoned, mopped up, measured, governed, diverted, pushed over, pulled back, and turned inside out his band, and whenever their enthusiasm seemed likely to lead them into indiscretions, he soothed them with his soothing-syrup.⁷⁵

In many respects, this is Bennett's most accomplished potboiler. His objectification of class culture reveals a society in search of an identity, for although Ilam and Carpentaria are purveyors of pleasure by appointment to the middle class,

⁷⁴ Orwell, 'Good Bad Books', p. 21.

⁷⁵ Arnold Bennett, *The City of Pleasure: A Fantasia on Modern Themes* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1907), p. 38.

the fundamental ethos of their enterprise is dominated by the imperatives of cash flow and profit and loss accounts:

‘We shall take fifteen thousand pounds at the gates to-day,’ said Carpentaria. ‘The highest attendance in any one day at the Paris Exhibition of 1900 was six hundred thousand. Do you imagine we can’t equal that? We shall surpass it, sir. Wait for our August fêtes. Wait for our Congress of Trade Unions in September, and you will see! The average total attendance at the last three Paris exhibitions has been forty-five millions. We hope to reach fifty millions. But suppose we only reach forty millions. That means two million pounds in gates alone.’⁷⁶

The opulence and extravagance of the pleasure city is financed by the exploitation of mass consumption, and it is no coincidence that the heart of this commercial enterprise is at the turnstiles, into which admission fees are dropped to be counted, stored, transported and banked in secret.⁷⁷ An element of this novel’s subtlety is that, as a potboiler, it dichotomises consumerism and finance, by both appealing to and subverting the pleasure of the reading experience. With its murder mystery intrigue and evocation of mass consumerist leisure, it provides its intended audience with an optional palliative for the inescapable financial challenges and constraints of daily life. Both a dipole and a teasing construct, the novel provides escapism, whilst simultaneously critiquing its ephemeral attractions.

The quality of Bennett’s potboilers varied significantly, and the worst of them had little redemptive value in terms of his reputation. He was embarrassed by *Teresa of Watling Street* (1904), and in his later career attempted to suppress its publication. Dismissed when it first appeared as ‘readable trash’ by the *Guardian’s* reviewer, it has also been described as the novel which even Bennett aficionados are most likely to spurn.⁷⁸ However, like all of his fantasias, it is not irredeemable since some of the talents which he developed later in his career were able to flourish in this

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 18 – 19.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp.160 – 67.

⁷⁸ Alan Pedley, ‘No connection with my best work’, in *The Arnold Bennett Society Newsletter*, (Stoke-on Trent: Arnold Bennett Society), 3:14 (Winter 2003 – 4), p. 21.

novella. There are, for example, early signs in Bennett's description of a London morning of his ability to evoke the atmosphere of an urban metropolis, later to be perfected in his portrayal of the Five Towns.⁷⁹

Teresa of Watling Street also serves as a proleptic indicator of some of Bennett's persistent interests in his later fantasias on modern life – his preoccupations with the power of commerce and with the influence of banks. It is also possible to detect his nascent fascination with the obsessive and monomaniac which travels in a continuum in his serious fiction from Ephraim Tellwright in *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902) to Henry Earlfoward in *Riceyman Steps* (1923); in this book it is personified by Raphael Craig, a respectable bank manager and counterfeiter, who is determined to gain revenge on the man who seduced and abandoned his fiancée and the twin daughters whom he accepted and raised as his own.

In addition, there are insinuations of Bennett's ambivalence towards, and uneasiness with, the privilege of wealth, which the powerful and affluent ostentatiously enjoy and flaunt with their Décauville and Panhard cars and their houses in the fashionable Manchester Square of central London.⁸⁰ Nor should it be forgotten that Bennett's satire in this much derided novella is directed towards capitalism's indifference to the manipulation of the financial markets which, paradoxically, are the instruments of Simon Lock's nemesis:

'I don't understand the methods of the Stock Exchange – never did,' said Sir Arthur Custer, M.P. 'I only came into the City because a lot of fellows like yourself asked me to. But it seems to me the only thing to do is to cry off.' [...]

⁷⁹ Arnold Bennett, *Teresa of Watling Street: A Fantasia on Modern Themes* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1904), pp. 119 – 20.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 278 and p. 289.

‘My dear Sir Arthur,’ said Simon Lock, ‘there is no crying off in the City. We have contracted to deliver those shares, and we must deliver them, or pay the price – commercial ruin.’

‘The Stock Exchange,’ Sir Arthur blustered, ‘is one of the most infamous Institutions –’

‘Yes,’ Simon Lock cut him short, ‘we know all about that. The Stock Exchange is quite right as long as we are making money; but when we begin to lose it immediately becomes infamous.’⁸¹

Eager to profiteer from the flotation of a mining company, Lock is the driving force and leader of a consortium of City speculators. It is ironic that Raphael Craig, the man who thwarts his ambitions, as an act of revenge for his bigamous seduction of his fiancée, achieves his objective by using counterfeit money to drive up the price of the shares prior to the company’s flotation. The moral ambivalence of Craig’s actions is highlighted when he destroys his shares after Lock’s financial ruin and subsequent suicide.

It is worth noting, too, that even when Bennett was writing fiction as a journalist, as he was here, he could not always abandon his artistic interests and that as a craftsman he remained in thrall to an enduring admiration and respect for the French novelists of the nineteenth century:

A man such as Simon Lock had, therefore, a double, or, at least, a highly intensified, motive in avoiding financial failure. Yes, thought Richard, Simon Lock would stop at nothing to compel Raphael Craig to give way. His mind wandered curiously to tales of the Spanish Inquisition, and to the great torture scene in Balzac’s ‘Catherine de Medici.’⁸²

It is through such references, which are indices of taste and erudition, that Bennett demonstrates to his readers, even in his most undistinguished potboiler, that they are united in a shared intellectual investment.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 197 – 98.

⁸² Ibid., p. 281.

Post-war potboilers

It would be incorrect to assume that Bennett wrote his potboilers and serials at the beginning of his career, using them to earn the money which subsidised other more artistic and serious fiction or as space fillers whilst he developed his income as a playwright and journalist, only to reject them as second-rate juvenilia after he had established his reputation as a literary figure and metropolitan celebrity. Such an assumption would not account for his decision to write *Lilian* (1922) nearly fifteen years after he had published his last Edwardian fantasia, *The Ghost*, in 1907. Bennett's determination to write this serial at the height of his celebrity reveals the persistence of his commitment not just to exploit the commercial potential of his potboilers, but also to deploy them as satirical critiques.

As early as 1908, Bennett recorded in his Journal that he did not wish to write any more serialised potboilers.⁸³ It was a sincere, if naïve, aspiration. According to his close friend Frank Swinnerton, he wrote *Lilian* to show him what the appropriate end to his novel *Coquette* (1921) should have been.⁸⁴ Whilst this may be partly true, it is also likely that the financial and emotional costs of his broken marriage weighed heavily on his decision to return to potboiling at the end of 1921. He never classified this novel as a fantasia, but he wrote it quickly, and as a cathartic response to his separation whilst cruising aboard the luxury yacht *Amaryllis*, owned by his close friend, Herbert Sullivan. The plot of the novel was neither complicated nor sophisticated. The eponymous heroine, Lilian Chase, is a young, penniless and uneducated London secretary. In effect, her limited means and prospects provide her with only two choices in life: starvation or prostitution. Her chief asset is her beauty which compels Felix Grig, an ageing widower and owner of the typing agency office

⁸³ *Journals I*, 28 March 1908, p. 284.

⁸⁴ *The Critical Heritage*, p. 90.

in which she works, to declare his passion for her and to take her to the south of France, where she marries him just before he dies of pneumonia. In interpreting her own version of feminised modernity, she chooses to prostitute herself with him in order to secure her future; as the inheritor of his business, her wealth and prospects are transformed.

The book was subjected to fusillades of abuse when it was published. A. N. Monkhouse in *The Guardian* thought it was the type of novel that would fuel the conviction that he was now irredeemably second-rate, whilst Desmond McCarthy complained that Bennett's novels had degenerated into fairy tales in which his characters were obsessed with rampant materialism.⁸⁵ Although he appeared to have treated the hostile reception for the most part with *sangfroid*, he was, nevertheless, sufficiently disturbed to launch a defence against the disparaging review written by the novelist and *Daily Express* journalist, S. P. B. Mais, in which he was criticised for continuing to write potboilers:

S.P.B.M. calls my novel '*Lilian*' a pot-boiler. The 'Oxford Dictionary' definition of pot-boiler is: 'A work of art or literature done merely to make a living.' That is to say, the writer of a potboiler has venally contrived something for a purely commercial end, and solely for money. Nearly all writers write for money. Shakespeare did. But the serious writers do not write solely for money. Serious writers produce the best work they can, and hope to make a living out of it.⁸⁶

It is not difficult to sympathise with Bennett's frustration because in this short novel he manages to demonstrate the breadth of his appeal to an educated middlebrow audience. In particular, he provides a subverting insight into the constrained fate of the ranks of post-war metropolitan young women. Lilian Chase, left to fend for herself and trapped in poverty when her aspirational bourgeois parents die, is an avatar for all the other young women who are desperate to find work in order to

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁸⁶ *Letters III*, 19 October 1922, pp. 173 – 74.

support themselves. The opportunities available to them offer little personal and fewer material rewards. Bennett reflects acerbically on the servitude, humiliations and treacherous insincerities of office life. He also shows that the generational hostility and personal jealousy of Isabel Grig, the operational manager of the typing agency, are the foils to her counter-intuitive misogyny and the catalyst for Lilian's undeserved and summary dismissal for insubordination. The complexity of Lilian's victimhood is subtly revealed, too. Whilst Isabel Grig resents her youth and attractiveness and is fearful that her affluent brother Felix has become emotionally infatuated with her, Lilian feels entrapped by her youth and disempowered by her fortuitous beauty as much as by her impoverished career prospects.

Lilian also extends the continuities with Bennett's more serious and acclaimed fiction. His preoccupation with the gulf between age and youth which conspicuously underpinned *The Old Wives' Tale* and the *Clayhanger* trilogy is present in this novel. Isabel cuts a tragic figure in the 'duplication of wounded arrogance', and in her imperious condescension to the pregnant Lilian.⁸⁷ Lilian, in her turn, although anxious to be magnanimous as victrix, is unable to resist the temptations to rejoice in youthful exuberance at her triumph over her embittered and reactionary sister-in-law. As in *The Old Wives' Tale*, youth and energy replace disillusioned experience and age.

Bennett also uses the novel to examine the prejudices of entrenched gender modelling which are presented through Felix Grig's stentorian declamations:

'A woman wants making. Only a man can make a woman. She has to be formed. She can't do it herself. A young man may be able to do it, but he's like a teacher who swots up the night before what he has to teach the next day. And he's a fearful bungler, besides being cruel – unconsciously. Whereas an older man, a much older man – he knows! It's a unique chance

⁸⁷ Arnold Bennett, *Lilian* (London: Cassell 1922), pp. 224 – 26.

for both of them. She has so much to give, and she has so much to learn. It's a fair bargain.'⁸⁸

This authorial insinuation of the alienating abuse of patriarchal power illustrates that, in his inability to conceive that women are able to lead fulfilled lives both within and outside marriage, without the masculine sanctification of an older man, he is as much a prisoner of his background and position as Lilian.

Much of the criticism of the novel is concerned with Bennett's alleged obsession with the unproductive wealth and opulent materialism of the upper-class *habitués* of post-war Mediterranean luxury resorts. However, although Lilian's conscience is disturbed by the conspicuous consumption of the prodigal social élite, Bennett presents, through Felix's authoritative convictions, a sinuous defence of the beneficent potential of wealth:

'You must remember there's nothing new in all this. It's been going on in the Mediterranean for thousands of years, and it's likely to go on for thousands of years more. It's what human nature *is*. What are you going to do about it? Would you abolish luxury and pleasure? Not you. Do you imagine that God created the shores of the Mediterranean and this climate for anything but this? [...] The fellow that's got the new concession for the casino is a bit of a genius. He's moulding the place into something fresh. It used to be the primmest place on earth. He discovered that the English don't want to be prim any more; he showed them to themselves.'⁸⁹

Felix's declamations are particularly striking because Bennett discussed Sigmund Freud with Rivers at Cambridge in October 1920, and in this part of the novel he appears to be tapping in to one of his most revolutionary theories – the principle that the id is controlled by an uncoordinated need for, and reliance on, pleasure.⁹⁰ The ironic corollary to this contention is, of course, that Bennett is exploiting the cheap wish fulfilment of the pleasure pursuit instinct by providing serial fiction as a gratifying amenity rather than as a serious intellectual artefact.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.154 – 55.

⁹⁰ *Journals II*, 19 October 1920, pp. 274 – 75.

There are also opportunities to reflect on the redeeming parameters of dissolute promiscuity. The anonymous gambling prostitute in the Cannes hotel is quick to assist Lilian when Felix collapses, mistaking her ironically for a working prostitute as opposed to a kept one, and later, after Felix's death, returning the money which she borrowed from her to finance her gambling.

The unpublished manuscript for this novel is especially important because it illuminates our understanding of Bennett's working practices. Firstly, it confirms that he was extremely methodical in the way in which he approached his writing, recording obsessively when he worked and how much he produced.⁹¹ Secondly, it shows that he was not enchained to a predetermined daily regimen of Trollopian working hours. In fact, he was extremely flexible – writing the novel in irregular spurts of activity, in the morning on some days and in the afternoon and evening on others. Thirdly, it shows the care with which he systematically redrafted his work at the manuscript stage and beyond. (All full pages of the manuscript contain multiple corrections or redraftings.)⁹² The manuscript also helps to demonstrate that Bennett made changes as he was in the process of bringing the novel from manuscript to first edition – probably at the galley proof stage. For example, page 51 contains the following: 'and Lilian caught fragments of verse such as: "The rich get rich, And the poor get children,/ And us"', which has been altered for the printed edition so that the words: 'And us' are replaced by: 'Ain't we got fun?'⁹³ The change of tone is significant, because it effectively marks Bennett's insinuation that the ephemeral

⁹¹ Arnold Bennett, MS Lilian 1921 – 1922, unpublished manuscript Accession No: B/1339 (University of Keele: Special Collections), p. 1 and p. 80.

⁹² p. 5 of the manuscript shows that Bennett wrote it as follows: 'Even during the war he dissuaded Lilian from [undertaking] any war-work, holding that she could most ^{meetly} [x] help [to win] the Empire to triumph by [x solacing] ^{helping to solace} her father in the terrific troubles of keeping a [x] large art school alive under [Dora] D.O.R.A. and the Conscription Act.' (The square brackets indicate where words, or illegible words and letters marked by 'x', were excised.) The number and extent of the corrections in the manuscript is an indication of how meticulously Bennett approached his work, even when he was writing quickly.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 51 of the manuscript and p. 152 of the 1922 Cassell edition.

gaities of luxury hotel life and the career pursuit of pleasure which Felix has bequeathed her by marriage will, of themselves, provide Lilian with no intrinsic personal fulfilment.

Bennett was normally amenable to requests to tailor his writing to the tastes of the readers of his serial fiction and to the demands of magazine editors, and he showed no prickliness in his response to requests for modifications to the story; for example, he did not object to Cassell's request to extend the serial and to modify two sentences, 'I am going to have a baby' and 'I am seven months' gone', in order to accommodate the sensibilities of its readership. However, he made it clear to Pinker when there was a call for him to change the ending that there was an artistic Rubicon which he would not cross:

I'll write 1000 words, if the price is reasonable. But it must be understood that the end simply is that Lilian has the baby, looks after it, & runs the business. She may marry again – probably will marry the doctor. But she can't possibly *marry* him in the book.⁹⁴

His determination to maintain his creative integrity does, of course, expose the quintessential and inherent tensions of Bennett's career and shows that he always remained the literary craftsman as much as the professional tradesman.

Nor should this be surprising. After all, he had clearly identified the writer's dilemma in *The Author's Craft* as early as 1914. There, he had asserted that the question which he, like other aspiring artists, faced was whether he should write to please himself or to please his public. He was able to empathise with Meredith's views that potboilers suppressed creative originality, but he noted that Meredith continued to write them so that he had the financial wherewithal and creative leisure to write the poetry which was important to him.⁹⁵ Bennett, of course, contended in

⁹⁴ *Letters I*, 15 July 1922, p. 316.

⁹⁵ *The Author's Craft*, pp. 108 – 12.

The Author's Craft that all creative artists were forced into an accommodation with the tastes and mores of their readership and that, in order to meet these demands and predilections, the serious artist had to rely on guile and craft. Thus, in writing *Lilian*, he was labouring for money and doing so with considerable success.⁹⁶ At the same time, he was able to engage in the novel with two profound social and feminist concerns: the vulnerability of young working women and their economic exploitation at the beginning of the 1920s. These two concerns, embedded in his potboiler, were, as Douglas Mao has observed, also integral to the development of the highbrow art of Modernism.⁹⁷ Bennett's post-war potboiler can be seen to straddle and undermine these cultural divides.

Potboiling and Modernism

On the surface, there would appear to be little connection between *The Strange Vanguard* (1928), Bennett's final fantasia, and a seminal work of high Modernism such as *The Waste Land* (1922). Bennett's affinities with Modernism will be explored more fully in chapter four, but the potential for synergy between Eliot's work and his should come as no surprise. He knew Eliot well, had recommended him for a commission in the Quarter-masters (sic) or Interpreters (sic) Corp during the War, and had also invited him to attend meetings of the Anglo-French Poetry Society at his London flat, at which Marguerite, his wife, gave poetry recitals.⁹⁸ It was a relationship which shone a light on Bennett's psychological fragilities because, whilst he always admired Eliot as a distinguished writer, he also claimed that he was intimidated by his intellect and education:

⁹⁶ *The Critical Heritage*, p. 92.

⁹⁷ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds, 'Modernisms Bad and New', in Mao et al., *Bad Modernisms*, p. 8.

⁹⁸ *Letters III*, 26 August 1918, p. 66 and *Letters IV*, 11 February 1920 – footnote, p. 250.

I would like to send you a contribution [for Eliot's *Criterion*], but I am really afraid of doing so. I should have to take so much care over it! My articles, especially those about books, are rather slapdash. I am also handicapped by an intense ignorance. Indeed my life-long regret is that I have no exact knowledge on any subject on earth. I always envy scholars.⁹⁹

Bennett was familiar with Eliot's work and with the portrayal in his modern wasteland of an ill-at-ease and spiritually bereft society in which human relationships are degraded, personal intimacies cheapened by casual and meaningless sex, and the collective psyche oppressed by the dry desert of everyday life. Elements of this spiritual and temporal accidie were not lost on him. He never intended his fantasia to be simply a 'lark', but also a sociological and moral disquisition on modern themes.¹⁰⁰ In this context, it is not untenable to suggest that Bennett demonstrates that elements of Modernism did not necessarily need to be severed from the popular. His simple plot (a millionaire industrialist is involved in a battle of wills with his stubborn and headstrong wife who was born in the Five Towns) subtly conceals the concerns which forged his responses to the excesses of the Jazz Age and 'The Bright Young Things'. The fissures and disjunctions of a brittle and friable society are captured in his portrayal of the latent antagonism which separates the rich from those who serve them.¹⁰¹ The social malaise with which the novel is concerned can also be seen in Lord Furber's career. Not only has he acquired his wealth through industrial inventions, investments and profiteering in the City, but he is an unprincipled newspaper proprietor, too. It is as if Bennett had anticipated Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* (1938) in his presentation of a Press that arrogates intrusive powers and exercises them by fabricating the news rather than reporting it:

'Yes,' said Mr. Robbington [the Rome correspondent of Furber's newspaper the *Courier*]. 'I was expecting that question. But supposing I had stopped to verify my facts, and supposing some other paper had got hold of the same

⁹⁹ *Letters III*, 3 June 1927, p. 286

¹⁰⁰ *The Critical Heritage*, p. 103.

¹⁰¹ Arnold Bennett, *The Strange Vanguard: A Fantasia* (London: Cassell, 1928), p. 7.

incomplete facts that I got hold of, my editor would have been wanting to know by cable what the deuce I meant by not getting in first [...]. You make a fuss about verifying the facts. But the *Courier* doesn't want its facts verified. It never prints facts, save by accident.'¹⁰²

Furber also belongs to an affluently bored and morally torpid class and he is afflicted by a dystopic waste land culture which is characterised most incisively by its casino gambling and the competitively tawdry consumption of the rich oligarchs who parade their opulent yachts in Monte Carlo harbour as symbols of their virility, power and influence. The socialite, Harriet Perkins, delivers the most devastating arraignment of this society:

‘A cousin of mine left me the whole of her fortune on the condition I changed my name to hers. She was extremely rich – until about a year before she died. Then she lost most of her money – not that I knew! So that she only left about sixty pounds a year.’

‘And did you change your name for a rotten sixty pounds per annum?’

‘Sixty pounds isn't rotten. Six pounds wouldn't be rotten. No money is rotten. [...] Besides, the poor old thing fully meant to be generous. I think it would have been dreadfully mean of me to refuse her merely because she'd been done in by investment-agents, when she was too old to look after herself.’¹⁰³

With its references to the fraudulence and negligence of financial advisors, her observation resonates powerfully with a twenty-first century readership. It is a world, too, in which only the most wealthy and spirited women, like Furber's wife, Maidie, can hope to exercise any personal freedom. But even those who enjoy a measure of independence are handicapped by their decadent and rootless lack of purpose. Harriet is unattached and independent, and takes full advantage of her flat and club life in London and the foreign travel which she views as her natural entitlement, but even she is spurned by Furber for her rootless decadence.¹⁰⁴ Far from being a worthless potboiler, *The Strange Vanguard* is an intriguing critique of the decadent

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 229.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 256.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

affluence, democratic deficit and social fissures of the Jazz Age. It presents Bennett as a very modern author – linking him to a younger generation, Waugh and Eliot – and demonstrates yet again his reluctance to endorse the rigid codes by which highbrow and middlebrow fiction were identified and separated. It is no surprise that Bennett elected to rebrand this fantasia, categorising it on title pages after its publication, as a novel.

Afterword

In his Introduction to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Henry James referred to the architecture of creative fiction:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million [...] .They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, ensuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. [...] There is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may *not* open.¹⁰⁵

As an architect of fiction, Bennett constructed a variety of edifices, some large and imposing, some smaller and more artisan, some prefabricated and functional, but all carefully designed.

Bennett's fiction continues to evoke emotive responses. He has been described as both a 'novelist of deep social honesty' and as an 'aspiring vulgarian' whose craftsmanship was vitiated by materialism and greed.¹⁰⁶ As the second epigraph to this chapter demonstrates, he was sensitive to the accusation that even his journalism was a form of potboiling – trite, predictable and motivated by financial cupidity – so much so, that his insecurities obliged him to defend himself at

¹⁰⁵ Henry James, *The Portrait of A Lady: Volume I* (London: Macmillan, 1921), pp. xi – xii.

¹⁰⁶ Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (1993; repr. London: Penguin, 1994), p. 110.

the end of his career in *The Savour of Life*. His potboiling fiction, if noticed at all, has generally been dismissed as technically competent, but lifeless and uneven in quality. Bennett's attitude towards it was frequently ambivalent, although he was never embarrassed about utilising it to earn the 'money of shame'.¹⁰⁷

Too often, he has been viewed through the prism of his potboilers as the servant of magazine and newspaper editors and the imperatives of the elaborately constructed mass consumerist ideology which they sustained. In this incarnation, he is presented at his worst: a profiteering shopkeeper, offering only what his readers enjoyed and determined not to challenge or undermine their indolent prejudices and supine assumptions.

As a counterpoint to Henry James' verdict that Bennett's work was at its best when he 'hugged the shores of the real', as a photographer of the people and places he knew best, Malcolm Bradbury argued that it was at its weakest when he set sail 'on the sea of the fanciful'.¹⁰⁸ The most significant truth about this author, however, was that, like Trollope, he was a compulsive and obsessive writer.¹⁰⁹ His energy fuelled his ambition since he was determined not to experience Henry James' besetting fate – that of writing 'invincibly unsaleable' books.¹¹⁰ He wrote his serials, as a journalist, for newspapers and periodicals, and they were primarily targeted at their readers. They were never conceived as high Art, but as commercial ventures which would provide him with the financial power to concentrate on his serious fiction, his journalism and above all, on his lucrative theatrical work. He was occasionally embarrassed by the clumsiness of his potboilers and sometimes

¹⁰⁷ *The Truth About an Author*, p. 106.

¹⁰⁸ Henry James, cited in Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, p. 111. (James' comment is recorded on page 111, as is Bradbury's.)

¹⁰⁹ *Letters I*, 27 April 1904, p. 50.

¹¹⁰ Henry James, cited in Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1870 – 1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 7.

uninspired when he was writing them, but he was never ashamed that he wrote for the market, just as Shakespeare and Balzac had done. Writing his potboilers helped him to develop as a craftsman. It is one of the great ironies of his career that he never made much money out of them.

In reality, they now languish in obscurity or are dismissed, if remembered, as the toxic artefacts of cultural decline. The case for their re-evaluation rests firstly on their status as the commercial and professional compilations of a burgeoning and maturing novelist, secondly on the insights which they shed on Bennett's inchoate sense of his core aesthetic, and thirdly on their value as palimpsests revealing the connections with his more acclaimed and familiar fiction. The cultural codes, social values and moral shibboleths which they presciently and subversively evoke – the need for an independent and reputable free Press, effective regulation of investment banking and stock market speculation, the iniquities of social, economic and gender exploitation, the moral corrosiveness of police corruption, the role of responsible capitalism in liberal democracies and the spiritual contamination of unbridled wealth – still resonate in the digital age of the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE METROPOLITAN AUTHOR FROM THE NORTH

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

From Four Quartets: Little Gidding by T.S. Eliot.¹

From the Five Towns to the metropolis

Bennett's decision to abandon the Five Towns after he had published *Hilda Lessways* in 1916 was a watershed in his career. Much of the fiction which he published thereafter was centred on London and its suburbs. The focus on a metropolitan topography reshaped his work and, as I shall demonstrate in this chapter, allowed him not just to consolidate his achievements as a regional novelist, but also to experiment and innovate in his new manner novels. Bennett's ambitions to relocate and reshape his fiction, which began as early as 1913, were catalysed when he began to write *The Pretty Lady* (1918) in 1917. The process of remoulding his fiction was not a smooth one and suffered from attendant birth pains, as he made clear to André Gide in November 1920:

As for my new manner, – well, it is not yet materialising! I have begun a novel – true, it is only a light one – and I have not been able to get the new manner into it. After writing sixty books one cannot, I find, change one's manner merely by taking thought. However, I have hopes of my next novel after the present one. It will be entirely serious. There were, by the way, symptoms of the new manner in *The Pretty Lady*.²

His recalibration as a psychological realist was a key component of his post-war career as a novelist and was galvanised by his fascination with the

¹ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (1942; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 42.

² *Letters III*, 30 November 1920, p. 135.

psychoneuroses of the latent, unconscious self. This was an interest which was stimulated by his appreciation and acceptance of the popularisation of the theories of Sigmund Freud, particularly those relating to the destabilising impact on human behaviour of subconscious energies and emotional repressions, and by his friendship with the eminent psychiatrist and ethnographer, W. H. R. Rivers. Bennett had been introduced to Rivers by Siegfried Sassoon in 1919, and his respect and admiration for him as an individual and professional permeate his Journals and Letters. In particular, he stimulated in Bennett a fascination with the self-protective nature of shell-shock. Writing to his American publisher, George Doran, in December 1919, Bennett's approval of Rivers was unmistakable:

I am sending to you [sic] Dr. W. H. R. Rivers, and I enclose copy of my letter of introduction. I wish to tell you more privately that the subject of psychoanalysis is of the most absorbing interest. It is a subject which is becoming more and more prominent in England and which will certainly appeal very powerfully to citizens of the United States. Rivers knows a great deal about it.³

Rivers' intervention in Bennett's life was significant because he encouraged his interest in the neuroses of the unconscious self which he had begun to explore in *The Pretty Lady*, reflected on in *Mr. Prohack*, mused on in *Lord Raingo*, and consummated in *Riceyman Steps*. What Bennett demonstrated in the new manner elements of his metropolitan fiction was how these neuroses, complexes and sublimated desires were transmuted into everyday discourse, habituated behaviour and personal interactions. It is in this context that his new manner novels, particularly *Riceyman Steps*, developed beyond his Five Towns fiction because, as Robert Squillace emphasises, they reject the restraining influence of the community

³ *Letters III*, 29 December 1919, pp. 119 – 20.

on individual life, and explore instead the psychological energies shaping public and private behaviour.⁴

Bennett's metropolitan fiction has been systematically undervalued. Most critics lean towards James Hall's judgement that his career reached its zenith with *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger* and no one, apart from James Hepburn, has argued that the best London novels outnumber the best Five Towns fiction.⁵ His achievements have been occluded or underestimated – in part because too much attention has been paid to his career both as a Government spokesman and propagandist during the First World War, and as a journalist after its conclusion.

The spectrum of his experience and interest allowed him to write as a satirist in both *Mr. Prohack* (1922) and *The Pretty Lady* and as a political historian in *Lord Raingo* (1926). His metropolitan fiction also allowed him to find his place in the social commentariat (as a cartographer of cultural fault lines) through his presentation of sexually independent and free-thinking women, and it also endorsed his position as an aesthetic *cognoscente* who had steeped his fiction in painting, music and the theatre.

Écriture artiste

Though Bennett focussed on psychology and the city as he endeavoured to develop his new manner novel in the post-war period, he was, of course, not embarking on an unfamiliar journey. As the epigraph to this chapter implies, he was returning to his roots as a writer, since his first novel, *A Man from the North* (1898), was set in London. He had not found the writing process easy; it took him over fourteen

⁴ Squillace, *Modernism, Modernity and Arnold Bennett*, p. 141.

⁵ Hall, *Arnold Bennett, Primitivism and Taste*, p. 130, James Hepburn, *The Art of Arnold Bennett* (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1963), pp. 182 – 201 and Squillace, *Modernism, Modernity and Arnold Bennett*, p. 205.

months to complete, partly because of self-doubts about his ability, and he was forced to abandon several early drafts and the original title, *In the Shadows*.

Given his later career as a regional writer, it is surprising that Bennett reveals in this novel, through the eyes of the protagonist Richard Larch, the first scintilla of distaste and aversion for the insularity of life in the Five Towns. The mental stultification and emotional resentment from which the young and ambitious protagonist suffers are compressed in the novel's opening paragraph:

There grows in the North Country a certain kind of youth of whom it may be said that he is born to be a Londoner. The metropolis, and everything that appertains to it, that comes down from it, that goes up into it, has for him an imperious fascination. Long before schooldays are over he learns to take a doleful pleasure in watching the exit of the London train from the railway station. [...] London is the place where newspapers are issued, books written, and plays performed. And this youth, who now sits in an office, reads all the newspapers. He knows exactly when a new work by a famous author should appear, and awaits the reviews with impatience.⁶

It follows as no surprise that Bennett emphasises that Richard's experience has been shaped by the topographical ugliness of the Five Towns, the sterile cultural life to which he has been subjected, and the chafing intellectual dullness of his employment as a shorthand clerk in a solicitor's office.

In contrast, the capital city is not a place for the craven and the querulous. For the spirited and the adventurous, its subversive attractions as the city of pleasure echo with Circean irresistibility. Bennett chooses the Ottoman theatre in Piccadilly as the space in which sexual promiscuities anathema to the proprieties of the Five Towns are most garishly flaunted:

The Ottoman, on the rare occasions when it happened to be mentioned in Bursley, was a synonym for all the glittering vices of the metropolis. It stank in the nostrils of the London delegates who came down to speak at annual meetings of the local Society for the Suppression of Vice.⁷

⁶ *A Man from the North*, pp. 1 – 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

With its power, cultural diversity and sexual promiscuity, the capital city contrasts sharply with the prim rectitude and censorious contempt of the bourgeois backwater which the callow young man has abandoned. For the young and aspiring provincial artist, loss of innocence and relief of repressed sexual appetites are easily accommodated through transactional compromise:

In a minute he was on the north side of Coventry Street. He looked into the faces of all the women, but in each he found something to repel, to fear. Would it end in his going quietly home? He crossed over into the seclusion of Whitcomb Street to argue the matter. As he was passing the entry to a court, a woman came out, and both had to draw back to avoid a collision. 'Chéri !' she murmured. She was no longer young, but her broad, Flemish face showed kindness and good humour in every feature of it, and her voice was soft. He did not answer, and she spoke to him again. His spine assumed the consistency of butter; a shuddering thrill ran through him. She put her arm gently into his, and pressed it. He had no resistance....⁸

The opportunities for commercialised sexual gratification provide frissons of ephemeral arousal laced with misogynistic contempt, most crudely captured by the scatological sneering of his fellow apprentice and disaffected junior, Jenkins, with his customary dismissal of women as 'tarts'.⁹

A Man from the North is an important novel not just because it exposes the temptations of metropolitan liberation, but also because in places it is a palimpsest for his later work, where many of his more successful novels embrace a symbolic interplay between space, time and experience. In chapter fifteen, for example, which deals with Adeline Aked's early childhood and the house in which she was brought up, the three buildings knocked into one can be read as a prefiguration of the Baineses' shop in *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908). In addition, the clipped, resentful sullenness of the staff in many of the restaurants which Richard frequents in London with Jenkins and Mr. Aked are redolent of the marked hostility of the sullen

⁸ Ibid., pp. 216 – 17.

⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

waitresses in the Elm Tree Tea Rooms in *Buried Alive* (1908). It is significant, too, that Richard is attracted to Adeline Aked not just because of his inexperience, but also because she seems to offer a solution to the same insoluble riddle of life which kills Sophia Baines in *The Old Wives' Tale*.

A Man from the North is also important because it charts the personal and aesthetic vicissitudes of an aspiring writer from the provinces and because this first novel, with its evocations of *New Grub Street*, explores deep canyons of personal frustration and despair. For Aked the suburbs are a cornucopia of inspiration for a realist novel, as he animatedly declares to his niece, Adeline:

‘Child!’ he said – and he used the appellation, not with the proper dignity of age, but rather like an omniscient schoolboy, home from the holiday, addressing a sister – ‘Child!’ – his eyes were still closed, – ‘the suburbs, even Walham Green and Fulham, are full of interest, for those who can see it. [...] How many houses are there in Carteret Street? Say eighty. Eighty theatres of love, hate, greed, tyranny, endeavour; eighty separate dramas always unfolding, intertwining, ending, beginning, – and every drama a tragedy. No comedies, and especially no farces! Why, child, there is more character within a hundred yards of this chair than a hundred Balzacs could analyse in a hundred years.’¹⁰

Unfortunately for him, he is never able to find a publisher for his novel, *The Psychology of the Suburbs*, a subject which, with its emphasis on the integrity and validity of ordinary lives in ordinary communities, was ironically the cornerstone of Bennett’s success with his Five Towns fiction.

A Man from the North was no minor, pot-boiling novel and neither was it an unalloyed Bildungsroman, despite Bennett’s deliberately provocative contention in *The Author’s Craft* that first-class fiction must always be autobiographical.¹¹ It is a carefully crafted and challenging piece of work, especially in its use of symbolic allusions to connect seemingly disparate parts of the plot. For example, the

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 100 – 01.

¹¹ *The Author’s Craft*, p. 61.

oleograph, 'After the Battle of Culloden', which hangs in Aked's house in Carteret Street, is a visual cue for despair and defeat, a fate which both Aked and the younger Richard share as artists and suitors. Their asymmetric entanglements are perfectly balanced – Richard is attracted to, but rejected by Aked's niece; Aked is the lover of the waitress Laura Roberts, the woman Richard marries after the older man's death.

The novel is also significant because it shows that Bennett was not afraid to make cultural assumptions about his readers' abilities to decode his runic markers. For example, the silent and unseen departure of the Norwegian sailors from Littlehampton preludes Adeline's rejection of Richard and her sea journey when she emigrates to join her brothers in America. The *feuilleton* of Catulle Mendes, which Richard reads in the Soho restaurant, emblematises the Parnassian notoriety of its author as well as the licentious freedoms of London and of Paris, too. In addition, the references to the Four Italian schools of sixteenth-century painting in chapter fourteen are cultural signifiers revered by the aspiring artist Aked, but symbolically unappreciated by Adeline. Her appreciation of the sentimental ballad 'The River of Years' (when she and Richard are walking on the beach at Littlehampton) and of Hope Temple's sentimental love songs provide coded fragments of her character and suggest that the development of any relationship between her and the aspiring novelist Richard is unlikely. He prefers Schubert's songs; she is sustained by popular, but undemanding literature, such as *East Lynne* (1861). He loves the city, but she loves the city of pleasure; he enjoys plays and concerts, but she loves the social exhilaration of the theatre more:

She was never moved by the events on the stage, and whether it happened to be tragedy or burlesque at which they were assisting, she turned to Richard at the end of every act with the same happy, contented smile, and usually began

to make remarks upon the men and women around her. It was the play-house and not the play of which she was really fond.¹²

The chasms between them are evidently voids in tastes, music and literature, and it is these which will separate them permanently.

This undervalued first novel was Bennett's attempt to capture the challenges and confrontations facing a young man not just in search of artistic identity, but also of fulfilling intimacy in a close personal relationship. Richard has a clear perspective of his ideal woman:

The difficulty was that Adeline fell short of the ideal lover. That virginal abstraction was to have been an artist of some sort, absolutely irreligious, broad in social views, the essence of refinement, with a striking but not necessarily beautiful face, soft-spoken, and isolated – untrammelled by friends. Adeline was no artist; he feared she might be a regular attendant at chapel and painfully orthodox as to the sexual relations. Was she refined? Had she a striking face? He said Yes, twice. Her voice was low and full of pretty modulations. Soon, perhaps, she would be alone in the world. If only she had been an artist... That deficiency, he was afraid, would prove fatal to any serious attachment.¹³

What develop as central issues for him are impulses of ownership and control but, like the majority of metropolitan dwellers, he is obliged, *faute de mieux*, to negotiate with concession and compromise, so that he rationalises Laura's inability to share his emotional and aesthetic ambitions when he realises that he lacks the artistic talent to succeed as a writer.¹⁴

Thus, in this carefully crafted novel, Bennett presents the artist as a victim – imprisoned by his future as an office clerk, defeated, stagnating and condemned to the shadows into which he was born and from which he is unable to emerge after he has accepted the limitations of his creative abilities. As he observes resignedly when

¹² *A Man from the North*, p. 195.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 262 – 64.

Aked lies dying: ‘Art was a very little thing.’¹⁵ With an ironic genuflection to Ibsen, Bennett implies that Richard’s future as the provincial artist, shackled by those limited prospects of self-realisation normally reserved for women, is imprisonment in the doll’s house as dutiful husband and employee:

He knew that he would make no further attempt to write. Laura was not even aware that he had ambitions in that direction. He had never told her, because she would not have understood. She worshipped him, he felt sure, and at times he had great tenderness for her; but it would be impossible to write in the suburban doll’s-house which was to be theirs. No! In future he would be simply the suburban husband – dutiful towards his employers, upon whose grace he would be doubly dependent; keeping his house in repair; pottering in the garden; taking his wife out for a walk, or occasionally to the theatre; and saving as much as he could.¹⁶

The gender dynamics of this passage suggest that his failure will be permanent artistic emasculation. In fact, the only consolation left to him is the hope of vicarious fulfilment from his child.

In many respects this first novel revealed elements of the binary which was woven into Bennett’s career: the centripetal drive to London and the centrifugal attraction of the Potteries. It initiated him as a writer of avant-garde fiction, introduced him to the London literati, and taught him a valuable lesson in the need to identify and research the tastes and predilections of his intended audience. The *Academy*, for example, dismissed it as ‘the kind of worthlessly clever book which neither touches nor moves the reader’.¹⁷ Although it was a commercial failure, it taught him also that the suburbs, whether provincial or metropolitan, could provide abundant quarry for his career.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 263.

¹⁷ *The Critical Heritage*, p.15.

Embracing Modernism: the new manner novel

Chris Baldick's bland summary of *The Pretty Lady*, Bennett's first substantial experiment with the new manner, provides an exemplary illustration of how his innovative explorations in this novella have been persistently undervalued:

Bennett's *The Pretty Lady* (1918), a sombre story of wartime London, in which war profiteers cavorting at charity balls are exposed as frivolous parasites. The title character, a Parisian prostitute living in London as a refugee, comes to the aid of a disturbed soldier on leave, so forfeiting her position as the kept mistress of a wealthy man about town.¹⁸

With its impressionistic fragmentation and complexity, this novella deserves to be recognised for its incisive and interrelated critiques of sex, power, death and social injustice and for its conflation of realism and cultural tropology. Like Baldick, Walter Allen missed the point of *The Pretty Lady* when he dismissed it as nothing but a 'triumphant exercise in vulgarity', and he missed it even further when he complained that it was difficult to imagine the author of *The Pretty Lady* writing *Riceman Steps*, since there is a clear progression from one novel to the other, as I shall demonstrate in a later section of this chapter.¹⁹

In its determination to deal allusively and symbolically with contemporary society, *The Pretty Lady* provides many clues about the reasons for Bennett's decision to abandon the Five Towns. His metropolitan topography was a renewed liberation for him, allowing him to write a novella steeped in the commodified sexuality and sexual barter of West End theatres:

The stage scene flamed extravagantly with crude orange and viridian light, a rectangle of bedazzling illumination; on the boards, in the midst of great width, with great depth behind them and arching height above, tiny squeaking figures ogled the primeval passion in gesture and innuendo. From the arc of the upper circle convergent beams of light pierced through the gloom and broke violently on this group of the half-clad lovely and the swathed grotesque. The group did not quail. In fullest publicity it was

¹⁸ Chris Baldick, ed., *The Oxford English Literary History, 1910 – 1940: The Modern Movement*, 10 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 338.

¹⁹ Allen, *Arnold Bennett*, p. 91.

licensed to say that which in private could not be said where men and women meet, and that which could not be printed.²⁰

The stage and the actors, with their sensual zest and primal avidities, function as a compelling cynosure for the beguiled audience and as a backdrop to the prostitutes soliciting in the Promenade. From this perspective the novel is an uncensored return to *A Man from the North* and one in which Bennett kicks over the moral and spiritual traces of his pre-war regional fiction. But as well as embracing sexual licence through topographical alterity, Bennett is able to engage in this novella, as a Modernist sympatico, in tracing the powerful currents at flow in the submerged crannies of the human psyche.

With its juxtapositions of aristocratic self-indulgence, self-repression, social injustice, violent death and sexual commodification, *The Pretty Lady* is one of the most sombre of all Bennett's works. Its epigraph, a dictum culled from Samuel Butler's Notebooks, typifies its liberal deployment of clipped allusions. Teasingly and proleptically, it announces that the novel will debate the Manichaeian polarities of virtue and vice:

Virtue has never yet been adequately represented by any who have had any claim to be considered virtuous. It is the sub-vicious who best understand virtue. Let the virtuous people stick to describing vice – which they can do well enough.²¹

It is a conflict about which Butler has much more to observe in the accompanying five dicta, with their collective affirmations that the function of vice is to keep virtue within reasonable bounds and that longevity of practice legitimises immorality as an irreducible component of a civilised society. The clear purpose of Bennett's acknowledgement of these condensed dicta is to demonstrate his intention to expose

²⁰ Arnold Bennett, *The Pretty Lady: A Novel* (London: Cassell, 1918), p. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. unnumbered frontispiece.

and define human nature. Against a backdrop of metropolitan civilian life in wartime London, it is a determination which is fertilised by an elegant compression of symbols, paradoxes and impressionistic constructs.

Bennett's cultural and moral arbitrations in *The Pretty Lady* are filtered primarily through the eyes of one man, Gilbert Hoape, and three women: a courtesan – Christine Dubois – and two privileged society women, Lady Queenie Paulle and Concepcion Iquist Smith, both of whom were moulded on two notorious socialites, Lady Diana Manners and Elizabeth Asquith.²² An ageing and affluent English bachelor, who had casually known scores of courtesans, G. J. Hoape is an experienced practitioner of illicit sex, but his enduring affections are unevenly distributed between the three women. His relationship with Lady Queenie Paulle is charged with a faint frisson of unconsummated desire, whilst in contrast he has occasionally experienced a tepidly modulated love for Concepcion Iquist. His most persistent and urgent passions, however, are energised by his infatuation with the courtesan Christine Dubois, whose exotic allure has obsessed him since he first saw her in the Marigny Theatre in Paris just before the outbreak of war. So compelling are her attractions that in his more distracted moments, he can even envisage marriage to her. As a commercial investor, he reveres the concept of property and the practice of ownership and he resents the other clients on whom she relies to earn her living; in relishing her passion and ardour for him, he can in moments of distraction entertain thoughts of keeping her as a permanent lover and mistress.²³

²² Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda, 1914 – 18 and after* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1989), p. 126. Buitenhuis indicates that Lady Diana's picture appeared almost weekly in *The Tatler* and *The Sketch*. She was noted for her eminence in fashion and interior design and for her rakish and bohemian behaviour. Elizabeth Asquith was the daughter of the Prime Minister.

²³ *The Pretty Lady*, pp. 220 – 22.

As a self-satisfied, affluent idler and war profiteer, G.J. personifies capitalism at ease and his conscience is untroubled by the accumulation of his wealth. He is a successful entrepreneur and the profits from his business, the Reveille Motor Company, are the products of a potent symbol of interwar modernity which allow him to retire at 50 in financial and material comfort. A man of taste and aesthetic sensitivities, he is no cultural philistine. Nor is he lacking in moral conscience since he is persistently troubled by his unease with the social injustice which he sees in London, particularly in the extravagant and wilful self-indulgence which shapes the behaviour and attitudes of Queenie Paulle and the élite social set which she dominates:

He had always felt that there was something fundamentally wrong in the social fabric, and he had long had a preoccupation to the effect that it was his business, his, to take a share in finding out what was wrong and in discovering and applying a cure. This preoccupation had worried him, scarcely perceptibly, like the delicate oncoming of neuralgia.²⁴

One of his most unsettling epiphanies occurs when he realises that the war had scarcely impacted on the most sheltered and privileged of the affluent metropolitan élite:

The shops and offices seemed to show that the wants of customers were few and simple. Grouse moors, fisheries, yachts, valuations, hosiery, neck-ties, motor-cars, insurance, assurance, antique china, antique pictures, boots, riding-whips, and, above all, Eastern cigarettes! The master-passion was evidently Eastern cigarettes.²⁵

However, despite his fears about the threats to the social fabric generated by the strains and deprivations of the war, he remains at heart and in practice an unreconstructed capitalist and sensualist.

Hoape is a complex man. At times, he is pompous and self-deluding as, for example, when he tries to justify his Committee work to Concepcion Iquist:

²⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

‘It’s the job of one part of London to talk. If that part of London didn’t talk your tribes on the Clyde couldn’t work, because they wouldn’t know what to do, nor how to do it. Talking has to come before working, and let me tell you it’s more difficult, and it’s more killing, because it’s more responsible.’²⁶

In reality, his committee meetings and charity work are signifiers of his boredom and *amour propre*, rather than disinterested philanthropy, and are important analgesic distractions from the war and from its consequences which he would prefer to avoid; like Queenie Paulle he is only prepared to engage in charity work which does not affront his sense of dignity.²⁷ On the other hand, he can be stoic in his physical bravery, particularly in his traumatised resilience to the discovery of a child’s severed arm in the street in the aftermath of a German bombing raid.²⁸

As a man of contradictions, he is capable of both generosity and small-mindedness. Whilst he is prepared to find and finance alternative accommodation for Christine after the tenancy of her Cork Street flat is summarily terminated by her landlord, he remains emotionally obtuse. Despite his passionate attractions to her, he never fully understands her and is consumed by jealous outrage when he assumes, mistakenly, at the end of the novel, that having taken advantage of his financial generosity, she has descended into common prostitution. Echoes of Butler’s dicta in the epigraph reverberate when he fails to comprehend that virtue and vice have coalesced in her. It is one of the most grating ironies of the novel that what had been an affair of passion and genuine affection for him is chilled into frozen recrimination; his decision to disembarrass himself of her is a glacial rejection of her scrupulous integrity.

In so far as *The Pretty Lady* is a treatise on the problems of self-exploration and self-definition, the main characters are Christine and Concepcion. A practising

²⁶ Ibid., p. 184.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 194.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 209.

and devout Catholic, Hoape's pretty lady, Christine Dubois, is an experienced courtesan in her mid-twenties who has left her home in France to seek refuge and traffic in London. Attractive, experienced as an arch seductress and in demand as a sexual entrepreneur, she has managed to avoid the principal scourges of the prostitute's profession – venereal disease, alcoholism and pregnancy. Ensclosed in her Cork Street flat, she remains a prisoner in a power struggle – unprotected from the cold and unemotional realities of the prostitute's life and forced to bribe corrupt police officers so that they do not compromise her trade.²⁹

Through correlative compression and insinuation, Bennett explores a terrain of objects, space and possessions to reveal character and motivation. These facilitate his emphasis on the social and aesthetic chasms which separate Christine from G. J. Not surprisingly, her tastes and interests are more plebeian than his; she prefers the gaieties of Berger waltzes and the Boston two-step and, like other Parisian cocottes, the thrills of cheap and popular *Fantômas* novelettes; he prefers the classical austerities of Bach or the brio of Richard Strauss. Her landlord's aesthetic tastes in the rented flat in Cork Street – from the red shaded lights to the voluptuous and insipidly sentimental engravings of Frederick Leighton and Marcus Stone – reflect her disempowerment and passive subjection to her fate as a purveyor of casual sex, and contrast sharply with Hoape's affluent social capital and the dilettante taste of his Regency furnished apartment in the Albany in Piccadilly.

Although she is available for general patronage as a sexual commodity, she is loyal to Hoape and passionately adores him as a paragon of desire. At the same time, owing to her insecurity, she is too ashamed ever to refer to her professional assignations with other men:

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 87 – 88.

She was mad about Gilbert; she thrilled to be his slave; she had what seemed to be an immeasurable confidence in him; and yet never, never could she mention another individual man to him, much less tell him of the public shame that had fallen upon her in the exercise of her profession. Why had fate been thus hard on her?³⁰

Easily wounded, she suffers, too, from Hoape's reluctance to introduce her into the confidential intimacy of his private domestic life. She is not dissatisfied with her existence, even though she is afflicted by bouts of depression, guilt and loneliness, but as a carnal entrepreneur she is repulsed by the emotional repression and hypocrisy of the English.

Bennett focuses his Modernist orienteerings on her emotional vicissitudes as the pretty lady of the title. The counterpoise of her humane generosity with her vitriolic and xenophobic hatred of the Germans points to the fractures in her psychological balance. Her spiritual superstitions and mystical irrationalities enable her to empathise with the disorientation and suffering of one of her clients, the shell-shocked and truculently drunken commissioned junior officer, Edgar, whom she meets in the Promenade of the theatre. Like Christine, he too is a victim of the war. Stripped of his commission as a result of overstaying his leave, he is forced to return to the Front as a private, a journey that Bennett tangentially suggests will result in his death.

The depths of her mysticism and superstition are evoked by Bennett's forays into Modernist narrative mode in chapter sixteen, particularly through his evocation of her fragmented impressions when she visits the Brompton Oratory, where she is racked by a sense of sin and punishment for having neglected her devotions to the Virgin Mary. Through impressionistic encoding, Bennett shows that her spiritual disorientation and malleable animism leave her credulous and incapable of

³⁰ Ibid., p. 96.

recognising the epistemological contradictions implicit in the worship of a Christian goddess capable of simultaneous benevolence, jealousy and revenge:

Christine cast herself down and prayed to the painted image and the hammered heart. She prayed to the goddess whom the Middle Ages had perfected and who in the minds of the simple and the savage has survived the Renaissance and still triumphantly flourishes; the Queen of heaven, the Tyrant of heaven, the Woman in heaven; [...]. Christine made peace with this jealous and divine creature. She felt unmistakably that she was forgiven for her infidelity due to the Infant in the darkness beyond the opposite aisle. The face of the Lady of VII Dolours miraculously smiled at her; the silver heart miraculously shed its tarnish and glittered beneficent lightnings. Doubtless she knew somewhere in her mind that no physical change had occurred in the picture or the heart; but her mind was a complex, and like nearly all minds could disbelieve and believe simultaneously.³¹

The fragility of her emotional subconscious is also emphasised by her suggestible eagerness to believe that the broken watch which Edgar gives her as expiation for his drunken boorishness will provide an amulet against future misfortune. Her fractured psyche is most exposed in the Guinea Fowl club when she is convinced that she has heard Edgar calling her name, a spiritual suggestibility at odds with the raucous abandon and crude lubricity of Hoape, his companions and the other two pretty ladies who accompany them.³² In addition, with Modernist ambiguity, Bennett obscures her experiences in narrative opaqueness, so that it is never totally clear that her adventitious meeting with Edgar as she leaves the Guinea Fowl and her subsequent conversations with him at the Cork Street flat are anything other than the febrile projections of her psychological and emotional disorientation.

When Christine's prospects appear to her to be in decline as the War is coming to its climax, her labile reflections on the power game on which she depends for her livelihood are played out through the free indirect discourse of her refracted impressions:

³¹ Ibid., pp. 97 – 98.

³² Ibid., p. 157.

By her acquiescences, her skill, her warmth, her adaptability, her intense womanliness, she had created between them a bond stronger than anything that could keep them apart. The bond existed. It could not during the whole future be broken save by a disloyalty. [...] No ordinary woman, handicapped as she was, could have captured this fastidious and shy paragonAnd the notion that her passion for him had dwindled was utterly ridiculous, like the notion that he would tire of her. She was saved. She burst into wild tears.³³

It is one of the cruellest ironies of the novel that Hoape rejects her only when he surreptitiously sees her searching the streets near Piccadilly. In condemning her as a sexually venal predator, he fails to understand that she is a self-absorbed mystic and compassionate altruist on a quest to find Edgar, or his proxy, so that she can offer moral support and comfort to the distressed.

Like her friend Queenie Paulle, Concepcion Iquist is an impulsively independent woman, but she is driven more by her sense of duty than by egotistical assumptions of entitlement. Her affluence and social status are derived from her father's South American business wealth and her bachelor uncle's political success in England: 'The Iquists had led the semi-intelligent, conscious-of-its-audience set which had ousted the old, quite unintelligent stately-homes-of-England set from the first place in the curiosity of the everlasting public.'³⁴ It is through her experiences that Bennett animates the debate on the function of capitalism and the morality of war profiteering and labour exploitation. It is through her, too, that he demonstrates the challenge to the old patriarchal hegemony. She is endowed with an aggressive masculinity and blunt egotism, and emerges as a proxy for those women determined to contest industrial capitalism by engaging in traditional male roles and employment. After the devastating death of her husband, Carlos, on active service, she visits the United States to gain experience in industrial catering, before moving to Scotland to organise and manage a canteen for armaments workers on the Clyde.

³³ Ibid., p. 295.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

The appalling and brutal death of one of the female workers whose long hair becomes entangled in machinery further disturbs her emotional balance. It is a death which violently underscores the polarities of capitalism and exploited labour, and it serves as a stark counterpoint between her life and the experiences of the rich and complacent metropolitan élite.

As a victim of the civilian equivalent of shell-shock, Concepcion cannot refrain from self-identification as a ruined and cowardly woman, returning to London because, as she views it, of her querulous inability to endure the cruelties and rigour of war work in Scotland. It is a return which surprisingly unites her to many of the outmoded and gendered prejudices which she had resisted during her work on the Clyde. Her reference to Milton when she quotes *Paradise Lost* to G.J. in chapter thirty-four appears at first to strike a discordant note of passive surrender to the dominant primacy of masculine power:

‘Oft-times nothing profits more
Than self-esteem, grounded on just and right
Well-managed; of that skill the more thou knows’t,
The more she will acknowledge thee her head
And to realities yield all her shows.’³⁵

In quoting Raphael’s advice to Adam and in choosing to stress the last line, Concepcion’s counter-intuitive proposal appears to embrace the proposition that the fundamental basis of the relationship between the sexes remains immutable – a construct in which the patriarchal protector is seduced by the physical attractions of the quiescently submissive but manipulative female. That this is merely a hackneyed and unmediated generalisation – born out of the turbulence of her inner disorientation – is suggested by Bennett’s references to the heterodox complexities

³⁵ Ibid., p. 246.

of Concepcion's affections for Queenie, sentiments which reposition the impact on her of Queenie's affectionate kiss in chapter twenty-eight.³⁶

Concepcion's emotional and spiritual vulnerabilities are clearly in evidence when she loses self-control during her first meeting as a replacement for Queenie at the Lechford Hospitals Committee. That she and Christine, separated by breeding, background and wealth, are in debt to kindred mystical creditors is revealed to G. J. through the prism of her private world of fear and pain. Enfolded in sinuous abstraction and metaphysical distraction, her inner torment is revealed to him when he visits her following her nervous breakdown:

'But I don't think I'll apologise to you for bringing you to Wrikton and this place. They're not real, you know. They're an illusion. There is no such place as Wrikton and this river and this window. There couldn't be, could there?'³⁷

This behaviour, as she recovers from neurasthenia, may be rationalised as exhibitionist and theatrical, but Bennett astutely withholds any assurance that, as a traumatised civilian war casualty, her declared intention to commit suicide is insincere.

Self-serving, capricious and vain with a ruthless egotism blended with aristocratic *hauteur*, Lady Queenie Paille, daughter of the Marquis and Marchioness of Lechford and bellwether of London society, exudes all the privileges of breeding and many of its unattractive indulgences. When challenged on the brazenness of her *déshabille* at her charity art exhibition, her response is ebullient defiance:

'Good God! If I began to dress like a house-maid the Germans would be in London in a month. Our job as women is quite delicate enough without you making it worse by any damned sentimental superficiality...'³⁸

Her iconoclasm and lack of respect for convention can be found in the Modernist décor and furnishing of her apartments. Where the rest of her parents' home,

³⁶ Ibid., p. 190.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 311.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 145 – 46.

Lechford House, disports Canova and Thorwaldsen statues and paintings by Rubens and Lawrence, the décor of her living space integrates African primitivism with a Modernist fusion of chromatic and geometrical clashes. Whilst Concepcion believes that Queenie is in love with G. J., her emotional life remains promiscuously unresolved, and the field of vision in chapter twenty-six suggests that she relishes the tantalising bait of sexual ambiguity:

G.J's glance ran round the room like a hunted animal seeking escape, and found no escape. [...] On the front of the mantelpiece were perversely but brilliantly depicted, with a high degree of finish, two nude, crouching women who gazed longingly at each other across the impassable semicircular abyss of the fireplace; and just above their heads, on a scroll, ran these words: "The ways of God are strange".³⁹

Through her self-promotional caprice, Bennett points to the shallowness of London society life. She has few rivals as an energetic, but ineffective and self-congratulatory charity worker, one who refuses to demean herself by becoming a V.A.D. Her self-destructive impulse can be seen in the manner of her death. While others attempt to protect themselves, she is killed by the German aerial bombing at Lechford House because of her cavalier refusal to shelter from danger. Her wilful shallowness can also be seen in the vanity and tasteless vacuity of her plans to set up a First Aid Station for Distressed Beauties. The inability to comprehend the insensitivity of such a gesture and its incompatibility with her charitable work is emphasised by the way she treats the war and her contacts as recreational distractions. Through her preparations for a performance as Salome in a fund-raising Pageant of Terpsichore at the Albert Hall, the novel's conflation of sex and death is further emphasised. The dance of death for charity (with its evocations of Maud Allan's sensual performances as Salome) offers a bleak counterpoint to the arduous

³⁹ Ibid., p. 170.

and dangerous work undertaken by Concepcion and the other women war workers at the armaments factory on the Clyde.

As a complement to the blended angulations of these four characters, Bennett shores up his vision of wartime London by dispersing graphic cameos and impressionistic iconography in order to reveal the social striations and ethical fissures impacting on civilian and military life alike. For example, when G. J. visits his bootmaker's in St. James's he is venerated by the deferentially accommodating shop manager who summons a polisher to clean his boots:

A trap-door opened in the floor of the shop and a horrible, pallid, weak, cringing man came up out of the earth of St. James's, and knelt before God far more submissively than even the manager had knelt. He had brushes and blacking, and he blacked and he brushed and breathed alternately, undoing continually with his breath or his filthy hand what he had done with his brush. He never looked up, never spoke. When he had made the boots like mirrors he gathered together his implements and vanished, silent and dutifully bent, through the trap-door back into the earth of St. James's. And because the trap-door had not shut properly the manager stamped on it and stamped down the pale man definitely into the darkness underneath.⁴⁰

The syntactics of a dehumanised worker, imprisoned in Stygian gloom and held in contempt by those who purchase his labour, flaunt his dignity, and secrete his existence, operate as a figurative expression of the city's repressed conscience and as a concise allegory of the durability of privilege, wealth and social subjugation, none of which, as this fragment demonstrates, has been threatened or inconvenienced by the war.

In chapter nine, the Library of G. J.'s club is presented in cameo as a paralysed adjunct of the war. The two members whom G. J. encounters there, a retired judge and an ex-politician, articulate the incompetence and stupidity of the war effort, highlight the accreted folly and ignorance which prolong it unnecessarily and expose the lack of career opportunities for those excluded from

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

the most privileged social and political nexus.⁴¹ Bennett's contempt for the disjunctions of class and morality is also made clear in the Marquis of Lechford's precautions to protect his London residence, Lechford House, from aerial attack; the wire netting which he erects to guard the main roof from bombs is not extended to the servants' quarters. It is an economy which signals his casual acceptance of the dispensability of their inconsequential lives.

Even minor characters are located among these collected fragments. An unlikely but articulate feminist icon, the Cockney-accented, downtrodden minor character, Nurse Smaith, is a combative denunciator of the chauvinistic exploitation of women. In her professional capacity she has performed outstanding war service in the Balkans, but meets only with bureaucratic obstruction and patronising indifference from the male-dominated members of the Executive Committee of the Lechford Hospitals when she seeks to recoup the deductions which have been made unfairly to her wages.

These episodic interventions are united by Bennett through expansive allusions to privilege, sex and death. In chapter twenty-two which is entitled 'Getting on with the War', most of the expensively clad women who attend the charity art exhibition to raise funds for the Lechford Hospitals are drawn by the urge to see their portraits displayed and admired. Bennett's casual reflection, that they and their male companions 'were comfortably conscious of virtue in the undoubted fact that they were helping to support two renowned hospitals where at that very moment dissevered legs and arms were being thrown into buckets', points to the disconnect between those on active service literally sacrificing their limbs and the hedonistic and aesthetically complacent metropolitans left undisturbed and bedecked in their

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40 – 46.

conspicuous finery.⁴² That this is an occasion for privileged aristocratic vagary can be seen in Queenie Paulle's flirting and dalliance with the young officer on leave, Lieutenant Molder, and in the languid *hauteur* of her proposition that the war is a legitimate sluice for male sexual energy and tension.

In the same chapter, Bennett draws on the iconography of virtue deferring to vice through reference to Félicien Rops' etching of *Pornocrates* which operates as a trope to evoke the hypocritical lubricity, if not of the affluent and fashionably dressed women, then certainly of their physically aroused male companions:



Pornocrates – Félicien Rops

(Medium: Etching coloured with Watercolours Date: 1878 Current location: Sammlung M. Mabile)

⁴² Ibid., p. 141.

‘Oh!’ breathed the Major, ‘have pity. It’s not any canvas woman that I want – By Jove!’ He caught sight of an invention of Félicien Rops, a pig on the end of a string, leading, or being driven by, a woman who wore nothing but stockings, boots and a hat. ‘What do you call that?’⁴³

Major Craive is determined to indulge in full carnal pleasure on his last night of leave – particularly since he is aware of the threat to his mortality on his imminent return to active service. However, Bennett’s concern is located not in the Major’s fate but in Pornocrates’. In the etching, Rops conceptualises vice, cupidity and virtue as fellow travellers and dependent companions and, since Pornocrates is blindfolded – a point which the Major ignores – she is forced to walk in darkness, unaware of the presence of her three lost loves. The etching, evocative of Rops’ affinities with Baudelaire and French decadence, returns the reader to the novel’s epigraph and, through the symbolic relationship which unites the golden-tailed pig with the naked woman, interrogates the consequences for post-war society of a debased metropolitan culture in thrall to sexual and moral promiscuity.

Bennett presents a graphic and extended contrast, too, in the scene at the notorious Guinea Fowl club, where sexuality is stirred by a combination of rag-time music and seductively percussive bass syncopation. One of the pretty ladies who accompanies Craive declaims with semi-intoxicated bravado Edgar Allan Poe’s poem, ‘To Helen’. Since she has been procured by Craive in his role as pander, her choice resonates with connotations of sexual disloyalty and debased promiscuity. At the same time, however, the significance of Poe’s interrogation of the binary of feminine vice and purity is completely ignored:

The uncomprehended marvellous poem, having startled the whole room, ceased, and the rag-time resumed its sway. A drunken ‘Bravo!’ came from one table, a cheer from another. Young Alice nodded an acknowledgement and sank loosely into her chair, exhausted by her last effort against the spell of champagne and liqueurs. And the naive, big Major, bewitched by the

⁴³ Ibid., p. 147.

child, subsided into soft contact with her, and they almost tearfully embraced. A waiter sedately replaced a glass which Alice's drooping, negligent hand had over-turned, and wiped the cloth. G.J. was silent. The whole table was silent.⁴⁴

This is a powerful passage, and not just because much of Poe's work speaks to images of mental disturbance, but also because, in this cameo of contrasts, sex and drink are presented as tradeable commodities, culture is debased through ignorance and lack of taste, and even the evocations of enduring classical beauty are subordinated to the pulsations of carnal desire.

Death stalks the novel as a grim companion to these sexual energies. That *The Pretty Lady* is intended to provide a marker for a moribund epoch can be seen in Bennett's evocation of the funeral of a Victorian eminence, General Lord Roberts. Occasionally, Death is wooed as a dangerously thrilling suitor – as when Queenie is killed on the roof of Lechford House. Some like Edgar disappear silently and without trace, some like the young woman at the Clyde armaments factory suffer horrendous deaths, and others are killed on active service; perhaps the most poignant death of all is that of the anonymous young girl who, G.J. discovers, has been dismembered during the air raid. Her severed arm is an emblem of a brutalised and shattered world:

The sole object of interest which the torch revealed was a child's severed arm, with a fragment of brown frock on it and a tinsel ring on one of the fingers of the dirty little hand. The blood from the other end had stained the ground. G.J. abruptly switched off the torch. Nausea overcame him, and then a feeling of the most intense pity and anger overcame the nausea.⁴⁵

The kaleidoscopic fusion of all these symbols propels the novella beyond its metropolitan boundaries and brings into focus the ontological brutality, inexplicability and uncertainties of human mortality.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 155 – 56.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 209.

The Pretty Lady is much more than a new manner novel about prostitution in wartime London. It anticipates many Modernist precepts: the bankruptcy of material progress, the valorisation of feminist alterity, and the impact of the fractured subconscious on the psychological angulations and irrationalities of human behaviour. From Leighton to Rops, from Berger to Bach, from *Fantômas* to Edgar Allan Poe, the breadth of Bennett's cultural references reveals the catholic expansiveness of his intellectual interests and aesthetic tastes. It demonstrates, too, that he has been unjustly undervalued in his role as an experimental pioneer, unafraid to appeal to the demotic and popular, whilst comfortably embracing the challenge of élitist allusiveness to appeal to a cultured, literate and educated audience.

The Terror of the Treasury

Bennett began to write *Mr. Prohack* (1922), on 11 October 1920; it took him just over eight months to complete.⁴⁶ Although it was serialised, it was never intended as a potboiler and close scrutiny would rebuff the claim that in this novel Bennett operated as a commercial writing-machine with little consideration for the aesthetic value of his work. It was always intended as a serious satire, and even before serialisation began in America in September 1921 he was infuriated that the *Delineator* had made unauthorised excisions, as he made clear to his agent, James Pinker:

I return the proofs. The cuts which have been made are most ruthless. They certainly impair the interest and atmosphere of the story, and I do not understand why they have been made. The length of the serial, 100,000 words, was suggested by the *Delineator*, and the number of instalments was also fixed by them; and I arranged the details of the narrative specially to suit serial publication. It is somewhat discouraging to have the thing spoilt by cutting after I have taken all this trouble.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *The Critical Heritage*, p. 89.

⁴⁷ *Letters I*, 27 April 1921, p. 293.

In this novel, Arthur Prohack, the terror of the Treasury, is an upper middle-class civil servant whose means have become straitened during the war. He and his family are post-war casualties who have fallen to the depths of the new poor; the hypocrisy which sustains his powerful but anonymous position in society is succinctly captured in his reflective exposition to his wife:

‘That’s where the honest poor have the advantage of us. You see, we’re the dishonest poor. We’ve been to the same schools and universities and we talk the same idiom and we have the same manners and like the same things as people who spend more in a month or a week than we spend in a year. And we pretend, and they pretend, that they and we are exactly the same. We aren’t, you know. We’re one vast pretence.’⁴⁸

In this morality tale, Prohack unexpectedly acquires substantial wealth (as a result of a legacy bequeathed to him by a war profiteer to whom he had once lent £100). He faces an immediate conundrum: how to fashion an appropriate lifestyle for spending this legacy. It is a dilemma which he is unable to resolve:

He wanted to reconstruct society in the interest of those to whom no miracle had happened. He wanted to do away with all excessive wealth; and by “excessive” he meant any degree of wealth beyond what would be needed for the perfect comfort of himself, Mr. Prohack, – a reasonable man if ever there was one! [...] As for enjoying his fortune in present circumstances, he thought that he might succeed in doing so, and that anyhow it was his duty to try. He was regrettably inconsistent.⁴⁹

As for Prohack’s son, Charlie, he remains, unlike his parents, untroubled by self-doubts or conscience. He experiences no sense of guilt in enjoying the fruits of capitalist speculation and regards his luxury yacht, which he scarcely has time to enjoy, as the legitimate reward for his courageous business enterprise. Willingly conceding that he is a non-productive profiteer and driven by a desire for social revenge, he despairs at the injustice and ingratitude meted out to former soldiers like himself. His disenchantment and sublimated anger point directly to Rivers’ influence

⁴⁸ Arnold Bennett, *Mr. Prohack* (1922; repr. London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), p. 14.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33 – 34.

on Bennett. Like the chauffeur Carthew, an ex-territorial soldier with a cynical distaste for those who choose to wear decorative ribbons to confirm their solidarity with the nation's military orthodoxies and the shell-shocked Joe in *Riceyman Steps*, he is appalled by what he sees as the betrayal by his country of the sacrifices which he made in the war:

‘You can’t tell me anything I don’t know already. I’m a pirate. I’m not producing. All the money I make has to be earned by somebody else before I get hold of it. I’m not doing any good to my beautiful country. But I did try to find a useful job, didn’t I? My beautiful country wouldn’t have me. It only wanted me in the trenches. Well, it’s got to have me. I’ll jolly well make it pay now. I’ll squeeze every penny out of it. I’ll teach it a lesson. And why not? I shall only be shoving its own ideas down its throat.’⁵⁰

Although an adamant cynic, he remains, as he sees it, true to his principles in demonstrating to his country that he and other capitalists like him are the true victors in the post-war world.

Mr. Prohack helps to explain why so many writers and critics have concluded that by the 1920s Bennett had forfeited the right to be considered as a serious artist. It is frequently dismissed as the type of lighter work which he wrote quickly and conspicuously for money. It has also been criticised for being offensive in its complacent glorification of wealth and financial success, whilst Arthur Prohack has been reviled by John Lucas as a hollow materialist whom Bennett, injudiciously, held up for our approval.⁵¹

Such collective judgements are precipitate and fail to appreciate that Bennett never set out to produce a writerly text, but rather a subtle economic, social and political disquisition on the state of post-war England. Nor does any scaring critique acknowledge its unrecognised affinities with his other novels – specifically *The Pretty Lady* and *Lord Raino*. In all three, Bennett consistently demonstrates

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 152 – 53.

⁵¹ Lucas, *Arnold Bennett: A Study of his Fiction*, p. 192.

that the devastation of the First World War scarcely impacted on the moral debility and extravagant crassness of the fashionable metropolitan social élite. As in the other two novels, *Mr. Prohack* is located in a post-war culture where privilege, fraud and pretence are endemic, and where everything can be commodified, as Prohack discovers when he is diagnosed with catarrh of the stomach by the fashionable Dr. Veiga, a condition which he would have been unable to afford before acquiring his legacy.⁵²

There are further links with *The Pretty Lady*, specifically in the way in which post-war upper middle-class metropolitan society organises and promotes its social life. Queenie Paulle's charity art exhibition finds a parallel with the self-indulgent League of All the Arts in *Mr. Prohack*. The League serves no purpose other than providing a forum for its members to indulge its prejudices and value judgements:

The reception [...] was almost at its apogee [...]. On every hand could be heard artistic discussions, serious and informed and yet lightsome in tone. If it was not the real originality of jazz music that was being discussed, it was the sureness of the natural untaught taste of the denizens of the East End and South London, and if not that then the greatness of male revue artistes, and if not that then the need for a national theatre and of a minister of fine arts, and if not that then the sculptural quality of the best novels and the fictional quality of the best sculpture.⁵³

It allows artists and bohemians to meet together with no other objective, apart from a nebulous commitment to make Britain civilised in the eyes of the artistic world. Prohack derides its Social Amenities Committee as 'a pack of self-seeking snobbish women'.⁵⁴ His caustic broadside is an endorsement of all those absentees who are searching to locate, in the aftermath of war, a culture expressive of both political and social conscience.

⁵² *Mr. Prohack*, p. 59.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

Bennett also returns to his feminist preoccupations in this book. Prohack's daughter, Sissie is stubbornly independent, self-willed and absolutely determined to live on her own terms. She has no qualms about challenging and defying her father and, like Concepcion Iquist, has completed an iconoclastic rite of passage – in her case by driving a motor van during the war. Her resentment of abrasing male condescension is an extension of her determination to secure fulfilment through her work. With a sharp, incisive mind, she has the confidence to assure her father, correctly, that unearned wealth will not deliver the personal happiness he expects, and to defy him when she chooses to leave home so that she can marry and live, in comparative straits, with Ozzie Morfey.

Bennett's satire is also directed at the self-referential metropolitan cultural elite when he takes aim, just as he did in *The Pretty Lady*, at its nefarious smugness and morally incestuous male club life, a theme to which he later returned in *Lord Raingo*.⁵⁵ In addition, Sissie's *inamorata* and future husband, the indefatigable social parasite Ozzie Morfey, and his patron, the impresario Asprey Chown, provide Bennett with rich opportunities to satirise the vapidities and pretentiousness of the post-war metropolitan theatrical world. In this interlude Bennett is once more an expositor of the economic servitude to which women are condemned and which post-war London endorses. Such exploitation is seen at its subtlest when the victim is not completely disempowered. Eliza Fiddle, the Revue diva, has little control over her professional life which, ironically, confers both great wealth and feudally dependent insecurity. In counterpoint to her position, the narcissistically obsessive Softly Bishop sees marriage to Eliza's half-sister, Fancy, merely as a commercial venture and as an opportunity to exploit her youth and talent on the stage.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 84 – 89.

The *leitmotif* of this novel may be seen most clearly in the behaviour, attitudes and values not just of Charlie, but also of Sir Paul Spinner, both of whom articulate vengeful paeans to free enterprise. Sir Paul, as a successful stock market speculator and plutocrat, represents the self-interested and immovable inflexibility of Britain's pre-war ancien regime, as the financial journalist Francis Fieldfare makes clear to Prohack:

'But did you ever know Spinner touch anything that didn't mean money in the first place? I never did. What he and his lot mean by the welfare of the country is the stability of the country *as it is*. They see the necessity for development, improvement in the social scheme. Oh, yes! They see it and admit it. Then they go to church, or they commune with heaven on the golf-course, and their prayer is: "Give us needed change, O Lord, but not just yet."'”⁵⁶

Spinner's cupidity is a national offshoot of the post-war disfigurements inflicted by class immobility, social stasis and rampant political hypocrisy. For example, when Mimi Winstock approaches Prohack in an attempt to persuade him not to seek legal redress for the car crash involving her employer, the politician Carrell Quire, and Prohack's wife, Eve, she inadvertently reveals Quire's lack of principles. A man of frantic ambition and ruthless egotism, he is the owner of three cars, even though he is a leading political figure in the anti-squandermania campaign. In business as in politics, avarice and expediency trump concepts of sacrifice and restraint in the interest of the wider public.

The cultural sanctification of luxury and extravagance in *Mr. Prohack* genuflects to many staples of middlebrow preoccupations, such as wealth and social privilege. Not surprisingly then, Bennett foregrounds intellectual constructs to which he returned in potboilers, such as *The Strange Vanguard*. When Sissie complains at

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

the extravagance of Softly Bishop's lunch, she encounters Prohack's defence of excess and luxury:

'I agree with your general criticism, but let us remember that all this wickedness does not date from the day before yesterday. It's been flourishing for some thousands of years, and all prophecies about it being overturned by Nemesis have proved false.'⁵⁷

Even the aberrant combination of international war and capitalist excess is powerless to undermine these conditioned and ineradicable human desires. Bennett also readopts his stance as satirical social critic in the asperity of his presentation of Lady Massulum – leader of London society and an offshoot of Queenie Paulle. Her photograph appears regularly in the *Daily Picture* and, intentionally or not, its impact is to suggest that nothing can happen simply to the rich.

That Bennett is preoccupied in this novel with the materialism of the metropolitan élite can also be seen when Prohack walks into the Grand Babylon Hotel to meet his son. He is astonished that affluent idleness can flourish with such energy and incredulous at the symbolic temples of privilege and luxury – the Turkish Baths – which he is encouraged to attend by Dr. Veiga. It is an epiphany only slightly less startling than his bewildering discovery that, at the end of the greatest war on earth, braces can still be made to measure in Bond Street.⁵⁸

The profound enigma which *Mr. Prohack* probes – the arbitration of wealth, social justice and personal fulfilment – is never resolved, but Bennett suggests that human contentment cannot be found among the lotus eaters. As Prohack discovers in this fable, spiritual tranquillity is sustained only through acceptance that life is worry and that absence of worry is death.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 288.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 128.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 191.

The new manner novel redux

Originally intended for the serial market, *Riceyman Steps* (1923) was completed by Bennett in just five months on 17 March 1923.⁶⁰ It charts the psychological and physical decline of Henry Earlfoward and Violet Arb, the widow he marries, and compares their fates with those of their servant, Elsie Sprickett and her shell-shocked fiancé, Joe. Stripped bare of plot and narrative, it is confined to the topographical seediness of Clerkenwell and, with its Modernist affinities, it is his most accomplished new manner novel.

As long ago as 1969, Louis Tillier demonstrated that *Riceyman Steps* is an important work because of the light which it sheds on the way in which Bennett approached his craft. He shows firstly that, in familiarising himself completely with the Clerkenwell area in which he had decided to set the book, Bennett had returned to the methodical research which he had adopted in preparation for writing both *Anna of the Five Towns* and *Clayhanger*. At the same time he turned his attention to, and drew liberally from, two important secondary sources. The first was F. Somner Merryweather's, *Lives and anecdotes of misers, with a few words on frugality and savings* (1850).⁶¹ The second was *The History of Clerkenwell* (1865), by William J. Pinks.⁶² The second of these sources was particularly important for the novel because there are several instances where Bennett has clearly borrowed almost verbatim from Pinks, for example Henry's account to Mrs. Arb of the Clerkenwell medieval mystery plays:

He would explain to her eager ear that once Clerkenwell was a murmuring green land of medicinal springs, wells, streams with mills on their banks,

⁶⁰ *The Critical Heritage*, p. 94.

⁶¹ Tillier, *Studies in the sources of Arnold Bennett's novels*, pp. 145 – 56. The episode in which Merryweather refers to the frugality of a dirt contractor who gives his daughter's fiancé a wedding present of waste dirt, which the young man then sells for a profit of two thousand pounds, is adapted in the novel.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 147 – 54.

nunneries, aristocrats, and holy clerks who presented mystery-plays. Yes, he would tell her about the drama of Adam and Eve being performed in the costume of Adam and Eve to a simple and unshocked people.⁶³

However, *Riceman Steps* is in no sense a derivative, with its original and cerebral presentation of its three main characters, the miser Henry Earlfoward, the shopkeeper and woman he marries, Violet Arb, and their servant, Elsie Sprickett, and just as in *The Pretty Lady*, Bennett fuses objects, spaces and possessions, in order to reveal character and motivation. Henry is attracted to Violet because he recognises that she, like him, is thrifty and careful with her money, but her failure to understand that he is governed by his grand passion, miserliness, and by the need to achieve predictability in his life, ultimately destroys her. Even when in pain, as in the first stage of his courtship when he escorts Violet around Clerkenwell, he is unable to countenance spending his money on either taxi or tram. Expense appals him. His pathogenically obsessive thrift can best be illustrated by his decision to purchase seven identical blue suits at an auction. It is a psychological affliction that even prevents him from enjoying the visit to Tussaud's on his wedding day:

Meeting her glance, Henry hesitated. Was there to be no end to disbursements? His secret passion fought against his love. He turned pale; he could not speak; he was himself amazed at the power of his passion. Full of fine intentions, he dared not affront the monster.⁶⁴

The psycho-dynamics of this obsession are clearly a turbulent by-product of a diseased imagination. Even the dirt which the cleaners remove from the shop on their wedding day is scrutinised by Henry for its potential commercial value and, symbolically, his wedding present to Violet is a safe and a key so that she can lock away her possessions. Henry's fragile psyche is attacked not just by his pathological fear of waste but equally by the fear of social insurrection, as revealed in his

⁶³ Arnold Bennett, *Riceman Steps: A Novel* (London: Cassell, 1923), p. 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 95 – 96.

querulous reaction to the news in the *Evening Standard* of the affray at the Clerkenwell Communist Club.⁶⁵

His loss of appetite and his refusal to eat, firstly a boiled egg and then a steak, and his idiosyncratic determination to reduce housekeeping costs, point to the depth of his psychological and spiritual malaise. Even his toothpicks are spent matches. His mental deterioration contaminates his spiritual life and his lack of charity is emphasised by his scheming refusal to subscribe to Dr. Raste's relief fund for the London Hospital and by his pinched refusal to seek specialist advice to relieve the pain in his leg which causes him to limp.⁶⁶ Ensnared under a self-contained and hardened carapace, he refuses to accept that Violet's health is rapidly deteriorating because of under-nourishment; he rationalises her death and exculpates himself from any responsibility for it by blaming Elsie's wedding cake present as the immediate cause of her decline, and it is the shock of discovering that Elsie has taken sixpence from his safe which kills him:

What so profoundly, so formidably, shocked him was the fact that Elsie had surreptitiously taken his keys, rifled the safe, and returned the key,— and smiled on him and nursed him! There was no security at all in the world of perils. The foundations of faith had been destroyed. Elsie!⁶⁷

The contrast between the fastidious Henry and the chaos and dirt of his shop and house is in every sense perplexing to Violet before their marriage and tragic after it:

Surely Mr. Earlforward was the most normal being in the world, the mildest, the quietest, the easiest! But the bath, the kitchen, the blankets, the filth, the food, the £40 book, and all those new suits and new shirts! She had never even conceived such an inside of a house! She could hardly credit her senses.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 161.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 189 – 90.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 298 – 99.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 73.

Following her inheritance of a business in Clerkenwell, Violet experiences the fear of anxious vulnerability. It is the outburst in her shop by the psychologically traumatised Joe that convinces her that she needs to sell it and to remarry:

She was overwhelmed by a sudden and final sense of the folly, the tragedy, of solitary existence for a woman like her. She had wisdom, energy, initiative, moral strength, but there were things that women could do and things that women could not do; and a woman who was used to a man needed a man for all sorts of purposes, and she resolved passionately that she would not live alone another day longer than she could help.⁶⁹

Afflicted with quasi-masochistic tendencies and eagerly submissive, Violet does not even balk at Henry's decision to file off her wedding ring so that he can sell it to buy a cheaper one.⁷⁰

In some respects, the two are perfectly matched. She surreptitiously and parsimoniously borrows a copy of the *News of the World* in order to inspect the advertisement for the sale of her shop, and she also negotiates with Elsie over her weekly wages – paying her £20 per annum, the lowest remuneration she could offer to a general servant. However, their incompatibility is illustrated by her decision to vacuum clean and reorganise Henry's bookshop, an impulse which reveals her failure to realise that the chaotic disorganisation which he cherishes is a deliberate component of his business plan to attract bargain seekers. Violet's tragedy is both the loss of her first husband and her subsequent entrapment as Henry's victim. She develops into his mercenary and unapproachable business companion, viewing all their customers, even the ones who spend lavishly, like the American businessman Mr. Bauersch, simply as opportunities for impersonal commercial profit.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 78 – 84.

In the conflict of her marriage, she sacrifices her identity to the trivialities of daily defeats. Her spirit becomes so hardened and contaminated that like Henry she develops a pronounced misanthropic contempt for those who lack financial security:

A tram-car shuddered up King's Cross Road, throwing sparks from its heels and generally glowing with electricity. It was crammed and jammed with humanity – exhausted pleasure-seekers, returning home northwards from theatre, music-hall, cinema and restaurant. Pathetic creatures; stupid, misguided, deluded, heedless, improvident – sheltered in no strong fortress, they! Violet thought of the magic gold.⁷¹

Nonetheless, she retains enough resilience both to insist on consulting Dr. Raste about her health when he visits the bookshop and to rebuff any suggestion from Henry that Elsie be dismissed (for stealing and eating the cheese from the improvised larder) because of her fear of living alone with him.⁷²

What is particularly interesting about *Riceyman Steps*, however, is that Bennett made clear to his nephew that the principal character in the book was neither Henry nor Violet, but their young servant, Elsie Sprickett. Symbolically, her cheap and coarse clothes are the natural signifiers of Riceyman Square which appears as a decrepit, foul and slatternly area, a place in decline where there is scarcely one house without a broken window pane. A strongly built young woman, Elsie is four years a widow, her husband having died of dysentery on active service in 1915. The house in which she rents a room in Riceyman Square is overcrowded; its urban underclass residents find little relief from the tensions and privations of daily life, except the narcotic of sleep once a week on Sunday mornings. It offers little protection to her from the threat of her fiancé's unpredictable violence and catalyses her move to the Earlforwards' shop.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 166.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 195 – 96.

Bennett demonstrates in this novel that even in the centre of the metropolis, many working-class lives are circumscribed by tight geographical and mental boundaries. In Elsie's case, these are accepted without rancour or even complaint.

Her simple ambition is to wait at table:

No egotism in those features! No instinct to fight for her rights and to get all she could out of the universe! No apprehension of injustice! No resentment against injustice! No glimmer of realization that she was the salt of the earth. She thought that she was in a nice, comfortable, quiet house, and appointed to live with kindly people of superior excellence.⁷³

Her gentle, quiet humility and emotional sensitivities can be seen in the way in which she ties a pink satin slipper to the Earlforwards' bed for their honeymoon and in her prodigality in providing their wedding cake and rice. Here Bennett presents her as a benevolent priestess exercising the munificence of a Rothschild. The cake, however, is a potent threat. It demonstrates that Henry and Violet are exploiting and battenning on Elsie's generosity, and it symbolically nourishes and sustains the tragic disconnects which will engulf and kill them:

They could afford to be young and to live perilously, madly, absurdly. They lost control of themselves, and gloried in so doing. The cake was a danger to existence. It had the consistency of marble, the richness of molasses, the mysteriousness of the enigma of the universe. It seemed unconquerable. It seemed more fatal than daggers or gelignite. But they attacked it. Fortunately, neither of them knew the inner meaning of indigestion.⁷⁴

Elsie, by contrast, is constantly hungry and, paradoxically, this is a transgressive symbol of her spiritual health. Unlike Henry, she craves food for the nourishment of life, eats both the boiled egg and the steak which he has refused to touch, steals cheese and potatoes from the improvised larder and even ravens on raw bacon. Physically and psychologically, she is sustained by both the food and her innate altruism, and they combine to provide her with intuitive powers of divination.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 87 – 88.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 113.

She understands that one or both of the Earlfowards is destined to die and, after they have fallen ill, is the first to appreciate that the shop will never reopen for the sale of books.

Despite Violet's frequent ingratitude and petty verbal cruelty, Elsie remains loyal to her because she has provided her with the secure sanctuary which she craves. It is poignantly ironic that she becomes mistress of the shop after Violet has been admitted to hospital and highly significant that, as carer and nurturer, she is left to water Violet's bulbs (a symbolic action denoting her capacity for protecting and preserving life). It is significant too that, in her anger at Henry's cruel indifference to Violet's suffering and fate in hospital, she should resume the cleaning of the shop which her mistress had formerly initiated and then abandoned.⁷⁵ The greatest irony is, of course, that her morally defensible appropriation of sixpence, taken from Henry's safe (which is replete with his gold and bank notes), should on its discovery be the immediate cause of his death.⁷⁶

As a contrast to Henry and Violet, Elsie's generosity of spirit is depicted by Bennett in the way she takes her fiancé, Joe, into her care after he has been released from prison and covertly protects him in the Earlfowards' shop. In effect, the generosity of her actions nourishes her spiritual health, whilst the lighting of the fire in her bedroom where Joe is taken, suffering from malaria, and the food which she gives him emblematically encode the warmth of life and sustenance which both Henry and Violet have denied themselves.

It is through Elsie that Bennett is able to offer a final poignant reflection on the transience of human life. Earlfoward is an anachronistic obsessive who cannot adapt to the commercial and social realities of the post-war world, and his wealth is

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

inherited by the Reverend Augustus Earlfoward. A relative and missionary in the West Indies, he returns to claim his legacy and conspicuously conducts himself without Christian charity. All traces of Henry and Violet are removed after he sells the shop and its contents to Belrose, the entrepreneurial and successful cheesemonger, who is seeking to expand his business. In a melancholy but pregnant coda, the only remains of the two of them are in Elsie's heart. She blames Henry for Violet's death and herself for his. In her humility, resignation and determination to face adversity without rancour or complaint she is a symbol of her class, with its stoical acceptance of the exploitation and discrimination to which it is subjected, and in her endurance of Joe's violent outbursts she too is, vicariously, a victim of the war.

Joe's history and his relationship with Elsie are key interventions in the novel. When he emerges from Pentonville Prison he is not just a war victim but a stateless casualty, since he has been forced to erase his past by selling his identification papers. Bennett's descant defines him (like Geoffrey Raingo) as a state servant who has been exploited, traumatised and then jettisoned by the Government after the war. The skill with which Bennett probes his subconscious and its capacity for speciously manipulating rational order is emphasised by Robert Squillace's deft observations:

The analyst of war neuroses [Rivers] seems to have provided the novelist who was searching for a new manner, a manner to supersede Balzac, with a means for suggesting the self-protective interests that could lurk in the most apparently rational manifestations of masculine order.⁷⁷

Joe's inarticulate rage against the General and then the police constable whom he encounters unexpectedly and confronts in Piccadilly are his only means of articulation and result in his criminalisation:

⁷⁷ Squillace, *Modernism, Modernity and Arnold Bennett*, p. 143.

‘We used to call him the Slaughterer. That was how we called him. We never called him nothin’ else. And there he was with his two rows o’ ribbons and his flash women, perhaps they weren’t flash, and I didn’t like the look of his face – hard, ye know. Cruel. We knowed him, we did. And then I thought of the two minutes’ silence, and hats off and stand at ’tention, and the Cenotaph, and it made me laugh. I laughed at him through the glass. And he didn’t like it, he didn’t.’⁷⁸

His scornful laughter is that of a victim of traumatic stress who has suppressed the horrors of war and who loses emotional and psychological equilibrium when reminded, without warning, of his brutalising experiences. It is not without irony that the references to shell-shock by Bennett, which had been evolving in his fiction since *The Pretty Lady*, anticipate the parallels between his work and Virginia Woolf’s – particularly Septimus Smith’s experience in *Mrs. Dalloway* when he encounters the official car carrying important but unknown personages in central London.⁷⁹ Distorted and fractured perspectives in the narratives of both novels are exploited in order to articulate their characters’ latent anger, bewildered sense of injustice and suppressed trauma. Thus, it is in his presentation of Joe that Rivers’ influence on Bennett’s work can be most clearly seen, particularly his analysis of sublimated trauma, a subject in which Rivers specialised, as Charles S. Myers, the psychologist who first coined the term ‘shell-shock’, recorded:

He defined *repression* as the self-active, “witting” expulsion of experience from consciousness, and *suppression* as the “unwitting” process by which experience becomes unconscious. Thus suppression may occur without repression.⁸⁰

Mapped against these criteria, it becomes clear that Joe’s apparently irrational and violent outbursts are the consequences of the self-protective canopy under which he shelters from the oppression of his traumatising experiences.

⁷⁸ *Riceyman Steps*, p. 302.

⁷⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 12 – 14.

⁸⁰ Charles S. Myers, ‘The Influence of the late W. H. R. Rivers’, in W. H. R. Rivers, *Psychology and Politics*, (London: Transaction Publishers, 2011), p. xxxvi.

As a new manner novel, *Riceyman Steps* is also a unique achievement because of Bennett's fluid integration of contrasting perspectives. In many respects, Henry's bookshop is a psychological space at odds with the realist construct of the district and, as a microcosm of post-war England, it is a national representation too. Redolent of the Baineses' shop in *The Old Wives' Tale*, it lacks architectural precision and stability, and is given and develops its own personality and idiosyncrasies, ensnaring Violet, for example, when she moves in after her marriage.⁸¹

The extent of the Earlforwards' decline is mediated not just by Elsie's experiences, but by also by Dr. Raste who visits both at Elsie's request.⁸² Equally, the most cogent analysis of Earlforward's grand ruling passion, his miserly obsession, is enunciated by Violet who denounces him for his selfishness and inscrutability:

'My first husband wasn't very polite, and I've known the time when he's laid his hand on me, knocked me about – yes, and more than once. I was young then. Disgusting, *you'd* call it. And I've never told a soul before; not likely. But what I say is I'd sooner be knocked about a bit and know what my man's really thinking about than live with a locked-up, cast iron safe like you! Yes, a hundred times sooner. There's worse things than a blow, and every woman knows it.'⁸³

The shock of her eventual denunciation of him as a miser is not that she feels obliged to deliver it, but that it has taken so long for her to articulate it. This delay and her inability to control his ruling passion is the direct cause of the fibroid growth which kills her. Through these shifting viewpoints, Bennett exploits an important contrast between Henry's decrepit shop and the flourishing one next door which is owned by the Belroses. They take over Violet's business first, and Henry's after his death, and transform them both. It is ironic that their human sympathy and generosity towards

⁸¹ *Riceyman Steps*, p. 103.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 174 and p. 179.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

Elsie and Henry are not incongruous with their benevolent capitalist instincts for commercial success.

In another vignette, the cruel whipping of the dog by a young woman in the neighbouring backyard to the bookshop (witnessed by Elsie at night) is not just emblematic of a world of gratuitous cruelty, but a trope for the hypocritical plurality which sustains and authenticates the disjuncted rules of social life in Clerkenwell. (The young woman appears as the personification of amiable warmth in her engaging and neighbourly concern for Earlforward's welfare when Elsie meets her the next day.)⁸⁴

At times too, Bennett seems determined to undermine the narrator's credibility. Towards the end of the novel, as Neil Cartlidge perceptively observes, Henry sees Elsie as a woman who, with her dark hair and eyes and curve of her lips is growing prettier every day, yet she is also described by the narrator as a plain, fat and unattractive woman.⁸⁵ Cartlidge's conclusions are impeccable and seminal: firstly that the consequence of this aporetic uncertainty is to shift the responsibility for interpreting and decoding events onto the reader and away from an apparently unreliable narrator and secondly that such evasive inconsistencies and passages of associative discourse are not indications of the narrator's incompetence, but rather deliberately structured inversions which serve to challenge rather than disorientate the reader.⁸⁶ What Bennett is offering therefore is a radical challenge to the apparent trustworthiness of a realist text through constantly shifting viewpoints and subjective reinventions of reality.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 262 – 63 and p. 283.

⁸⁵ Neil Cartlidge, "The Only Really Objective Novel Ever Written"? Arnold Bennett's *Riceyman Steps*, in *Papers on Language & Literature* (Edwardsville), 38:2 (Spring 2002), p. 120.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 118 – 20.

In an unforeseen outcome, his experimental book, which subversively challenged paradigms of objectivity, did not compromise either his commercial or artistic interests. He was surprised, relieved and re-energised by the warm reception of his new manner novel, as he made clear to André Gide on 25 February 1924:

I was undoubtedly, with H.G. Wells, falling under the whips of les jeunes. In fact every book was the signal for a general attack (Wells suffered more than me). Also my bourgeois public was considerably disgusted by those very innocent works *The Pretty Lady* and *Lilian*. So that I was being counted as a back number. *Riceman Steps* has altered all that, and I am suddenly the darling of the public.⁸⁷

Psychology and Politics: Documentary Realism

In the final novels of his career Bennett's new manner technique was diluted, but never abandoned. In *Lord Raingo* (1926), part documentary, part political history, Sam Raingo's relationship with Delphine Leeder is a mirror image of Gilbert Hoape's with Christine Dubois. Like Hoape, Raingo is a member of the conservative new rich; he idealises his mistress and rejects any conception of her as an odalisque. His conscience about their relationship is untroubled (even though he is married and she is much younger than he), and he rationalises it by complacently persuading himself that a liaison was unexceptional for a man of his intellect and background. He exploits her vulnerability and dependence (as Hoape had done with Christine) by installing her in an office flat which he maintains in Orange Street, in central London. Like Hoape, he too suffers pangs of jealousy and affronted dignity – in his case on the discovery of Delphine at the Savoy Hotel with her former fiancé Harry Point, a young officer on leave. In this context, his feelings for Delphine are compounded contradictions of admiration, passion, contempt, jealousy and unshakeable assurance that her affections are not confined to him:

⁸⁷ *Letters III*, 25 February 1924, p. 213.

Why was she crying when he first saw her? Could a woman love two men at once? (For he was sure that she was fond of himself.) Could he love and respect her and yet believe her capable of duplicity. Strange! He could!⁸⁸

An ex-politician and middle-aged millionaire confronting the possibility of a premature death owing to a weak heart, his invitation to Downing Street to discuss his political preferment is a source of elation to him and a counterpoint to the tedium of life in Moze Hall, his opulent country residence. Although a successful businessman, as a politician he was a failure. In his eight years as a Member of Parliament, he never received promotion to a Ministerial post, mainly because he was a poor public speaker. Bored, disillusioned, dissatisfied and unfulfilled with the financial profits which he has accrued before the War, he is intoxicated by the prospect of political power, particularly since the inchoate Ministry of Records provides him with a covert opportunity to influence and expand British international propaganda. His ambitions contain little altruism and his blinkered vision cannot extend beyond his plan for an expansionist centralisation of power:

He loved his work; he had developed a passion for it. He smacked his lips over conferences, press-audiences, press-lunches, minutes, finance, cables, broadcasting, films, intimate banquets for foreign nobs. And all these were nothing in his mind compared with his large comprehensive scheme for unifying every kind of propaganda under one roof and his own headship.⁸⁹

As a metaphor for his political and personal failures, the scene of his greatest triumph, the effusive reception which he receives following his speech in the House of Lords at the Press banquet hosted by the Prime Minister, is complemented by his disenchanted fears of Delphine's infidelity when he returns to Orange Street to find no sign of her.⁹⁰ His experiences in the Ministry ultimately lead to his embitterment and disillusion:

⁸⁸ Arnold Bennett, *Lord Raingo* (London: Cassell, 1926), p. 201.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

‘I had a silly, footling idea that a world-war would change human nature. For all human nature cares a world-war is just like company-promoting. And my human nature’s not better than theirs.’⁹¹

The tragedy for Raingo is a multiple one. The strains of public speaking in the House of Lords and of confronting his opponents there expose the fragility of his weak constitution and, ultimately, precipitate his death. He realises as his illness enfeebles him, that he is dispensable, that his political triumph was ephemeral and that his illness has been accelerated by his vanity. Most seriously he learns of Delphine’s suicide.⁹² By the time of his protracted death, which in many ways is a conflation of Earlforward’s and Darius Clayhanger’s, he has been reduced to an emaciated, unshaven and frightened man. At his death, the secrets and confusions of his repressed guilt surface in his final cry, not to Delphine Leeder his lover, but to his unmourned and unloved dead wife, Adela.⁹³

Like Joe in *Riceyman Steps*, Raingo’s son, Geoffrey, suffers from the trauma both of his experiences at the Front and as a prisoner of war. Physically, he is emaciated when he arrives unexpectedly at his mother’s funeral; psychologically he is severely damaged. Again, Bennett draws on his connection with Rivers to demonstrate that Geoffrey’s facial tic and claustrophobic inability to sleep indoors at Moze Hall are clear manifestations of his post-traumatic stress. However, whereas Joe’s experiences at the Front were not particularised, Geoffrey’s are more substantiated:

‘I’ve lived in a German military prison for Germans. I know what it is. And I can’t say I cared much for it. No doubt it was all right, but the fact is, I haven’t got a natural taste for prisons or for trenches either. Not as a permanent residence. The food might have been better; also the company.’⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 253.

⁹² Ibid., p. 328.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 410.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 186.

Whilst Joe can only respond to his mental tortures through sporadic outbursts of violence, Geoffrey is able to articulate his bitterness and disdain for the war and for those who prolong it through mismanagement and incompetence. In particular, he rejects politics as an odious and tawdry deception, repudiates Andy Clyth, the Prime Minister, as a charlatan and disdains his father's work in the Ministry of Records:

‘And look at the new lot. Good God! What a crew of circus-performers, liars, whoremongers and millionaires! I saw some of the land defences here as I walked from Harwich. It's enough to make you laugh.’⁹⁵

His comments reveal his determination to articulate a critical voice against the essentially corrupt and duplicitous world of power which his father enjoys, and to reject the tawdry distortions and suppressions of Government propaganda. It is highly significant that Geoffrey decides to refurbish Moze Hall only after he has made his commitment to his future wife (Delphine's half-sister, Gwen) to seek restorative, psychiatric therapy.

There are several other links between *Lord Raingo* and his new manner novels. When Sam falls ill in part II and begins to decline physically, Nurse Kewley attends to him with professional dedication. She is a less abrasive figure than Nurse Smaith in *The Pretty Lady*, but both women accept without demur the imperative for the disinterested self-sacrifice and dedication which the ideals of their profession demand. Their selflessness and dedication are positioned in stark contrast to the innate self-interest of the eminent politicians and employers who control their fates.

In addition, the Zeppelin attacks in chapter LXXIX are redolent of the bloody vignettes presented in *The Pretty Lady* and serve as a reminder of Queenie Paulle's death on the roof of Lechford House.⁹⁶ Like Queenie, Delphine Leeder is consumed with a death wish. Bennett draws a fine contrast between the two, however. Where

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 367.

Queenie is self-indulgent, wilful and shallow, Delphine, like Christine Dubois, is troubled by her conscience. Unable to reconcile her position as Sam's mistress with the death of Harry Point, her suicide in Brighton is an affirmative action – part expiation for the young man's death on active service and part rejection of an impossible future with Sam Raingo which, as she realises, would be blighted by her psychological fragility and crippling social self-consciousness.

Bennett also returns to the symbolic significance of pomp and high ceremony in this novel. As Lord Roberts' funeral in *The Pretty Lady* was a signifier of the death of an era and a challenge to its anachronistic values, so Raingo's investiture as a Member of the House of Lords is pregnant with allusive disparagement:

The day came when Samuel Raingo, the Eccles boy and millionaire, preceded by two of the very highest officials in the historic hierarchy of Parliamentary ceremonialism, walked slowly in the red-benched chamber towards a Lord Chancellor seated on an unrecognizable woolsack. Sam was flanked by two barons – not barons descended from the defiers of King John at Runnymede, but common barons of no lineal prestige, mere acquaintances who not much earlier had been as plebeian as Sam himself and whose elevation had been due to causes perhaps far less avowable than Sam's. All were gorgeously and absurdly clad. Sam felt at once an ass, a cynic and a conqueror.⁹⁷

At a period when military and civilian sacrifices pervade all aspects of the country's social and political life, Bennett's ambulation through outmoded pageantry is tinged with no gentle affection for Savoyard grandiosity, but with bitter contempt for its irrelevance and symbolic blindness to the casualties and sacrifices of civilian and military life.

Bennett also returns in *Lord Raingo* to the symbolic force of the amulet. In *The Pretty Lady*, Christine was emotionally sustained and comforted by the broken watch which Edgar presents to her as an apotropaic charm. Raingo receives a Virgin and child icon from the Prime Minister's mother, Eileen Clyth. Its symbolic value is

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 167.

twofold: as a memento from the mother of his childhood friend, it is a token of continuing affection and integrity and a prophylactic in a venal and duplicitous political world of envy and ambition (it is she who has exercised her influence over her son in order to ensure that Raingo is offered an appointment as a Minister), and it also serves as a forewarning of Sam's imminent death when it slips from his sick bed in chapter LXXXII.⁹⁸

Finally, there are echoes in *Lord Raingo* of Bennett's critiques of chauvinistic prejudice in *The Pretty Lady*. Although women were confidently asserting themselves not just in the armaments factories on the Clyde, but in the City too, they are still exploited and patronised.⁹⁹ Others, such as Mrs. Blacklow, provide an alternative discourse on war victimhood. She remains desperate for employment because, after her husband has been taken prisoner in 1916, she becomes pregnant by her lodger. The desperate straits in which she finds herself both mirror and contrast with Raingo's experiences with Delphine; he was never able to reciprocate her affections, keeping her concealed because he was ashamed of her and feared the potential damage which she could inflict on his career and reputation. Mrs. Blacklow's reward for her indiscretion is a life of hardship, sacrifice and uncertainty.

Even Raingo's wife, Adela, appears as little more than a cipher when compared to his lover, Delphine. He has little affection for her and resents her petty vanity and lack of social aplomb and domestic skills. In cold aloofness he sees her more as a liability than an asset to his political and social ambitions.¹⁰⁰ The gulf that separates them can be seen in her indifference to his political career which erupts into open mockery of his pomposity when he dresses in his ermine robes in the privacy of their London service flat. Her death in a car accident animates his

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 381.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 172.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 92.

lugubrious realisation that he has never enjoyed marriage to her since Geoffrey's birth.

Delphine Leeder by contrast is quick and astute. A potential political asset for Raingo, she perceives even before he does that he has never been forgiven for humiliating his colleagues by refusing a salary when appointed to the Ministry of Records. Intuitively, she also realises that conspiratorial political cliques are inevitable and unappeasable and that, since he had not been formally initiated into Government by his Ministerial colleagues, they would prefer to assist his enemies and political rivals before him. A former actress and clerk, Delphine lacks social status, but her alertness and perception make her the perfect wife for a politician, and Raingo cultivates and cannot suppress thoughts of her as mistress of Moze Hall.¹⁰¹ The fatal seeds of her death, as Raingo observes during his final illness, were to be found in the mysticism of her guilt. Even though this is not as complex as Christine Dubois' in *The Pretty Lady*, she too, like Joe and Geoffrey Raingo, is in her own way a victim of war neurosis.¹⁰²

Viewed as a political documentary, *Lord Raingo* excels with its excoriating critique of Government and the corridors of power which it controls, and its achievements were recognised by C. E. M. Joad in his review in October 1926:

That you can always propagate a propaganda if you have the proper geese is one of the fundamental axioms of those who rule [...]. Propaganda touched its greatest heights and produced its maximum effect in this country during the last two years of the great war, and Arnold Bennett's new book is a brilliantly vivid and unforgettable account of the way in which it was done. It is first and foremost a political novel on the grand scale.¹⁰³

Building on Trollopian foundations, Bennett constructs a political world of intrigue, jealousy and nepotism. Even though they had been childhood friends and enemies in

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 238.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 403.

¹⁰³ C. E. M. Joad, *Daily Herald*, 13 October 1926, quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 467.

Eccles, the Prime Minister, Andy Clyth, has conceived an enduring animus against Raingo. Unlike Sam, Clyth enjoys no independent income and is humiliated by the need to earn his living as a politician. It is a relationship in which Sam's pride, at what he regards as his superiority over Clyth, leads him into a *folie de grandeur* when he accepts his Ministerial post and becomes a victim of the Prime Minister's machinations.¹⁰⁴

Clyth is the great temporiser and understands the compromises, duplicities and prevarications inherent in all political power. In his opinion, it is better to equivocate than to insist rigidly on the centralising efficiencies to which Raingo is committed. As Prime Minister, he is adroit, Machiavellian and able to deploy a talent for chicane which is concealed by his apparently trustful and candid manner; his appointment of Raingo is motivated more than anything by the need to strengthen his own position through divisive patronage. That he is totally driven by self-interest and lacks scruples, integrity and decency is encapsulated in his cynical observation that: 'There are no public worries. There are only private worries.'¹⁰⁵ Even his visit to the dying Raingo is catalysed not by compassion, but simply by his opportunistic impulse to batten on the prestige of a popular but enfeebled minister.

Collective group think fascinated Rivers as a social psychologist and its competitive fragmentations fascinated Bennett, too. In this novel, personal resentments and jealousies take precedence over the national interest (Raingo, for example, is envied for his wealth and for his refusal to accept a salary which he does not require), whilst the most persistently disruptive point of contention is the battle for control of the Secret Service budget. By allocating control of this to Raingo's new Ministry of Records, Clyth deliberately antagonises and undermines the War

¹⁰⁴ *Lord Raingo*, pp. 213 – 14.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

Office and Admiralty. Through a process of reverse engineering, Bennett repudiates gestalt constructs and endorses Rivers' conviction that, where personal insecurities, petty rivalries, selfish ambitions and non-collegiate impulses intervene, the sum product of government is less than the individual abilities of each of its Ministers.¹⁰⁶ In particular, he excoriates the incompetence of the war machine, especially in the way in which the mushroom ministries, steeped in a conservative Civil Service tradition, bicker and contend with other Government departments. The struggle for status and prestige manifests itself as a defence mechanism in the War Office's calculated pettiness. Its instruction to its Military Intelligence Officers not to enter the Ministry's building is intended both as a slight and a deliberate affirmation of superior status and power.¹⁰⁷ All the Ministers in the War Cabinet are motivated by personal and petty spite and hate each other as much as their German enemies. Ironically, even the Ministry of Records is a chimaera; its bogus name conceals its function, which is to boost Great Britain's reputation abroad.

The febrile animosities and personal jealousies which Bennett had captured in his political documentary reappeared in the reactions to the novel's publication. Lord Birkenhead led the critical assault. Motivated in all probability by a mistaken assumption that Bennett had based Raingo's life on him, he accused him of recklessness for introducing public characters into his books.¹⁰⁸ Bennett was not slow to defend himself and in reply disingenuously, and somewhat patronisingly, denied that there was any substance to the allegation:

The character of my Lord Raingo was modelled on no statesman, and is the result of no attempt at portraiture. I have said so in private ten thousand times, but it is not my custom to deny misstatements about my books in public. If it was, I should have to give my life to the business. As regards the deceased statesman whom doubtless Lord Birkenhead has in mind, I may say

¹⁰⁶ Rivers, *Psychology and Politics*, pp. 20 – 22.

¹⁰⁷ *Lord Raingo*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁸ *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 475 – 83.

that I never had the slightest acquaintance with him. It is apparent from his concluding remarks that the author of *Famous Trials* was for some undisclosed reason getting a bit cross. His emotion led him to the use of certain vituperative clichés. The vituperation one can excuse and enjoy; but the clichés will afflict the lettered.¹⁰⁹

The writing and publication of *Lord Raingo* also left Bennett vulnerable to the accusation of hypocrisy, as Peter Buitenhuis has demonstrated, the charge against him being that he embraced power with alacrity in 1918 and only criticised its corrupt temptations after he and Beaverbrook had been summarily dismissed by Lloyd George from the defunct Ministry of Information in November 1918.¹¹⁰ Such criticism, however, fails to acknowledge his achievement in *Lord Raingo* which, like *Riceyman Steps*, was meticulously researched. The care with which he completed it, and the importance which he attached to it, can be seen in his meetings with his physician, Dr. Griffen, who vetted the book for him (particularly the details relating to the long illness and death of Sam Raingo) and in the support which he sought and received from Lord Beaverbrook.¹¹¹ As James Hepburn has judiciously demonstrated, it was a study not just of political power, but of human psychology, too. Raingo's death is a prolonged suicide since he is consumed not by ill health, but by disillusionment, embitterment, self-loathing and jealousy; no adventitious victim of pneumonia and pleurisy, he actually invites his own demise through deliberate overwork and strain when he realises that his relationship with Delphine cannot flourish.¹¹² It is also clear that when the dispersed psychological shards of his new manner novels are assembled and conjoined with its political

¹⁰⁹ *Letters III*, 23 November 1926, pp. 275 – 76. Bennett was being economical with the *actualité* in this letter. As Tillier has demonstrated in *Studies in the sources of Arnold Bennett's novels*, pp. 158 – 63, Raingo's career was based on Lord Rhondda's; a former Liberal MP, he was Minister of Food from 1917 to 1918.

¹¹⁰ Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words*, p. 178.

¹¹¹ *Journals III*, 8 May 1926, p. 133 and 11 May 1925, pp. 88 – 89.

¹¹² James G. Hepburn, 'Manuscript notes for *Lord Raingo*', in *English Literature in Transition (1880 – 1920)*, 5.1 (1962), p. 3.

inflections, *Lord Raingo* is not a fatigued by-product from a creatively exhausted and outdated writer, but rather an acidulously perceptive exposition of the traffic which negotiated the London corridors of power during the war, of the moral constructs which regulated social behaviour, and of the psychological frailties and vagaries by which individual lives were shaped and directed in an era of political conflict and international bloodshed.

Grand Hotel redux

Imperial Palace was begun on 25 September 1929 (a month before the Wall Street crash) and was published just five months before Bennett died in March 1931. His prefatory note to indicate that it contained eighty-five speaking characters was a brief but apposite acknowledgement of the scale and breadth of his last major novel. It has been criticised unfairly for its length and for its lapses into tedium, but it represents another development of Bennett's interest in the interactions and psychodynamics of individual and community life. In *Imperial Palace* Bennett indulges those preoccupations with the management of large metropolitan temples of hospitality and commerce, and with the personalities who frequented or worked in them, which he had already explored in his melodramatic potboilers, *The Grand Babylon Hotel* and *Hugo*. As the epigraph to this chapter implies, it was as if he were returning to his professional roots in order to inaugurate a new phase of his career, one which, as he recorded in his 1929 Journal, would allow him to explore, on the cusp of international economic austerity, a speciously perfect symbol of modernity:

The big hotel de luxe is a very serious organisation; it is in my opinion a unique subject for a serious novel; it is stuffed with human nature of extremely various kinds. The subject is characteristic of the age; it is as modern as the morning's milk.¹¹³

¹¹³ Arnold Bennett, *Journal 1929* (London: Cassell, 1930), 25 September 1929, p. 131.

Bennett's commitment to this novel can be seen in his preliminary work which involved assiduous research. In February 1924, he was given a comprehensive tour of the Savoy hotel in London, and he was still engaged in preparatory research three years later.¹¹⁴ Bennett was very coy about the debt which he owed to the Savoy for providing him with much of the mundane source material for *Imperial Palace* and when Hugh Walpole, a close friend, wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* that he had based his novel on the hotel, he reproached him with an animated letter of complaint:

It was, I think, an error of discretion on your part to say in the *Herald Tribune* that my novel is about the Savoy [...]. I shall therefore be glad if you will recall your dread statement in your next article. It is quite true that I have obtained a very large part of my material from the Savoy people, who were all told that I wanted the stuff for a novel. But the novel is not about the Savoy. It is about a larger and different hotel, situate in Birdcage Walk, a hotel with a history of its own: The Imperial Palace.¹¹⁵

The reason why he was so reluctant to acknowledge his debt to the Savoy was his anxiety to shield himself against any accusations of commercialism. In simple terms, in his role as a conscientious writer and elder statesman of literature, he feared that if rumours of his liaison with the Savoy spread, they would undermine his professional reputation and artistic integrity and lead to accusations that he was a co-conspirator with the hotel's directors in a tawdry publicity contract.¹¹⁶

By operating as functional mass observation of an élite luxury hotel in London, *Imperial Palace* foregrounds the interests in social investigation which became prevalent in the 1930s in the confluences of anthropological and psychological research. This allows Bennett to demonstrate his forte for capturing through shifting topographies, not just the ambitions, petty rivalries, enmities and

¹¹⁴ *Journals III*, 14 March 1927, p. 196.

¹¹⁵ *Letters III*, 29 August, 1930, p. 338.

¹¹⁶ Tillier, *Studies in the sources of Arnold Bennett's novels*, p. 168.

personality clashes of the *Imperial's* employees, but also the interconnecting responsibilities and practical logistics on which the hotel depends and by which it functions. Some of these, such as the mundane, but essential task of purchasing meat from Smithfield Market are captured through condensed reportage:

The illimitable interior had four chief colours: bright blue of the painted constructional ironwork, all columns and arches; red-pink-ivories of meat; white of the salesmen's long coats; and yellow of electricity. Hundreds of bays, which might or might not be called shops, lined with thousands of great steel hooks from each end of which hung a carcass, salesmen standing at the front of every bay, and far at the back of every bay a sort of shanty-office in which lurked, crouching and peering forth, clerks, pen in hand, like devilish accountants of some glittering, chill inferno.¹¹⁷

He balances, too, functional descriptions of the engineering technology and the operational matrices without which the hotel could not function with a back narrative of board meetings and the Machiavellian subterfuge that underpin the manoeuvres to merge the Imperial Palace with another consortium of hotels. As backdrop to all of this, he also interrogates the personal and professional relationships of the people who work in the hotel and who are condemned by their employment to an indentured surrender of personal identity. The interests of the hotel always supersede those of the thirteen hundred employees who are required to provide exemplary corporate and personal service, whilst tolerating without demur provocative, capricious and even dishonest behaviour from the paying guests.¹¹⁸ Not surprisingly, in view of these cloistered repressions, the hotel frequently morphs, as an arena of conflict and discord where fissile jealousies simmer and erupt, into a colophon for the dehumanisation of modern employment practice.

Bennett also shows in *Imperial Palace* how the modern luxury hotel is a marginalised and isolated community, and one which when staked out by

¹¹⁷ Arnold Bennett, *Imperial Palace* (London: Cassell, 1930), p. 21.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

sociological and economic boundaries is completely separated from the indigenous metropolis. Violet Fowler, the laundry manager who is eventually promoted to head housekeeper, is acutely aware, for example, that more than physical distance separates her parents' house in Battersea from the Imperial Palace in Birdcage Walk, and when the wealthy flapper, Gracie Savott, persuades Evelyn Orham to forsake the hotel, in order to accompany her to the Prince of Wales's Feathers public house, she basks in her conviction that she has gained admission for both of them to an authentic, unrefined metropolitan culture.¹¹⁹

In addition, the powerful facades of elegance, opulence, power and social rectitude behind which the hotel shelters all conceal its conspiracy to accommodate seedy, venal and sensual human impulses. The *Imperial Palace* is no stranger to the activities and clients of the *demi-monde*, and is even forced to retain a private detective in order to protect itself from dishonest and mendacious patrons. In addition, the opulent imperatives of corporate identity and service efficiency are mediated by glamorous sensuality and prurience. For example, the exotic cabaret dancer, Volivia, exerts an erotic and siren appeal in a performance which evokes the attractions of the Guinea Fowl club in *The Pretty Lady*:

In the distance guests were standing up to watch. In two days the tale of Volivia's exhibition of herself had spread like a conflagration through what is called the town – without the help of the press. When she opened Volivia had been nobody. Now, because she had so unmistakably succeeded at the Palace, she could get contracts throughout the entire western world of luxury. Her muscles knew it as they contracted and expanded, making ripples on her olive skin.¹²⁰

It is an arena too for cultural collision and conflict. The arrival of the Rajah and his retinue in chapter sixty-six subverts and confronts, through ethnographic alienation, the prejudices and phobias of the more conservative and economically

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 203 – 05 and p. 72.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 90.

powerful American guests who depart in reproachful high dudgeon for a neighbouring hotel.¹²¹ The cultural prejudices which the nouveau riche American plutocrats endorse are dexterously undermined by Bennett's references to the rich historical culture to which the Rajah belongs and by his understated insinuation that his request for a *lit de repos* was not motivated by salacious or sensual stirrings, but rather by an eagerness to adopt what he perceived as the innovative fashion of modish Western culture.¹²²

That *Imperial Palace* was clearly written for highly literate and culturally engaged readers can be seen in Bennett's demands on, and assumptions about, them.. For example, by hinting at the feline, seductive appeal of Mrs. O'Riordan, the ageing widow and head housekeeper, and by comparing her to Olympia and Madame Récamier, Bennett alludes to the sensuality of her past and hints at the sublimated passions of her relationship with her future husband, Colonel Sir Brian Milligan, Bart.¹²³

¹²¹ Ibid., pp. 584 – 88.

¹²² Ibid., p. 591.

¹²³ Ibid: pp. 50 – 51, p. 183 and p. 189. In this section of the chapter, Bennett's ability to re-interpret visual imagery can be seen in his allusions to the black cat which is scarcely distinguishable in Manet's portrait of Olympia. These allow him to emphasise the symmetries between graceful, feline elegance and the voluptuous allure of the sixty-two year old Mrs. O'Riordan.



Olympia – Édouard Manet

(Medium: Oil on canvas Date: 1863 Current location: Musée d'Orsay)



Portrait de Madame Récamier – Jacques-Louis David

(Medium: Oil on canvas Date: 1800 Current location: Louvre Museum)

In addition in chapter fifty-six, when Evelyn Orcham, the Director of the Imperial Palace, compares Gracie Savott's book with the work of Madame Bashkirtseff, Bennett provides unambiguous proof of his erudition, and of his expectations of those who wish to share it.¹²⁴ It is to a readership entirely comfortable with, or at least undaunted by these intimations, that Bennett embarks in this novel on a very modern interpretation of key Darwinian imperatives – the struggle for dominance, the survival of the strongest, the need for adaptation – all of which are imbricated in a psychological discourse which is championed by the presentation of Sir Henry Savott as a driving force of muscular capitalism.¹²⁵ As a financier and speculative investor, he is convinced that rationalisation and mergers are instruments of progress and tools for increasing efficiencies.¹²⁶ In a novel written and published just after the seismic Wall Street crash, Bennett demonstrates how stock markets are rigged and profits engineered. By unloading his shares and buying them back when the price has fallen, Savott undermines the financial and commercial stability of the North Atlantic shipping line, a major passenger transport company. In suborning the Press to attack the safety and maintenance record of this fleet, Savott and his fellow speculators directly challenge the stability and profitability of the London hospitality industry in general and of the Imperial Palace in particular, since sixty percent of its guests are from the United States.¹²⁷ The merger of the Imperial Palace with eight other luxury hotels – some in France, Spain and Italy – is thus an outcome of market speculation, share volatility and press manipulation. What is also interesting in this vignette of the Jazz Age in its death throes is the rapacity of the capitalist financiers. Savott turns his attention to

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 266 – 67.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

investing in the nascent film industry even before the new Orcham International Hotels Company has been established.¹²⁸ Another partner and merger speculator, the American cigarette manufacturer and multi-millionaire John H. Harbour, proudly boasts that he has never set his heart on something and failed to acquire it. The obsessions and commercial ruthlessness of aggressive capitalism can be seen in his determination to increase the sales of cigarettes in Europe to ten millions per day.¹²⁹

Like *Riceyman Steps*, *Imperial Palace* is dominated by three central characters – Evelyn Orcham, Gracie Savott, and Violet Powler – and the two novels are also similar in that Evelyn’s obsession with his career is a more restrained variant of Earlforward’s pathological obsession with his wealth. A middle-aged widower and ex-Army Service Corps officer, Evelyn has enjoyed over twenty years’ success as the Managing Director of the Imperial Palace Hotel. A respected autocrat who is settled in his ways, he is nevertheless perfectly prepared to countenance innovation. He is the taciturn and aloof embodiment of professional perfection. Whilst he may be dictatorial by temperament, however, he is also troubled by a sense of social injustice as he makes clear to Sir Henry Savott:

‘I may as well tell you that my sentiments about the plight of the under-dog in this evolution of yours are rather strong. In a place like this you get some very melodramatic contrasts, and they make you think. And when I think for instance of you in your suite, or me here, and then of some of the fellows and girls down in the basements, I get a sort of a notion that there must be something wrong somewhere. And your mergers aren’t likely to do such a devil of a lot to put it right. The reverse.’¹³⁰

As Director of the Imperial Palace Hotel, Evelyn is a driven and obsessive autocrat.¹³¹ Although his admiration for the resplendence of the hotel’s phallic and floodlit main tower, which can be seen even from Piccadilly, could be read as his

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 558.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 667.

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 166 – 67.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 149.

symbolic endorsement of virile capitalist strength, Evelyn clings to power not out of personal vanity or an urge to exploit, but as a means of providing his guests with impeccable service. Whilst he is occasionally given to doubts about the moral justifiability of the luxury hotel and anxieties about the stasis of his career, his principles and values are clearly articulated.¹³² He has little time, for example, for Gracie Savott's socialite and hedonistic friends and companions, dismissing them as a crew of wastrels.¹³³ Initially unimpressed by Gracie's volatility and determination to exploit him, and uncertain about whether to expose himself to the challenges of an emotional relationship with a woman, Evelyn becomes obsessed with her. By the time of his seduction by her in Paris, he has come to view her as an incandescent force in his life.¹³⁴ Part of Bennett's achievement in this novel is to chart his psychological and emotional discoveries, and it is only after he has proposed to Gracie and been rejected that he can finally acknowledge his latent affections for Violet Powler.¹³⁵ Only at this point is he able to accept that marriage to Gracie could never have succeeded because, unlike Violet and like Queenie Paulle, she was temperamentally unable to commit her life and energies to the self-sacrifice which sustained career work involves. Even at the end of the novel, however, Evelyn remains uncertain whether Violet is simply a means to an end as a helpmeet for supporting his ambition to perfect his chain of luxury hotels.¹³⁶

The dominant character in this book is not Evelyn Orcham, however, but Gracie Savott. The self-indulgent and sexually experienced daughter of a commercially astute financier, and a combination of Queenie Paulle and Myrtle

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 460 – 61.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 609.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 670.

Emmarce, she remains an unresolved enigma throughout the novel.¹³⁷ A fiercely independent ex-racing driver, she is bored and in search of fulfilling challenges to enrich her emotionally desiccated life. Her close social circle – the aesthete Leo Cheddar and the socialite gossip columnist, Nancy Penkethman – is a signifier for her aimlessness. Whilst she is compulsively egotistical, she is also emotionally intelligent and capable of altruistic generosity and empathy, especially in defence of, and support for, her pregnant and unmarried maid, Tessa Tye, as she makes clear to Evelyn in her *Imperial Palace* suite:

‘However, she isn’t married, as it happens. That’s why I made up my mind to look after her. It may interest you to know – I haven’t told anyone else – to know that when we got here that first morning she tried to commit suicide. Opening a vein with a pair of scissors. Yes, that was how she felt then.’¹³⁸

Whilst she may be headstrong and impulsive, like Christine Dubois she also possesses a spiritual earnestness; she is fascinated by Shakespeare, and her love of the Bible is rooted especially in her appreciation of the Psalms. The mystical injunction in Psalm forty-two: ‘Be still and know that I am God’, develops as her antiphonal shield against a chaotic and secular modern world.¹³⁹ With a fascination for metaphysics and religion, she gives a plausible impression that she is totally committed to her work as a writer.¹⁴⁰ Her creative energies appear to be driven by frenzied curiosity and a neurotic focus on psycho-sexual desires and spiritual paradoxes; she is, for example, completely captivated by Eddington’s treatise on *The Nature of the Physical World* and also by Troward’s theory that human beings are

¹³⁷ ‘Myrtle at 6 a.m.’, in *The Night Visitor and Other Stories*, pp. 185 – 89.

¹³⁸ *Imperial Palace* p. 381.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 157, 173, 451 and 580.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 382 and p. 418.

corporeal extensions of the Divine creative mind.¹⁴¹ For Evelyn her intellect and civilised elegance transform her into a masterpiece in an age of decadence.¹⁴²

In many respects Gracie is the modern woman – the flapper on an independent quest for the meaning of life. The heart of the novel lies not so much in the hotel in London, but in the scenes involving her and Evelyn in Paris. These are important because they expose the friability of Woolf's claims that Bennett could not conjure the intellect, temperament and inner life of his characters and they demonstrate overwhelmingly his capacity for writing powerfully about sexual passion.¹⁴³ Gracie is a wilful and determined sexual predator. As early in the novel as their encounter at the Shaftesbury Express restaurant in London, she is determined to arouse Evelyn through sexual jealousy. Freed from material considerations and empowered by her father's wealth and reputation, she is anxious to cast off the chains of respectability, and it is for this reason that she rents the flat on the Boulevard des Italiens when she travels to Paris.¹⁴⁴ Bennett transcends the sexually charged intimacies of her relationship with Evelyn by focussing on the interplay between her physical passion and her interrogation of her own concealed psyche. Thus, she is forensically honest in her analysis of their relationship after the shopping visit to the Jolie Laitière and clinically decisive in establishing why their relationship could never succeed. With echoes of Hilda's complaint to Edwin, she accepts that his determination to prioritise his work would clash with her egotist's need to monopolise his love.¹⁴⁵ It is only after her rejection of Evelyn that the full extent of Gracie's essential shallowness is revealed. After having observed the cash till girl in the Durand restaurant, she impulsively resolves to abandon her writing and

¹⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 417 – 18.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 400.

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 445 – 56.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 426.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 578.

to seek fulfilment through repetitive manual work, a task for which, as Evelyn realises, she is not suited because of her emotional capriciousness and her materialism.¹⁴⁶

Many of Gracie's paradoxes remain unresolved. At times, as when she visits the Prince of Wales's Feathers pub in London and the Durand restaurant in Paris, she has a fervent desire to cast off the trappings of wealth.¹⁴⁷ Yet at the end of the novel, she is quite content, having published her book, *Ideas and Sensations*, to sacrifice her writing career in favour of marriage to the aesthete Leo Cheddar, whom she idealises as a man whose willingness to subordinate his own career to her demands for love, attention and approval elevate him to a plane of tragic heroism shared only by General Boulanger and Charles Stuart Parnell.¹⁴⁸

Paradoxically, given her liberal support for Tessa Tye and her own sexual promiscuity, she shows intolerance and revulsion for the invert, in her dismissive comments on the lesbian couple whom she and Evelyn encounter in the Caligula club in Paris:

Then two girls extricated themselves from the thronged floor and approached the bar. One was tall and slim, in a close-fitting, high-necked gown which rendered the wearer conspicuous by its long trailing skirts. The other was short and plump in the scantiest possible flimsy frock. The demeanour of the tall girl was protective. They settled themselves at the bar, next to Evelyn and Gracie. The tall girl furtively, delicately, fondled her friend, with whom she had been dancing.

'Shall we go?' said Gracie very abruptly. And in the doorway, as Evelyn held aside the bead-curtain for her, she murmured harshly: 'I can't stand that kind.'¹⁴⁹

As with Hilda Lessways, the enigma in which she is enfolded is never resolved. Driven by an impulsive search for personal fulfilment, she remains mercurial,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 510 – 12.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 72 and p. 509.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 488.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 430.

volatile, restless, but shallow.¹⁵⁰ As Bennett reveals, her book will have no tangible cultural impact and will serve merely as a footnote to a literary project abandoned in favour of her next intense caprice.

By contrast with Gracie, whose glamour, intellect and panache she lacks, the diffident and submissive Violet Powler, is materially impoverished. In her assumption of the new roles and challenges which she is offered in the Imperial Palace and in the fulfilment of her professional responsibilities, she is the embodiment of the fundamental Darwinian imperative which is the *leitmotif* of this novel. She shares Evelyn's fascination with, and commitment to, the strategic management and daily operation of the hotel (obsessions which have permanently eluded Gracie). She is also very much a victim of the hegemonic male capitalist world; her employment and recreation are sanctioned firstly by Sir Henry Savott at his house in Claygate and then by Evelyn at the Imperial Palace. She becomes too an objectified and sexualised temptation for her fellow workers. Her uneasy relationship with the laundry manager, Cyril Purkin, is driven by his repressed arousal for her, and in another part of the hotel, Ceria, the grill-room manager who proposes to her, abandons his post in despair when his overtures are rejected.¹⁵¹

Violet is the ideal employee: industrious, efficient, discreet, even-tempered, loyal and self-effacing. She learns quickly how to be manipulative, particularly in seeking the support of Perosi, the restaurant manager, for Ceria's innovative proposal for a New Year's Eve dinner in the grill-room.¹⁵² She is eminently practical – promptly solving the problem of the Rajah's unexpected request for a *lit de repos* – and endowed with an excellent business brain; she recognises before Evelyn, for example, how to expand the in-house Works Department.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 396.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 61 and pp. 540 – 41.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 334.

Like Evelyn, she is dedicated to her work, and it is this shared obsession which makes them emotionally compatible and facilitates the development of their relationship into a sexless idyll.¹⁵³ Although she is in awe of his power and position, however, she is also unintimidated by him, challenging him vigorously when he contemplates whether to dismiss Ceria for deserting his post.¹⁵⁴ It is no surprise that Violet ultimately resolves to make a success not from her employment in the hotel, but from a union of minds and values:

Even the most earnest of 'them' threw away their business careers for marriage, and without a pang! But what a career she would make of marriage! She was serious; she knew what work was. And he too. She was his sort; he hers. Gracie was not his sort and never would have been, because she was not serious and did not know what sustained work was.¹⁵⁵

Her journey from laundry manager to marriage with the Director of the Orcham International Hotels Company confirms her belief that the modern luxury hotel is a locus for bewildering novelties and romantic surprises. It is, however, a point of view which conveniently ignores the casualties suffered by those unable to cope with the austerities of such environments – the cost of progress and Darwinian rationalisation is the suicide of the redundant manager of the Duncannon Hotel whose position, self-respect and identity are erased by the merger.

Bennett was nervous about the novel's reception and in England the continuum of critical opinion ranged from unrestrained approbation to dismissive scorn, the *Times Literary Supplement* suggesting that his aim was to capitalise on the current vogue for writing lengthy novels.¹⁵⁶ Echoing Virginia Woolf, V. S. Pritchett contended, unfairly, that it was as if Bennett was more interested in the functioning

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 642 and p. 648.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 552.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 670.

¹⁵⁶ Pound, *A biography*, p. 359.

of the hotel than in the people who managed it or worked in it.¹⁵⁷ However, a close reading of *Imperial Palace* clearly reveals that its main achievement was to demonstrate that Bennett was neither an opportunistic materialist careless of his integrity as a writer, nor an inaccessible artistic visionary, but a sensitive and accomplished novelist, able to appeal in his fiction to middlebrow tastes, and, in Gracie Savott's ontological musings, to the highbrow complexities of spiritual abstraction. Bennett's modern luxury hotel may authenticate and even valorise capitalist excess, but its architecture, spaces and functions in this novel lead to a reading in which Darwinian adaptation is the key to material success and evolutionary progress. Intriguingly, the prickliest metaphysical uncertainties and ambiguities in *Imperial Palace* are never resolved, and are despatched to Evelyn's final ruminations after the successful merger of the hotel with the Orcham International Hotels Company:

Were luxury hotels sociologically justifiable? He didn't know. He couldn't decide. He knew merely that he was going straight on. He said to himself: 'There's a lot of things in this world you'll never get the hang of. And only idiots try to.'¹⁵⁸

Afterword

In many respects, Bennett's metropolitan fiction was a return to, and reaffirmation of, his roots as a writer. The issues which he had tentatively explored in his first and unsuccessful novel – social, cultural, sexual and personal liberation – preoccupied him for the whole of his career and were a fundamental part of his post-war writing, not just as a novelist but as a journalist and literary critic too. His strengths in his metropolitan fiction included meticulous research, resourceful explorations of spaces and places, and forays into the depths and complexities of the human psyche, and

¹⁵⁷ V. S. Pritchett, *The Spectator*, 18 October 1930, quoted in *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 511 – 12.

¹⁵⁸ *Imperial Palace*, p. 670.

these led him into imaginative deconstructions of suppressed emotions and instincts and of their irresistible manipulation of human interactions. In this context, the focus of his metropolitan novels was very much linked to the legitimisation of self-identity.

In his explorations of the human condition, Bennett followed metaphysical and metafictional paths, and he navigated them by means of an innovative choice of markers – compressed symbols, paradoxes and impressionistic constructs. Through exploring shifting landscapes of objects and possessions, he successfully identified the drivers of unruly neuroses, and he isolated too the communal and individual uncertainties of human existence. The complexities of these revelations – psychologically fractured instability, credulous mysticism, ontological ambiguities and graphic iconography – are highly significant because with their symbolic density and universality they transcend both regional and metropolitan boundaries.

Not surprisingly the tectonic movements and seismic aftershocks of the First World War shaped and directed nearly all of the novels which he published after *Hilda Lessways* in 1916. By accreting them in dystopic fragments, Bennett used these upheavals as ballast for his critiques of functional capitalism, labour exploitation, social paralysis and war profiteering. Some of these ridiculed the ritualised absurdities that legitimise reactionary state power, others were open recriminations against political duplicity and venality, many lingered over the psycho-physical traumas and cultural contaminations that seeped from the infections of international conflict, a few contained episodic interventions on the pretentiousness and values of the self-referential metropolitan élite and on the cultural *hauteur* implicit in the indolent sanctification of luxury and prodigal extravagance for its own sake.

Bennett's approach to his metropolitan fiction, however, was tempered with restraint, tolerance and impartial inquisitiveness, as he reflected on abstractions such as the guilt of mysticism and the mysticism of guilt, and on the concrete exigencies of social, cultural and political harmony. As a paean to temperate rationality, the epigraph to *The Pretty Lady* is highly significant. In addition, the scientific interests which he took in the work of Freud and Rivers were powerful currents shaping the emergence of the new manner fiction in which he engaged his reader as 'hypocrite lecteur', by transforming him into a metatextual collaborator and decoder. Finally, Bennett's metropolitan novels demonstrated unequivocally, the invalidity of Woolf's claim that he could not write convincingly and powerfully about private interpretations and interior apprehensions of the external world, canards which are undermined by the award for *Riceman Steps* of the James Tait Black prize in October 1924. As Bennett noted with controlled modesty in his Journal when he learned of his success: 'This is the first prize for a book I ever had.'¹⁵⁹ This laconic observation gives the lie to the fallacy that his fiction spiralled into terminal decline after the publication of his last Five Towns novel.

¹⁵⁹ *Journals III*, 18 October 1924, p. 63.

CHAPTER FIVE

RACONTEUR AND TELLER OF TALES: THE SHORT STORIES

‘I don’t know what they are worth, I only know they ain’t literature.’¹

(Rudyard Kipling to Rider Haggard 1915)

Arnold Bennett: short-storyist

When Rudyard Kipling wrote to Rider Haggard in July 1915, he expressed his concern, as the epigraph to this chapter illustrates, about the tendentious dogmatism of his wartime propaganda stories. It is a point of interest at the beginning of this chapter to note his self-doubts because, whilst Arnold Bennett fêted Maupassant and Chekhov throughout his life as the finest short story writers, he had come to believe by 1929 that Kipling was the premier practitioner:

One currently hears, and perhaps I have myself said, that the short story is not a characteristically English form, and that the two supreme masters of it are foreigners – de Maupassant and Chekhov. Well, I have read all de Maupassant and all Chekhov several times, with undiminished satisfaction. But in the depths of my conscience I think that neither of them has surpassed Kipling at his best.²

On the surface, Bennett appeared self-assured as a short story writer. He was certainly a prolific one, completing over one hundred and sixty in his career. Between 1905 and 1931 he published seven volumes: *The Loot of Cities* (1905), *Tales of the Five Towns* (1905), *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns* (1907), *The Matador of the Five Towns* (1912), *Elsie and the Child and Other Stories* (1924), *The Woman Who Stole Everything and Other Stories* (1927) and *The Night Visitor*

¹ Quoted in Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder and Ruth Robbins, *The British Short Story* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 146.

² ‘The Short Story – With Kipling as Master’, in *The Evening Standard Years*, 10 October 1929, p. 313.

and Other Stories (1931). In addition, two more volumes – *Uncollected Stories 1892 – 1930* (2010) and *Lord Dover and Other Lost Stories* (2012) – have been published during the past six years.

Bennett, like Kipling, however, could appear troubled by uncertainty. At times he could seem casually dismissive of short stories as a genre, and he never doubted that they were easier to write than a serial. As he observed in his *Evening Standard* column in October 1927: ‘A serial is harder to write than a short story because it demands far more sustained imaginative power.’³ Nevertheless, like other realist and Modernist writers, he was always attracted to a genre which offered both artistic opportunities and rapid financial returns. In practice, Bennett’s critical evaluation of his stories was balanced and consistent. He was perfectly aware that those which he viewed as inferior but marketable work had been written, often as a journalist, to meet the mercenary demands of magazine editors, and he was unabashed in his frank admission to his literary agent that he collusively tailored their quality to the readership of the magazines for which they were intended:

When Mr. Whigham originally asked me to contribute to his magazine, my first question to him was: ‘Do you want me to do my best and most serious work, or do you want me to adopt a popular standard?’ Because my answer depended on his. His answer was quite satisfactory, and he laid particular stress on the high literary aims of the *Metropolitan*.⁴

On occasions, he was perfectly willing to redraft his stories in order to accommodate the editors for whom he was writing. A letter to his agent’s assistant written on 8 May 1900 makes it clear, for example, that he had simplified the style and diction of his short story, ‘Tiddy-fol-lol’, to suit the requirements of the editor of *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, the publication in which the story first appeared in December 1900:

³ *The Author’s Craft*, p. 77 and ‘Why a serial is harder to write than a short story’, in *The Evening Standard Years*, 6 October 1927, p. 89.

⁴ *Letters I*, 23 December 1914, p. 220.

Qua author, I curl the lip of disgust at the notion of altering this perfect and delicate trifle to suit the tastes of one million two hundred & fifty thousand coastguards & washerwomen. [...] *Qua* Editor, of course I can see what Mr Catling objects to in the story. But why can't he merely say what he wants without trying to explain his wants by a theory that 'so simple a tale' ought to be written in words of one syllable? This is the first time I have ever heard of a proportion being established between simplicity of tale & length of words.⁵

In writing his short stories, he was never afflicted with Conrad's snobbery:

In 1897 he refused to send *Pearson's Magazine* 'The Return' on the grounds that it was 'much too good to be thrown away where the *right people* won't see it'. By the 'right people' he meant those who would make him part of the literary élite of late-Victorian Britain and who controlled the more prestigious journals, such as *Blackwood's*, *The Savoy*, and *The New Review*.⁶

Even in the 1920s when Bennett had become a celebrated and, on occasions, an experimental novelist, he continued as a consummate professional and tradesman to produce his stories to order because they paid well.⁷

His position, however, was never one dimensional. Whilst his counter-intuitive remark that 'The Death of Simon Fuge', which was not serialised, was a pleasure to write because he had no need to fear 'the unperceptive stupidity of the magazine public', obliges us to reconsider John Carey's appropriation of his commitment to the democratisation of literature, it should be remembered that his motives for writing his stories were never completely mercenary.⁸ He valued many of them very highly and his judgement of their worth developed incrementally in lockstep with his career. In 1906, he thought that 'The Lion's Share' (1907) was his best; by 1907 it had been exceeded by 'His Worship, the Goosedriver' (1904) and by 1911, after the publication of *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger*, he confidently

⁵ *Letters II*, 8 May 1900, pp. 133 – 34.

⁶ Liggins et al., *The British Short Story*, p. 108.

⁷ *Letters I*, 17 October 1925, pp. 350 – 51.

⁸ Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, p. 152.

suggested that both ‘The Death of Simon Fuge’ (1907) and ‘The Matador of the Five Towns’ (1909) were amongst his finest achievements.⁹

When it suited him, he was quick to stress that his stories were as important as his serious fiction. His correspondence with his literary agent, James Pinker, reveals unequivocally both his acute awareness of commercial imperatives and his professional pride in the aesthetic value of his work:

I attach much importance to the publication of the short stories in the summer. They are artistic work, some of my best, & they must come between a potboiler like *Ghost*, & another potboiler like *City of Pleasure*.¹⁰

At the turn of the twentieth century, just as Bennett started his career, much of the short fiction which was published was circumscribed by generic identity – romance, adventure, detective, thriller or supernatural – and constructed through realist and naturalist aesthetics.¹¹ All of his earliest stories were written for popular newspapers and periodicals, such as *Woman*, *Tit-Bits*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Westminster*, *The Strand* and *The Sun*, and as a callow contributor to these publications he developed an understanding of the short story’s compressed requirements. These were readily acknowledged by other writers, such as D. H. Lawrence who suggested in 1908 that: ‘The great thing to do in a short story is to select the salient details – a few striking details to make a sudden swift impression’.¹² Bennett recognised that the growth of the short story towards the end of the Victorian era was a direct consequence of a burgeoning magazine readership. Much of it was formulaic and commercially driven, and it tended towards disposable literature for a newly emerging and empowered reading public. It is against this background and with the benefit of his

⁹ *Letters I*, 19 January 1906, p. 67, 4 March 1907, p.79, 12 March 1911, p. 152.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 April 1907, p. 87.

¹¹ Liggins et al., *The British Short Story*, p. 10.

¹² James T. Boulton, ed., *Lawrence in Love: Letters to Louie Burrows* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 1968), 7 October 1908, p. 19, cited in Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (Harlow: Longman, 1983), p.23.

early career as a journalist that he developed as, and remained for thirty years, a prolific writer of the short story.

Bennett's decision to commit much of his energy to writing so many magazine stories appears paradoxical at first impression. A twentieth-century Manichaean binary has consistently and pejoratively valued the novel over short fiction, and the genre has been roundly condemned as an inferior breeding ground for unreconstructed commercial artefacts, written in pursuit of popular taste in order to sustain a ravenously commodified New Journalism. The quintessentially sibylline disapproval of the genre is perfectly encapsulated in the mind set of an anonymised historical novelist who, responding to Q. D. Leavis's survey in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, was adamant that: 'The magazine story is almost without exception a commercial article. Manufactured to a formula – those stories that show any art are seldom placed in magazines.'¹³

Modern criticism of Bennett's work has tended to buttress this viewpoint, by dismissing his stories as specious and superficial. Writing in 1974, John Lucas argued that anyone reading through *Tales of the Five Towns* would be perfectly justified in concluding that, as a short story writer, Bennett had very little talent:

Tales of the Five Towns is filled with bread-and-butter stories, teased-out anecdotes of little worth. The title is misleading, for not all the tales are of the Five Towns [...]. There is simply nothing to them. They read like space-fillers. And one can see why. The period 1900-14 was the heyday of weekly and monthly magazines specialising in the short story. Bennett was a professional writer who could be relied on to meet editorial deadlines and to produce any number of words to order. No wonder, then, that he should write short stories.¹⁴

Most damagingly of all for Bennett, since a critical preference emerged during the early twentieth century for fiction in which plot was subordinated to psychology and

¹³ Leavis, *Fiction the Reading Public*, p. 47.

¹⁴ Lucas, *Arnold Bennett: A Study of His Fiction*, p. 90.

mood, his achievements as a short-storyist (to adopt Elizabeth Bowen's coinage) have been undermined by intellectual disparagement because they were not conspicuously Modernist.¹⁵ However, whilst Bennett's stories were never exemplars of radical Modernist highbrow art, with its technical experimentation, interior dialogue and de-authorisation of narrative voice, they were nevertheless frequently pitched in the interspaces between middlebrow and highbrow literature. In fact, one of Bennett's notable achievements was his manipulation of the short story to fuse elements of the realist and the Modernist. In his attempts to capture the intrinsic essence of the commonplace world in his stories, Bennett wrote with confidence and versatility as a traveller between places, spaces and buildings. His particular skill was in his presentation of his characters in their social world, where his technique allowed him to imbue small events with great significance and, on occasions, to burnish them with suggestive reticence, inflected ambiguity and resistance to closure.

As a prolific short-storyist, Bennett assumed several identities: admass journalist, social anthropologist, cultural anatomist, accomplished raconteur, regional historian and populist, synchronic serialist, discursive feminist, zeitgeist rapporteur, text-book psychologist, Modernist sympatico, witty humorist and representative of the Metropolitan commentariat. This chapter will show how he used these personae to critique social taxonomies, civic hypocrisy and gender politics, and it will also demonstrate that, even though the majority of his stories were popular entertainments rather than highbrow art, there remains a distinguished and significant minority which cannot be dismissed as inferior intercalations in his best work.

¹⁵ Liggins et al., *The British Short Story*, p.121 and Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Short Story in England', *Britain Today*, 109 (May 1945), pp. 11 – 16.

Pleasing the public: admass journalist and tradesman

In the earliest stages of his career, Bennett wrote his stories as a journalist in order to satisfy a newly empowered reading public. In this guise, however, he was exposed to the accusation that he was prepared to sacrifice any pretension to art or literature so that he could provide the public with the pabulum on which it battered. Of the sixty stories which were uncollected in Bennett's lifetime, forty-four of them were published before the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. Several of them appear as contrived, callow confections. Some, like 'The Strange Shelter' (1900), are sensational melodramas redolent of his byzantine potboilers, such as *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902). Others, such as 'The Phantom Sneeze' (1900), are fabricated ghost stories or quasi-Gothic tales. In others, there is a chilling evocation of the arbitrariness of fate and its intervention in human relationships. For example, in 'Strange Story: In the Matter of a Letter and a Lady' (1894), a man is saved from marriage to a woman he does not love when he discovers that the letter he wrote to her six years earlier proposing marriage on his return from abroad had never been delivered.¹⁶

However, not all of the uncollected early stories can be dismissed as shallow and formulaic juvenilia because some of those which confront the reading public with provocative questions about the conflict between tradition and modernity can be viewed as way markers to the development of Bennett's artistic maturation. The earliest include unembellished vignettes, for example 'He Needn't Have Troubled How He Looked' (1892), which reveals the solipsistic vanity of a fearful man in a dentist's chair, cowering but determined to impress the beautiful young woman who enters the surgery. In his terror, he realises belatedly that she was not a member of

¹⁶John Shapcott, ed., *Arnold Bennett's Uncollected Short Stories 1892 – 1932* (Leek: Churnet Valley, 2010), pp. 63 – 69.

staff, but a patient who had returned to collect a forgotten umbrella and had never been aware of his existence. This story is significant not just because it is one of Bennett's earliest, written in 1892, but also because it illustrates his nascent ability to particularise human susceptibilities, in this instance the patient's psychological dependency on self-image and his craving for endorsement of his self-esteem by youthful feminine beauty.

The impact of others depends, in part, on the suggestive correlations of their titles. The subtlety of 'In A Hospital: A Broken Off Match' (1893) lies in its implication that illness or infirmity has destroyed a couple's relationship: what the narrative actually reveals is that the overworked Nurse Smith is obliged to confront the body of her fiancé who has committed suicide as a result, it would appear, of gambling debts. The emotional resonance of this story is located not just in the betrayal of her loyalty by masculine cupidity and recklessness, but also in the legitimisation of her victimhood through patriarchal endorsement of the subservient roles to which she is confined and through which she is obliged to validate her identity.

Other stories are of interest because of Bennett's recalibration of seasonal journalistic favourites. In 'The Railway Station', published in 1904, Minnie Muriel Murgatroyd is rushing to catch the last Christmas Eve train to Manchester, so that she can marry. The impact of the story lies not just in the inherent tension of her late arrival at the station, nor in Bennett's emphasis on the transitory experiences of modernity which railway transport and its impedimenta underwrite, but also in his resented allusion to her fate if she fails to catch her train – incarceration in the department store's barrack-like dormitories in which she and all her fellow shop

assistants are obliged to live throughout the year.¹⁷ The muted discourse in this story is in part the same one that confronts Nurse Smith – economic servitude in the metropolis – but its ambivalence also points to the spectre of Minnie Muriel’s victimhood as a wife. By leaving this issue unresolved, Bennett allows for the possibility that the promise of modernity which the train confers is merely a cloak for the servitude to which she will be delivered in conventional marriage.

Bennett reshapes his alternative deconstruction of Christmas three years later in the *Daily Dispatch* in another uncollected story, ‘Miss Scrooge’. Superficially, this story is a calculated appeal to prejudice and intolerance: the toothless and hairless Miss Scrooge is physically unattractive and, in her complete insensitiveness to the traditions of the season, exercises a surly dominance over her family’s Christmas celebrations. The family ironically refers to her as ‘Auntie’, but she demonstrates little regard for them, refusing even to thank them for their presents. With saturnine stubbornness she declines to alter her diet for the day and when the guests arrive for dinner she retreats, unsociably, to bed. Only when she wakes on Boxing Day does Bennett reveal that she is the family’s adored infant daughter. With its deft compression and delayed decoding of selfless parental love, Bennett’s narrative authenticates the true spirit of the season as the Christmas Day curmudgeon is transformed into the Boxing Day Angel of the House. From a secular and materialistic twenty-first century perspective, the story risks exposure to the same accusations of maudlin sentimentality as Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (1843), of which it is an affectionate derivative. Such accusations, however, would

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 32 – 34.

undervalue the self-confident dexterity which Bennett deployed in order to connect with the most atavistic and adulatory of protective parental instincts.¹⁸

Five Towns populist and cultural anatomist

As with his Five Towns novels, Bennett used his stories to write as a cultural anatomist, and they enabled him to examine not just the scarred physical integuments of industrialised communities, but also the social, moral and political membranes which they sheltered. In them, as Philip Hensher has recently observed, he discovered the perfect tool for critiquing the cultural energies and contradictions of the north Midlands, as well as arrogant Metropolitan misconceptions about the uncouth North:

The culture of the North was something of great confidence and individuality. The life of the amateur was, and is, a vividly pursued one. The fascination in music and art, sponsored by civic-minded industrialists, is beautifully captured in a great short story by Arnold Bennett.¹⁹

Hensher's reference in the *Daily Telegraph* in July 2010 was to Bennett's critically acclaimed, 'The Death of Simon Fuge'(1907), a conte which Bennett realised would be unsuitable for any magazine because of its length.²⁰

John Wain has correctly argued that 'The Death of Simon Fuge' is a self-reflexive tale of Chekhovian resonance.²¹ Undoubtedly, Bennett would have been proud of this verdict since he felt that he had caught Chekhov's introspection in the story, even though, he had not read any of his work when he wrote it:

More and more struck by Tchekoff, and more and more inclined to write a lot of very short stories in the same technique. As a fact, "The Death of Simon Fuge", written long before I had read Tchekoff, is in the same technique, and

¹⁸ Arnold Bennett, *Lord Dover and Other Lost Stories*, ed., John Shapcott (Leek: Churnet Valley, 2011), pp. 257 – 62.

¹⁹ Philip Hensher, 'So what's so bad about the north?', *Daily Telegraph*, 29 July 2010.

²⁰ *Letters I*, 23 March 1907, p. 84.

²¹ John Wain, 'John Wain, Remarks on the short story', in *Journal of the Short Story in English*, Les Cahiers de la Nouvelle, 41 (Autumn 2003), pp. 157 – 74.

about as good. Though to say anything is as good as “Ward No. 6” in “The Black Monk”, wants a bit of nerve.²²

It is a tale of shifting perceptions told by Loring, a metropolitan outsider, born in Devon, educated at Cambridge and venturing into what is for him (and for many of Bennett’s readers) a geographical and cultural hinterland. As curator of antiquaries at the British Museum, he visits the Five Towns to inspect and value some slip decorated dishes discovered in a cellar at the Bursley Conservative Club. On his journey down from London he notes in the *London Gazette* the death of Simon Fuge, a painter virtually unknown to the public at large, but an artist commanding respect among the metropolitan elect and *cognoscenti*.

Loring, for all his aesthetic sophistication, is a prisoner of his tastes and prejudices. A cultured and fastidious southerner, he is appalled initially by the squalor of the Potteries, and regards Bursley as an undulating desert of ‘broken pots and cinders’.²³ Its lack of social grace is epitomised by the spitting in the trams and by the minatory and unwelcoming atmospherics of the Tiger, the local public house. Bennett is also studious in evoking the grime and dirt which nourish and sustain the industry and commerce of the Five Towns and the insouciance of the local reaction to them:

He [Brindley] lived in a low, blackish-crimson heavy-browed house at the corner of a street along which electric cars were continually thundering. There was a thin cream of mud on the pavements and about two inches of mud in the roadway, rich, nourishing mud like Indian ink half-mixed. The prospect of carrying a pound or so of that unique mud into a civilised house affrighted me, but Mr Brindley opened his door with his latchkey and entered the abode as unconcernedly as if some fair repentant had cleansed his feet with her tresses.

‘Don’t worry too much about the dirt,’ he said. ‘You’re in Bursley.’²⁴

²² *Journals I*, 26 February 1909, p. 312.

²³ *Tales of the Five Towns*, p. 272.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

Loring's preconceptions are sharpened by his first impressions of the polluted canals, demoniacally glowing furnaces, industrial squalor, noisome vapours, stunted architecture and reverberating echoes of minatory industrialisation. As he wryly reflects: 'I do not think the Five Towns will ever be described: Dante lived too soon.'²⁵

Bennett's artistic achievement in the story is to contest these preconceptions through contending cameos and unsettling challenges. Loring's metropolitan assurances are assaulted by a series of incongruous epiphanies which expose Bursley's flourishing cultural life – even Brindley's hand-rolled BDV cigarettes are superior to the more expensive metropolitan ones which Loring affects. On the one hand Loring's hosts can be brusque and emotionally retentive, on the other hand they are convivial polymaths. Whilst his host, Bob Brindley, had appeared as a deferential provincial nonentity when Loring first met him at the British Museum, he exudes genial self-assurance in his industrialised fastness. An architect and Chair of the management committee of the Wedgwood Institution, Brindley is also a committed book collector who takes immense pride in his copy of an exotic *Hortulus Animae*. His friend, Dr. Stirling, once owned one of Fuge's etchings, whilst their companion, the sanitary ware manufacturer Oliver Colclough, is a keen musician, and arrives in excitement to practise a piano arrangement for the Strauss *Sinfonia Domestica*, a copy of which he has bought in Manchester. Bennett's juxtaposition of earthenware and classical music is not adventitious, and forces the reader as much as Loring to reappraise the crippling misperceptions of cultural snobbery.

Brindley personifies the vibrancy of local cultural life and, as the consultant architect, his pride in the local Wedgwood Institution and museum is well placed.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 270.

Whilst it is only the size of a pocket handkerchief and its drawings, engravings and paintings typify a small provincial museum, its Wedgwood ware and the small painting by Simon Fuge which it houses confer an eclectic imprimatur. Although Fuge was not an incomparably talented artist, his painting of a small girl with its subtle interpretation of the loss of childish innocence, is ironically a *de profundis* emblem of his deliverance from spiritual isolation and benighted industrial philistinism:

And it glowed sombrely there on the wall, a few splashes of colour on a morsel of canvas, and it was Simon Fuge's unconscious, proud challenge to the Five Towns. It *was* Simon Fuge, at any rate all of Simon Fuge that was worth having, masterful, imperishable. And not merely was it his challenge, it was his scorn, his aristocratic disdain, his positive assurance that in the battle between them he had annihilated the Five Towns.²⁶

Through these meticulous aggregations Bennett is able to reveal that, far from being rebarbative and backward hinterlands, enclaves of the Five Towns flourish as culturally virile but complex metropolitan exclaves, regulated by class, taste and to a large degree by occupation and profession, too.

Another of Bennett's artistic achievements in this story is his success in obscuring reality by illusion, and not just in the matter of Loring's unanticipated discovery of a vibrant social and cultural life in an industrial waste land. His prurient preconceptions of the night Fuge spent on Ilam Lake with two seductively attractive local young women are unexpectedly undermined by the robust emotional independence of the two sisters. One of them is Annie Brett, barmaid at the Tiger, whom Loring dismisses when he meets her as coquettish, shallow and banal. The other is her younger and less attractive sibling, Colclough's wife; it is through her narrative that Bennett unmasks Fuge as a self-regarding counterfeiter. Happy in exile from the Five Towns to boast of his prowess as an accomplished philanderer on his

²⁶ Ibid., p. 290.

trip to Ilam Lake, Fuge deliberately conceals that his nocturnal and erotically charged boating adventure was no more than a Sunday school excursion. In reality, both sisters had found Fuge to be querulously indecisive, unable to control the boat, fearful of his wet feet and eager to return to the shore. Far from being a cavalier and promiscuous philanderer, he was merely, in the laconic and candid ridicule of the two sisters, a self-consumed braggart. Through the sceptical recollections of those who knew him, Loring learns that his misconstrual of the artist as roguish *roué* has been shaped by his willing and credulous acceptance of Fuge's boastfully revisionist recreation of his tryst. It is this realisation which increases the story's narrative power, and relocates it in dialectical interpretations of friable self-awareness.

With manipulative disparagement, Brindley feigns deprecation of Fuge, as Loring prepares his return to London, more enlightened and sensitive than before his visit, but determined to cling to his belief that the unexalted artist will eventually triumph over the Five Towns' lethargic indifference to his talent:

He may have been a boaster, and a chatterer, and a man who suffered from cold feet at the wrong moments! And the Five Towns may have got the better of him, now. But that portrait of the little girl in the Wedgwood Institution is waiting there, right in the middle of the Five Towns. And one day the Five Towns will have to "give it best". They can say what they like!...²⁷

Fuge may remain an alienated artist and an estranged prophet in the Five Towns where he was dismissed as a teacher from the Handbridge School of Art, but by careful orchestration of Loring's misperceptions and discoveries, Bennett validates the rigour and energy of a cultivated middle-class community. It is only when he is leaving the Five Towns that Loring finally comes to appreciate that the dryly dismissive disparagements of Fuge's art, by those most liberally endowed with pulsing artistic energies like Brindley, Stirling and Colclough, are deployed with the

²⁷ Ibid., p. 313.

characteristic reticence of the local community both to conceal and confer their appreciation of his work.

A more culturally sensitive Loring revisits the Midlands for the third time in ‘The Matador of the Five Towns’ (1909). Little has changed in their appearance. In this story there is a tragic seediness in Bennett’s description of Hanbridge with its impoverished men, coagulating mud and, as symbols of the town’s despondency, anthropomorphised tram cars:

Trams rumbled continually in and out of the square. They seemed to enter casually, to hesitate a few moments as if at a loss, and then to decide with a nonchalant clang of bells that they might as well go off somewhere else in search of something more interesting. They were rather like human beings who are condemned to live for ever in a place of which they are sick beyond the expressiveness of words.²⁸

The tattered urchins who line the outside of the local newspaper office, *The Signal*, reinforce the impression of poverty and privation. As a forerunner of J. B. Priestley’s *The Good Companions* (1929), the unfiltered image in this story emphasises the importance of sport, particularly football, to the town’s identity and civic self-respect.²⁹ The juxtaposition of ingenious but primitive methods of communication (homing pigeons are used by *The Sentinel* to carry the latest scores of the local football matches) and the mechanisation of the newspaper industry underscores the quintessential incongruities of an urban life which, despite its modernisation, still exploits child labour to distribute its products. More generally, Bennett seizes the opportunity in the story to explore the contradictions of commerce and its ravenous appetite for social and commercial capital. In doing so, he fashions and visits scenarios which he later developed in his full-length fiction. The ingenuity of the compositor in the offices of the local newspaper, *The Signal*, is a foretoken of James

²⁸ Arnold Bennett, *The Matador of the Five Towns* (1912; repr. Chalford: Nonsuch Press, 2007), p. 15.

²⁹ J. B. Priestley, *The Good Companions* (London: Heinemann, 1929), pp. 3 – 5.

Yarlett's expertise in the *Clayhanger* trilogy. Both men demonstrate through their labours the covenant which compromisingly binds the printing and publishing industry to the commercial power and influence of the capitalist markets which it serves.

As in the earlier story, Loring's presumptions are challenged then undermined. Having accepted Stirling's invitation to attend the second half of Knype's match against Manchester Rovers, his vision of the local football club as an instrument of mass artistic entertainment and of Jos Myatt as a flamboyant matador of the Five Towns, is subverted when he arrives at the game and witnesses the semi-feral, collective psyche of the players and the spectators, a point which Bennett underscores with great economy when he describes the belligerent attempts of the dispersing, jostling crowd to board the trams as an assault on the 'western bank of a Beresina'.³⁰ The popularity of the local celebrity and star player Myatt is founded on the value-set which he champions. In particular, he encapsulates much of the district's stoic indifference to physical hardship, and when he breaks the leg of an opponent, his laconic reaction is lugubrious and callous: 'Hadn't he been blooming well begging and praying for it, aw afternoon? Hadn't he now?'³¹ Bennett's skill can be found in his subtle demonstration that Myatt is both a beneficiary and victim of mass popularity and capitalist profit. Like the other players, he is simply a commodity to be exploited, a point which Bennett emphasises by describing them from his vantage point in the stand as tiny and insignificant and by referring to Myatt as a jointed doll.³² Even the urbane Loring is complicit in this capitalist exploitation

³⁰ *The Matador of the Five Towns*, p. 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 21 – 22.

of celebrity: he cannot resist the attractions of collective homage and vicarious glory – following Dr. Stirling down to the playing area when Myatt suffers an injury.³³

Although Loring considers Myatt to be honest but bovinely stupid, Bennett demonstrates that he is much more than a gross regional stereotype, and he exploits the brutalised indifference to the physical pain which he has inflicted on his opponent in order to mask his complexity. As a committed teetotaller, he is a disciplined, self-abnegating professional athlete and one not lacking in intelligence and curiosity. His bookcases at The Foaming Quart public house where he is landlord contain, *inter alia*, Ellen Woods' *Johnny Ludlow* stories, *Whittaker's* almanac, and Cruden's *Concordance*. He is, however, no refulgent matador and Bennett shows his vulnerability by emphasising Loring's empathy with the public celebrity who tussles laboriously with his bookkeeping as his wife struggles in child labour.

The death of Myatt's wife in child birth is played out against the ardent and unseemly pertinacity of his argument with Charlie, Knype's trainer, with whom he had struck a wager earlier in the afternoon on the sex of his unborn child. Bennett counterpoints Myatt's stubborn determination to renounce his football career, as soon as he is informed of his wife's death, by a bathos which appears brutally maladroit with its gauchely insensitive emphasis on the fatal consequences for Knype's civic esteem: 'Little Charlie gazed up at him sadly, plaintively, for what seemed a long while. "It's good-bye to th'First League, then, for Knype!" he tragically muttered, at length.'³⁴ What Bennett then reveals with clarity and economy is not gauche callousness, but the incapacity of a class to articulate its compassion and sensitivities. Charlie's lament for the football's club's loss represents, in effect, a

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 25 – 26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

communal phatic reserve which illustrates its inarticulate inability to condole with Myatt for his loss. The story's emotional resonance is achieved by Bennett's demonstration that the universal tragedy of maternal mortality in childbirth is a powerful but single element in the harrowing of Myatt. As well as the loss of his wife, he is confronted with the tragedy of age and commercial expendability as his value to Knype declines with his fading athleticism and physical energy.

As at the end of his earlier visit, Loring, like Bennett's reader, is left with a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural dynamics of an unexplored community. Bennett's portrait reveals that, although the Five Towns can be mean, ugly, crude and violent, they nevertheless retain a communal vitality and decency and a natural human empathy in the face of unpredictable tragedy. As a local celebrity, Myatt is transformed from ebullient icon to tragic hero, but the eclectic and irrepressible energies of regional cultural life are emphasised at the end of the story when Loring returns from Myatt's Foaming Quart to Bob Brindley's house to find him seated at the piano practising Ravel's *L'Heure espagnole*.³⁵

It is worth considering, as a coda to this story, why Bennett valued it so highly as an 'A1' piece of work.³⁶ At least one part of the explanation of his pride must be that, in seeing it published in the *English Review* in April 1909, he knew that he had secured the endorsement of a highly respected periodical.³⁷ Four months earlier it had included, in its first edition, short stories by Tolstoy, Galsworthy, and Henry James, a serial instalment of Wells' *Tono Bungay* (1909), an autobiographical fragment from Conrad and a poem, 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy' by Thomas Hardy.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

³⁶ *Letters II*, 7 January 1909, p. 248.

³⁷ Ford Madox Hueffer, ed., *The English Review* (London: Duckworth & Co., Chapman & Hall, 1908 – 12 / 1910 – 02 : The Modernist Journals Project, Brown University and the University of Tulsa <<http://modjourn.org/journals.html>> [accessed 20 December 2015]

Founded as a literary journal by Ford Madox Hueffer in 1908, the *English Review* was a prominent conduit for the transition from Edwardian and early Georgian to Modernist, and it indulged a particular penchant for introducing the works of younger and more experimental writers such as Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and D. H. Lawrence. The company which Bennett was now keeping not only rebuffs the frigidly unsympathetic condescension of Queenie Leavis's anonymous respondent, but also reaffirms the value which he placed on his short stories.

Bennett, of course, was not the only short-storyist to record the cultural and environmental idiosyncrasies of withdrawn regional communities during the first two decades of the twentieth century:

There is in the Midlands a single-line tramway system which boldly leaves the county town and plunges off into the black, industrial countryside, up hill and down dale, through the long ugly villages of workmen's houses, over canals and railways, past churches perched high and nobly over the smoke and shadows, through stark, grimy cold little market-places, tilting away in a rush past cinemas and shops down to the hollow where the collieries are, then up again, past a little rural church, under the ash trees, on in a rush to the terminus, the last little ugly place of industry, the cold little town that shivers on the edge of the wild, gloomy country beyond.³⁸

With its gasworks and factories, this is a scarred and disfigured landscape. It is not however, the federated six towns of Stoke-on-Trent, but D. H. Lawrence's east Midlands, and what he captures in this story is the exhilarating liberation for women through war-time work on the tram service. In 'Tickets, Please!' (1919), they are graphically characterised by their aggressively brusque control of the drunken colliers on their tramcars and by their determination to retain their self-respect by exacting physical revenge on predatory philanderers.

It is not surprising that the same urban squalor, brutalised but effervescent lives, latent violence and unfulfilled potential are all absorbed in Bennett's Five

³⁸ D. H. Lawrence, *Collected Stories* (London: Everyman Dent, 1994), p. 411.

Towns stories, since he held Lawrence's work in qualified high esteem, as he made clear in the *Evening Standard* in 1927:

[D.H. Lawrence] is the strongest novelist writing to-day. *The Woman Who Rode Away* is first-rate, every page of it. Ten stories of varying length, and all of them characterised by superb creative power, and by a fundamental originality of observation! There are whole pages together where every sentence gives new light on human nature and, reading them, you know that you are face to face with a rough, demonic giant.³⁹

Like Lawrence, Bennett frequently exploits the kinetic energies and symbolic significance of movement and transport in his regional stories. He does so in 'The Heroism of Thomas Chadwick' (1912), in order to demonstrate the disconcertingly symbiotic relationship between self-respect and self-aggrandisement. Thomas Chadwick, the eponymous protagonist, is an embodiment of susceptibility and fecklessness. Bennett exposes his opinionated political principles and inability to hold down a regular job or trade, and authenticates his story by setting it against a background of trams and transport in the Five Towns. Chadwick's obsession is with his politics (he is a particularly energetic opponent of Federation – the unification of the Five Towns into one city), and his conservative and partisan allegiances accessorise his acutely sensitive deference to the social primacy of a bourgeois hegemony – personified by one of Bursley's social apogees, Mrs. Clayton Vernon. When she exits his tram car without warning before it starts, it confirms Chadwick in the erroneous belief that she resents travelling with pro-Federationist 'rag, tag and bob-tail'.⁴⁰

In commandeering the purse which she has left behind her, Chadwick welcomes the opportunity to ingratiate himself with Mrs. Clayton Vernon, but his reward for its return is nothing more than her tepid appreciation, a glass of beer and

³⁹ 'A New Venture in Criticism', in *The Evening Standard Years*, 7 June 1928, p. 164.

⁴⁰ *The Matador of the Five Towns*, p. 109.

two 3d pieces for his daughter's twin children. Bennett is particularly skilful in this story in demonstrating that Chadwick's innate sense of insecurity and social inferiority feeds his need for approval and respect. In order to bolster defensive redoubts for his inhibitions, Chadwick boasts to three of the Federationists who witness the loss of the purse that Mrs. Clayton Vernon generously gave him a sovereign each for his daughter's children, but his self-esteem is shattered when she boards the tram a week later. Mendacity and self-aggrandisement are his nemesis, and these are exposed in front of one of the Federationists when she apologises to Chadwick for having neglected to offer a 3d piece for his younger daughter's child.

Ostensibly, public humiliation fails to breach the carapace of Chadwick's self-esteem and superficially buttresses his confirmed prejudices. However, Bennett astutely demonstrates the vulnerabilities of his insecure ego:

He had proclaimed Mrs. Clayton Vernon to be his ideal of a true lady, and he was heroically loyal to his ideal, a martyr to the cause he had espoused. Such a man was not fitted to be a tram-conductor, and the Five Towns Electric Traction Company soon discovered his unfitness – so that he was thrown upon the world.⁴¹

Unable to cope with the loss of the public identity which he has fashioned and in response to his humiliating loss of face, he is forced to engineer his resignation as a tram conductor. It is this action which provides a reminder of the casual and tangential observation placed deliberately by Bennett at the beginning of the story – that Chadwick was unable to prosper from prolonged sequences of permanent employment. Though he categorised this story as a frolic in *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*, it is actually suffused with those raw Prufrockian overtones conjured by what Frank O'Connor has identified as the 'intense awareness of human

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 117.

loneliness.⁴² The raw poignancy in the story rests with Bennett's portrayal of Chadwick as tragic, isolated and vulnerable. Socially insecure, lacking in interactive empathy and unable to command secure employment, he is forced to endure his suffering as the butt of a social conspiracy which tolerates, but derides, his bluster and idiosyncrasies, a position analogous to that to which Titus Price is condemned in *Anna of the Five Towns*.

Bennett's ability as a cultural anatomist is equally conspicuous in some of his less celebrated regional stories, such as 'Under the Clock' (1912), where he explores fragmented localised identities by critiquing their abnegations and parsimonious asceticism. Here Bennett demonstrates with wry economy how place colludes with community in order to legitimise social customs and class shibboleths. When Annie Brachett leaves the microcosm of Sneyd to move to Birches Street, Hanbridge, after her marriage to William Henry, her short journey is to an alien culture:

Their acquaintance extended over three months. And she knew equally little of the manners and customs of the Five Towns. For although Sneyd lies but a few miles from the seat of pottery manufacture, it is not as the Five Towns are. It is not feverish, grimy, rude, strenuous, Bacchic, and wicked. [...] The people of the Five Towns go there on Thursday afternoons (eightpence, third class return), as if they were going to Paradise.⁴³

Subjected in Hanbridge to a life which is monotonous, cheerless and austere, but at the same time intemperate and dissolute, Annie is the captive of a disciplined and straitened regimen. Life is constrained by financial retrenchment, chief of which is her husband's weekly *impôt* for the Going Away Club. The bounteous twenty sovereigns which she receives from William Henry in the second week of August, after almost twelve months of marriage and privation, provide them both with a liberating respite from their dull and frugal existence.

⁴² Frank O' Connor quoted in Charles May, 'The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction', in *Studies in Short Fiction*, 21:4 (Fall 1984), p. 333.

⁴³ *The Matador of the Five Towns*, p. 119.

As with Elsie Sprickett, journeys for Annie are gateways to enrichment and novelty, and the second journey of her life provides her with a week's liberation from austerity. The transgressive exhilarations of escape and travel are validated through liberal expenditure – beginning with the train journey to Liverpool and the ferry crossing to the Isle of Man. Although William Henry has entrusted all of their savings to Annie, he ensures that they continue to spend freely, even to the belated purchase of gifts on the return boat journey. There is insufficient money to pay for the taxi from the railway station to Birches Street, but William Henry, steeped in the traditions of the more prudent Five Towns citizens, has observed local custom by leaving six shillings under the clock, in order to safeguard against the ignominy of a penniless return.

Bennett captures in the suggestive final paragraph of this vivid cameo the oppressed life of a cheerless, industrialised community, and he demonstrates how economic sacrifice is rigidly embraced by those who, like William Henry, work for modest wages in potbanks and factories. What Bennett also illustrates is that the self-abnegation which this involves does not destroy the innate emotional exuberance of the underclass to which William Henry and Annie belong. In fact, their negotiation, through thrift and self-denial, of a fleeting release from the physically oppressive monotony and dullness of daily life provides a spiritual and physical reanimation. The significance of the cultural signpost which Bennett has erected in this story of the everyday world is its clarity as an indicator of the capacity of regulated self-indulgence to gratify and liberate those at the base of the economic pyramid. It also demonstrates Bennett's ability as a cultural anthropologist to recognise and define the conflict of values in even the most apparently cohesive of communities. In Bacchic Bursley, not all members of the same social class submit to the delayed

gratification which the Going Away Club imposes on William Henry and Annie and on those who, like them, are prepared to wrap their parcels of personal pleasure in annual instalments.

It is not difficult to detect in some of his stories the influences of those Continental writers and mentors who shaped his work. Of his many uncollected short stories, 'The Life of Nash Nicklin', which he wrote in 1913, is particularly worthy of note, firstly because he regarded it as one of his best works and, secondly because, like 'The Death of Simon Fuge', it resonates with the Chekhovian staples of self-regarding introspection and fractured communication. In addition, it reveals Bennett's capacity for exploring the pathological frailties that shape obsessive compulsion and the toxic insecurities which poison emotional sensibilities – issues which he was well aware had fascinated both Flaubert and Maupassant.

The effect of Miss Morday's smile on Nash Nicklin, the unmarried thirty-year old secretary of the Toft End Brickworks and Colliery, is as devastating as the valentine card which Bathsheba Everdene sends to Squire Boldwood in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). Miss Morday is an outsider from Leamington, a friend of Miss Overhouse, the head of a recently established High School for girls. Tolerant and liberal in her views, she contrasts with the conservative Nicklin whose attitude to progress can be inferred from his opposition to the removal of the town's turnpike gates:

Nash Nicklin had been among those who had been opposed to the abolition of the turnpike. He would have retained the gate (which had to be opened for every vehicle passing Hanbridge and Bursley) partly from sentiment, partly because he feared that the modern spirit was moving too fast in the land, partly because he could not easily imagine roads without turnpikes, and partly because he regarded the transfer of roads from private to public control as a dangerous socialistic experiment.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *Uncollected Short Stories*, p. 361.

Bennett merges in his narrative those clashes of will, age and temperament which confront Nicklin's outmoded values and erode his moral equilibrium and personal tranquillity. Nicklin's insecurities fuel his obsessive and compulsive nature and emerge in the animus which he conceives against Mr. Sworn, a local businessman. These resentments are exacerbated by his conviction that Sworn has become his rival for Miss Morday's affection, and they nourish his self-delusion – the by-product of his vanity. He shaves off his beard because he assumes, mistakenly, that Miss Morday does not care for facially hirsute men, but he fails to recognise immediately that he has little in common with her, either by instinct or temperament. His emotional limitations are cruelly exposed when she is revealed as an adventuress through her courtship of, and marriage to, Sworn. Bennett is particularly adroit in demonstrating how the bitterness of personal rejection can septicise human vulnerabilities: Nicklin's insecurities are so contaminated that he abandons even the most basic of social courtesies whenever he encounters the couple in Bursley.

Bennett uses the short story's inherent flexibility to compress his narrative – adroitly telescoping the passage of time in order to reveal that Nicklin's hostility becomes habituated, that it nourishes his stubbornness, and that it vindicates him, too, when six years later Miss Morday scandalises the village by abandoning it in the company of the local curate. Binaries of wealth and poverty, happiness and misery, power and enfeeblement permeate Bennett's work, and he draws on them liberally in this story. Although Nicklin acquires several properties and prospers in material terms, he is unable to move from his house in Brougham Street. This is because, as Bennett demonstrates, his life force is perversely nourished by a dependent fixation on his nemesis, Sworn, whom he can neither forget nor desert. Ironically, both of them are united by the same illness – influenza – with Nicklin anxious to preserve

his enemy, so that he can continue to sustain his combative enmity. Within three days of his collapse in Trafalgar Road, Sworn is dead and the triumphant Nicklin emerges as *victor ludorum* in this revenger's tragedy. The malaise which destroys him is not the miserliness of Ephraim Tellwright or Henry Earlfoward, but an obsessive lust for retribution, cultivated over many years as retaliatory compensation for the public affront to his dignity and self-esteem. What Bennett has successfully evoked in this neglected story are the toxic mutations of an elongated spiritual death.

Occasionally in his Five Towns stories, Bennett explores the frictions of social and moral conflict by deploying confidential collusion and platitudinous subversion to foreground his intentions. At the beginning of 'The Dog' (1904), for example, he appears to suggest in his reference to glass houses and blinds that transgression can be both legitimised and savoured by concealment and secrecy:

This is a scandalous story. It scandalized the best people in Bursley; some of them would wish it forgotten. But since I have begun to tell it, I may as well finish. Moreover, like most tales whispered behind fans and across club-tables, it carries a high and valuable moral. The moral – I will let you have it at once – is that those who live in glass houses should pull down the blinds.⁴⁵

Ellis Carter, the 'dog' in this story, is an incarnation of one of Bennett's favourite caricatures – the 'Card' – personified by characters such as Alderman Keats in 'The Revolver' (1912), Jos Curtenty, the gooseherd mayor of Bursley in 'His Worship the Goosedriver' (1904), and most prominently in *The Card* (1911) and *The Regent* (1913) by Denry Machin, unprincipled entrepreneur and metropolitan theatrical impresario.⁴⁶

As with many of Bennett's Five Towns protagonists, Ellis's antecedents came from humble backgrounds and he, like Edwin Clayhanger, is the fortunate

⁴⁵ *Tales of the Five Towns*, p. 48.

⁴⁶ *Matador of the Five Towns*, pp. 265 – 72, *Tales of the Five Towns*, pp. 11 – 26, *The Card: A Story of Adventure in the Five Towns* (London: Methuen, 1911) and *The Regent: A Five Towns Story of Adventure in London* (London: Methuen, 1913).

beneficiary of an industrious and commercially successful father. Left in charge of the works whilst the rest of his family enjoy an unaccustomed holiday in Llandudno, Ellis is preoccupied not with thoughts of management responsibility, but rather with the allure of the annual Bursley Fair – particularly the sensual attractions of Ada, the young girl in charge of the shooting gallery.

Ada Jenkins can find little fulfilment in a peripatetic life which confines her to her shooting gallery booth and, although separated from him by social class, willingly accepts Carter's invitation to accompany him in a dog-cart excursion on Sunday – her only non-working day. Bennett subtly demonstrates how Ellis's failure to control the horse metaphorises the loss of his social dignity, as the recklessly driven vehicle crashes on its return to Bursley. Bennett's suggestive promptings also emphasise that the contretemps is not merely a physical collision, but a clash of values – between those espoused by the carelessness of irresponsible youth and those celebrated by the censoriously respectable chapel-goers and by members of his own family who are all appalled by his Sabbath disgrace. Bennett is particularly astute in capturing the telling emblems of perdition. His relatives recoil from the apotheosis of their social humiliation – Ellis's choice of both vehicle and companion (a green dog-cart and a Wakes girl). Their impeccable bourgeois values and pretensions are further undermined not so much by the orthodox disapproval of the chapel-goers, as by the enraged, yet articulately heterodox remonstrations of Ada's father, who delivers a withering verbal assault on middle-class assumptions of moral rectitude and social superiority:

'It seems to me that if the upper classes, as they call 'em – the immoral classes *I* call 'em – 'ud look after themselves a bit instead o' looking after other people so much, things might be a bit better, Mister Carter. I dare say you think it's nothing as your son should go about ruining the reputation of

any decent, respectable girl as he happens to fancy, Mister Carter; but this is what I say. I say – ⁴⁷

What Mr. Jenkins has to say is never revealed, but Bennett adroitly leaves his reader with nuanced lack of closure at the end this story by juxtaposing the joyless primness of the adults with the exhilarating subversions of their children and flavouring this with the final collusively refracted implication that: “Youth’s a stuff will not endure.”⁴⁸

The return of the synchronic serialist

Sophie Lewis has argued that the synchronic series format of story publishing was born out of the success of the Sherlock Holmes stories which first appeared in July 1891. Her argument is that Arthur Conan Doyle, having realised that readers who missed the first instalment of a serial would not be able to follow the narrative in succeeding editions, resolved this dilemma by writing independent and concentrically free-standing instalments of the case studies of his accomplished gentleman detective.⁴⁹

As he made clear in his *Evening Standard* articles, Bennett was an admirer of Conan Doyle’s work, and he adapted his technique so that he, too, could produce a series of stories that could operate as constituent parts of a synchronic mini saga.⁵⁰ He had first exploited this technique in *The Loot of Cities* (1905), and he repeated it by tracing the progression of Stephen and Vera Cheswardine’s courtship and marriage in six discrete stories, ‘The Nineteenth Hat’ (1910), ‘Vera’s First Christmas

⁴⁷ *Tales of the Five Towns*, pp. 58 – 59.

⁴⁸ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (London: Everyman Dent, 1996), II iii 53, p. 456.

⁴⁹ Sophie Lewis, ‘The Story: A Short Miscellany’ in Raymond Carver, ‘Principles of A Story’, *Prospect* (September 2005), p. 34.

⁵⁰ *The Evening Standard Years*: ‘The Art of the Crime Story: Conan Doyle, A. E. W. Mason and Some Others’, 8 September 1927, p. 81. ‘Recipe for A Classic Mystery-Novel’, 20 June 1929, p. 278 and ‘Detective-Story Writers Hot on the Trail’, 15 May 1930, p. 375.

Adventure’, ‘The Murder of the Mandarin’ (1926), ‘Vera’s Second Christmas Adventure’, all of which appeared in *The Grim Smile of the Five Towns*, ‘The Widow on the Balcony’ (1907), which appeared in *The Matador of the Five Towns* and the uncollected ‘Muscovy Ducks’ (1915). The complexity of bringing such work to market can be seen in their publishing histories. For two of them there is no extant record of their appearance in any of the newspapers or periodicals for which they were written prior to their collection and publication in book form. The first recorded publication of ‘The Nineteenth Hat’ was in *McClure’s* in May 1910 and that of ‘The Murder of the Mandarin’ in *Famous Story* in December 1926; both would clearly have been published in at least one magazine or newspaper, either English or foreign, before or during 1907 and obviously the same applies to the other two stories, for which no record of publication has yet been identified.⁵¹

On a superficial level these stories pander to the most basic staple of magazine fiction – the petty tensions and tactical battles of a prosperous middle-class couple from the beginning of their marriage. Whilst there is a ten year gap between Stephen and Vera Cheswardine when they are on their honeymoon in ‘The Nineteenth Hat’ – he is 30 and she is 20 – this is of secondary consequence to the gap in taste, intellect and temperament which also separates them.

Bennett’s achievement in these stories lies in his casually incisive dissection of marriage as an institution. Although both Stephen and Vera feel affection for each other, their relationship is not idealised. Stephen treats her with self-interested condescension. Since he regards her as his possession, she is denied any economic or personal independence. Vera, in turn, has little understanding of self-restraint and thrift. She is capricious, headstrong and wasteful. Much of her wilfulness is the

⁵¹ Anita Miller, ed., *Arnold Bennett: An Annotated Bibliography 1887 – 1932* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), p. 318 and p. 530.

product of her sublimated yearning for the children that she will never conceive. Stephen's paternal instincts are not so strong, but his energies and creative ambitions are transferred to his passion for his earthenware business. The battles of their wills and egos are fought over material possessions: on honeymoon, Vera covets the hat she sees in a Torquay dress shop simply on a caprice and not because she needs it. Whether it be a silver belt which she cannot afford or a new piano stool which Stephen dislikes, they provide in effect compensatory placebos, building blocks for her self-identity, and the driving energy for her emotional conflicts and rivalry with her husband. Bennett demonstrates, however, that Vera does not regard herself as pitiable and patronised. Although she enjoys the continuing affections and attentions of an old flame – Charlie Woodruff – her emotional intensity ensures that she is loyally anxious to protect and support her husband.

As for Stephen, his belief that marriage can only flourish through the unspoken endorsement of his dominance as benevolent patriarch testifies to his obtuse and authoritarian values. Whenever her choices conflict with his, whether these are suggestions for Christmas presents, foreign holidays or structural alterations to their house, they are vetoed summarily:

During the autumn she was tremendously bored at Sneyd. She had practically no audience for her pretty dresses, and her friends would not flock over from Bursley because of the difficulty of getting home at night. Then it was that Vera had the beautiful idea of spending Christmas in Switzerland. [...] Stephen refused. He remarked bitterly that the very thought of a mince-tart made him ill; and that he hated 'abroad'. Vera took her defeat badly.⁵²

In these stories Bennett delves and burrows into the nature of their marriage, isolating their economic imbalance, highlighting their intellectual incongruities, dwelling on their emotional incompatibilities, observing their begrudging reconciliations, and noting the bitter savour of their passion.

⁵² *Tales of the Five Towns*, p. 219.

The final and sixth story in the synchronic sequence is unique because it is charged with cathartic autobiographical significance. In the uncollected ‘The Muscovy Ducks’, published in *Metropolitan* in July 1915, Bennett extracts his material from his excruciatingly distressful relationship with his wife Marguerite Soulié, in order to analyse the frictions and abrasions of a marriage racked by malice, tension and spite. ‘The Muscovy Ducks’ is the tale of a conjugal power struggle between three people – not a conventional *ménage à trois* triangle – but one involving Stephen, Vera and their gardener, Ingestre, the *de facto* operational director of the twelve acre estate surrounding Chamfrey Hall, which has been bought by the increasingly prosperous Stephen twelve months before the opening of the story.

Vera has developed into an imperious woman lacking in taste and culture and mourning, like Leonora Stanway, the disappearance of her youth as she approaches her fortieth birthday.⁵³ Her former devotee, Charlie Woodruff, has been supplanted by Maccles, a prosperous neighbour with twenty-three acres. Whilst the story may be dismissed as a cathartic release for Bennett’s bitter frustrations with his failing marriage, it nonetheless employs a crafted sub-text in which Vera seeks to rejuvenate her life by embarking on a relationship to restore her deflated self-esteem. Thus, it is linked in thematic companionship to the other stories in which Bennett explores the nature and importance of identity and self-image.

It is, too, a story which relies for its impact on emblematic encoding. Vera is determined to respond to Maccles’ gift of doves by presenting him with two Muscovy ducks. Ambiguous instructions and the linguistic infelicities of Vera’s

⁵³ *Leonora*, p. 5.

French maid, Henriette, seal the fate of the ducks, which are both killed by Friskin, the under-gardener:

Vera caught her breath and then gave a scream. The ducks were dead. They lay side by side in the basket as in a coffin. A flush spread over Vera's cheeks and then she turned white; and then she tried to speak and was stopped by a sob. The sight of the beautiful iridescent birds, exquisitely formed and tinted, which that very morning had eaten out of the pocket of her garden cloak, and which in fancy she had already seen elegantly voyaging on Mr Maccles' lake – the sight of these lovely innocent animals in death, murdered, assassinated beyond recovery, inspired her with horror and rebellion.⁵⁴

In bruised resentment at the death of these child proxies, Vera is determined to ensure that Ingestre, whose behaviour she has never been able to dominate, is dismissed. With reticence and discretion, Bennett refuses to disclose, in this most cathartically charged of his stories, the ultimate impact of this abrasive interlude on the Cheswardines' marriage, but the implication appears to be that, owing to Stephen's tolerant capacity for temporising, the dispiriting emotional vicissitudes of their marriage will persist, as they did in Bennett's own after he had written and published the story (a prognosis which is partially validated by the Cheswardines' later and final appearance in *These Twain* where they are presented in their courtship and early years of marriage as both ardent lovers and bitter-sweet adversaries).⁵⁵

Metropolitan zeitgeist: cultural arbiter and rapporteur

In writing his short stories, Bennett reaffirmed the key characteristics of his craft as a writer. In them, as a member of the cultural commentariat, he glided effortlessly between regional and metropolitan settings and he foraged along and through class and social boundaries in order to animate the commonplace world. Writing in the

⁵⁴ *Uncollected Short Stories*, p. 397.

⁵⁵ *These Twain*, p. 420 and p. 427.

guise of fictional rapporteur, he was able, like T. S. Eliot, to identify and reproduce the post-war zeitgeist with its privileged, but spiritually fragile, inhabitants.

“Myrtle at 6 a.m.” (1929), for example, is very much a story about the privileged and economically emancipated young woman bereft of a meaningful role in society and, in the tonal similarities between Myrtle and Gracie Savott, it can be read as a condensed forerunner of *Imperial Palace*. In this context it operates as a muted dialectic on the post-war opportunities for, and expectations of, young women from affluent families. Bennett’s success in this story, as in *Clayhanger* and *The Old Wives’ Tale*, was based on his ability to draw on the polarised hostilities of generational conflict. The fundamental contrast of values is established between the successful financier and self-made businessman, Emmanuel Emmarce and his enchantingly arrogant, carelessly dissolute twenty-two year old daughter, Myrtle. Her lifestyle is one which Emmarce finds self-indulgent and wasteful:

‘You know my girl, you ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself. Coming home like this at six in the morning after one of your parties! I don’t say much, but something must be said some time. Your cocktails and your dancing and your sleeping it off all day! Day after day and night after night. How old are you? Twenty-two. And look at you! What good are you in the world? What sort of example do you think you’re setting? To servants, for instance?’⁵⁶

In this story, Bennett also probes the inherent capacity of the genre to capture the intellectual paralysis and emotional torpor of irresponsible hedonism. Although Myrtle is a self-indulgent metropolitan socialite, her suffering and ennui are comparable to Thomas Chadwick’s, the provincial tram conductor and social nonentity, because both are afflicted by attritional waves of spiritual isolation. When she complains to her mother that her life is an emotional desert because she has never been encouraged to earn her living independently, the advice she is given is to

⁵⁶ *The Night Visitor and Other Stories*, p. 188.

seek consolation in marriage. Myrtle is disillusioned not just at 6.a.m., but at any time during her day because she has recognised her failure and unwillingness to embrace a work ethic which she knows is the only therapy for her despairing self-recrimination. Her self-awareness is bolstered by her fiancé, Cuthbert Mallins, who warns her that her purposeless indolence and social exclusion (she has nothing to offer in the labour market) are destroying her life. He warns her, too, that the solution to her moral torpor is the energetic exploitation of her intellect through work in the world of business and the management of a household, remedies which she is prepared to embrace with alacrity. This is a story, however, which resists facile closure, and whether her marriage to Mallins will provide the foundations for a fulfilled union of equal partners is left in abeyance by Bennett's artful reticence.

Bennett also demonstrated his versatility as a short-storyist by writing a complement to *Riceyman Steps*. In 'Elsie and the Child'(1924), the title story for a volume published in 1924, Elsie Sprickett's exploitation as house and parlour maid in the service of Dr. Raste is framed against a metropolitan Clerkenwell backdrop. A.S. Wallace in the *Manchester Guardian* described it dismissively as more a bulletin than a piece of fiction, but this judgement fails to appreciate Bennett's achievement in this story. As with the novel, he undertook extensive preparatory research, revisiting Myddleton Square and interviewing his own doctor so that he could learn about the work of panel doctors.⁵⁷ Houses and buildings are always important signifiers in Bennett's fiction, and he uses them here as markers for Elsie's economic and social confinement:

The obscure, hot kitchen, full of cooking-range, sink, deal table, windsor chairs, washing apparatus, racks with crockery, saucepans, buckets, cloths, coal-bin, and cupboards open and shut, looked up subterraneously into the

⁵⁷ *Journals III*, 15 January 1924, p. 24.

forbidden and forlorn July garden through an open window from which steam and odours were issuing.⁵⁸

The suffocating kitchen is crowded with the utensils of domestic labour and the allusions to the racks, the steam and the subterranean enclosure are evocative of the torturous imprisonment in which Elsie as captive is taunted with the alluring, but forbidden, liberation of the summer garden.

However, unlike the novel, the story is no experiment in Modernist technique, and was written mainly because Bennett had recognised, with some irritation, that the success of *Riceyman Steps* had been largely attributable to the reading public's sentimental affection for Elsie, which he regarded as 'Psychologies des foules.'⁵⁹ In many respects, it is a study of characters, environment and social class, and of conflicts of wills, temperament and experiences – principally Eva Raste's reluctance to comply with her parents' wishes that she attend boarding school in Eastbourne. However, it also explores the ethical conflicts inherent in the exercise of power and influence by a dominant middle class and it returns to the mental illness from which Elsie's partner, Joe, was suffering in the novel.

Bennett offers no idealisation of the proletariat in this story, and he takes care to demonstrate that life in Clerkenwell is punctuated by acts of random aggression which evoke displaced memories of the distant violence of the war. Joe's affliction, his inability as a civilian to confront the delayed effects of shell-shock, results in outbursts of violence, and his thrashing of the dog, a mirror incident from *Riceyman Steps*, is a further example of the gratuitous and brutally unpredictable cruelty to be found in post-war Clerkenwell:

Joe passed through the lobby, opened the door to the expectant dog, seized him and began to thrash. Elsie heard the blows, and Jack's squeals were

⁵⁸ Arnold Bennett, *Elsie and the Child: A Tale of Riceyman Steps and Other Stories* (1924; repr. Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1985), p. 1.

⁵⁹ *Letters III*, 25 February 1924, p. 213.

terrible. And the blows did not cease. They waxed in power and rapidity, and Jack's squeals grew deafening. 'Oh, Joe. Joe!' Elsie murmured, sitting up in bed. Then she heard Jack's body flung savagely into the kitchen.⁶⁰

On this occasion, Joe's aggression has been animated by Elsie's fears that they will have to forfeit their posts in the Rastes' household if Eva continues in her stubborn determination to remain at home close to Elsie in Myddleton Square. It is Joe's unanticipated and unrestrained verbal attack on the little girl that ultimately persuades her to leave home for the boarding school in Eastbourne.

Bennett's evocation of the gulf between assumptions of entitlement and bourgeois privilege and the economic and social oppression of the metropolitan urban underclass is deliberately foregrounded in this story. The most graphic insights into the deprivations of Elsie's social and physical incarceration are located not just in the kitchen, but also in her journey to Victoria railway station to bid farewell to Eva and Mrs. Raste:

Elsie had never travelled so far afield. In the great, new reverberating terminus, with its crowds, shops, and strange contrivances of all kinds she ought to have been enchanted and impressed. For, though she had indeed seen the facades of King's Cross, St. Pancras and Euston termini, she had never till that morning been inside any railway station. Nor had she ever beheld a train, save for an occasional glimpse of an Underground train on the exposed part of the Underground line south of Roseberry Avenue. As for travelling in a train – wild dream!⁶¹

Like the Norman peasants in Maupassant's 'La Maison Tellier' (1881) who have rarely travelled out of their village, she is bewildered when she journeys into a wider world for the first time.⁶² Her confused and suffocated sense of space is epitomised by Bennett's clipped statement that she simply had no idea where Victoria station was in relation to Clerkenwell. In its metropolitan insularity, Elsie's life is just as confined twenty years later as Minnie Murgatroyd's was in the long Edwardian

⁶⁰ Arnold Bennett, *Elsie and the Child*, p. 24.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.47 – 48.

⁶² Guy de Maupassant, 'Madame Tellier's Establishment', in *Selected Short Stories* (London: Penguin Classics, 1971), p. 96.

summer, and just as circumscribed as any Five Towns' character of her social class. Whereas Bennett sometimes exploits the potential for omissions, ambiguities and open-ended interpretive possibilities in his stories, at the conclusion of this novelette, the nature of Elsie's existence in her sub-class confinement is underwritten by unequivocal authorial emphasis, and it coalesces uncomfortably around the universal constraints imposed on all muted and oppressed women.

Incursions into textbook psychology

In the 1930s Virginia Woolf, by her own admission, was not above writing lucrative, potboiling stories for the American market.⁶³ It was an odd development, given the pathways of her career as a fiction theorist and short-storyist. The predominant concern of her work as a novelist was a psychological one, and it focused on the human mind, especially the way in which it internalised, filtered and defined, if it could, external reality, and on the possibilities for presenting this experience in fiction. In a story written in 1928, 'Moments of Being: "Slater's Pins Have No Points"', she presents a genteelly impoverished music teacher, Miss Julia Craye, and unravels her life through the speculative and imaginative reconstructions of one of her pupils, Fanny Wilmot. Fanny's impressions are never authenticated, but they suggest that Miss Craye has remained unmarried by choice, and has spent a lifetime burdened by, or exulting in, the psychological consequences of her concealed lesbian impulses. The veil is only lifted momentarily and ambiguously at the end of the story when she embraces Fanny.⁶⁴

⁶³ Adrian Hunter, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 63.

⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'Moments of Being: "Slater's Pins Have No Points"', in *The Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, Susan Dick, ed. (London: Vintage Classics, 2003), pp. 209 – 14.

Through his explorations of the potential of the short story as a psychological genre, Bennett demonstrated that he, like Virginia Woolf, had an excellent eye for the internalised intensities of human emotion and passion. 'Last Love' (1923) is an elegant tale which he begins with spontaneous incongruity in the question posed by twenty-year old Minnie to her middle-aged music teacher: 'Don't you hate ugly undies, Miss Osyth?'⁶⁵ Through truncated but informative revelations, Bennett demonstrates that Miss Osyth is a victim of her emotionally and economically straitened life. Although she has inherited her cottage, her income is small but augmented by her piano lessons and by the sale of her exquisite needlework. The tragedy of her life is encapsulated by Bennett's depiction of her self-interrogation:

She would not have called her existence an unhappy one. But now Minnie's crude question seemed to have precipitated all the unperceived misery which her life had as it were held in solution. She was shocked by the swift vision of all that she had missed. [...] No! She had never been in love. Rarely had she had the chance to be in love; and never the courage to take advantage of the rare chance.⁶⁶

Bennett's description of her anachronistic parlour provides, on the surface, ample support for Virginia Woolf's accusation that he was too preoccupied with the material things which people owned and which surrounded them. However, such an accusation would misinterpret the importance of the parlour as a signifier of her changeless passion which has been resolutely repressed until the arrival of Alexis Beaumont. Alexis is a younger scion of the Beaumont family who had moved to Flittering fifteen years earlier in a doomed attempt to animate the cultural and social life of a conservative rural society. Having returned from exile, the young man awakens Miss Osyth's dormant and latent emotions.

⁶⁵ *Elsie and the Child*, p. 163.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

Her meetings with him, as she bandages his injured hand and takes fresh water and clean pillow slips to the unused hulk in which he has chosen to lodge, offer an emotional emancipation. They are erotically charged and license her to consider a fuller life as a lover. Bennett demonstrates, through her arousal and the subsequent flowering of affection for her young man, the human capacity for self-deceptive and subconscious irrationalities. As raconteur, he achieves this, in part, through insinuations and oclusions. Miss Osyth weeps not just in sympathy for Alexis, but in the suppressed fear of losing him, as he tells her in the intimacy of his boat of his family's refusal to finance his business trip to South America. Her sacramental reward – a brief kiss – is both exciting and unnerving and catalyses her anticipation of bliss with her young admirer.

Bennett's conclusion of the story is couched in Hardy-esque peripeteia. On her return from a hastily arranged visit to Brussels to visit a terminally ill relative, Miss Osyth discovers Minnie and Alexis locked in passionate embrace in the marshes, the intricacies of which the young girl has absorbed from her tutor (and unknown rival in love):

In the hollow she saw Alexis and Minnie sitting side by side, and their lips were joined in a long kiss. They were so young, so graceful, so natural, so ingenuous, so innocent in loving gesture, so fitted to the wild and lovely landscape, that Miss Osyth stood entranced, as much by admiration as by a shocked astonishment. They were pure creatures of the golden age which never was and never will be, but which flickers now and then for a moment into half-existence and vanishes.⁶⁷

Youth, energy, vitality and transient emotional fulfilment conspire tragically to exclude Miss Osyth's pretensions to intimacy. Following her epiphany, she internalises her loss with a fortitude which is compensated by her love of Bach, and by her determination to sacrifice her happiness to protect them both. The poignancy

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 180.

and emotional power of the story lie in the sublimation of her passion into music, and in the conflict between her meek acceptance of vicarious contentment at the prospect of her future and the triumph of the impersonal forces which have unappeasably fashioned her life choices. In theorising the short story, Edgar Allan Poe argued as early as 1842 that the prose tale should evoke a unified impression in its movement towards the completion of the writer's pre-established design.⁶⁸ To a significant degree, Bennett's success in 'Last Love' can be attributed to his faithful observation of this tenet.

As a psychological analyst, Bennett's indebtedness to Maupassant can be seen in what B. M. Eijxenbaum has defined as the 'maximal unexpectedness of a finale'.⁶⁹ That Bennett should adopt one of Maupassant's characteristic narrative ploys in one of his own stories is scarcely surprising, given his enduring admiration for him as a writer and artist – as he made clear in his *Evening Standard* column in July 1929:

When I am overwhelmed with books I say to myself like the naughty child we all are: "I won't look at any of them. I'll read something I know something about." [...] And the earnest and admirable new authors who demand and deserve attention are shamefully cast aside. And what do I turn to? Well, the short stories of de Maupassant, who Meredith said was the greatest of all imaginative prose writers.⁷⁰

In 'The Supreme Illusion', which was written in 1910, Bennett's accreted clues gradually unfurl the complex patterns and pathologies of human interaction. The narrator who has arrived in Paris is incommoded by a contretemps with an ageing, bumptious and unattractive woman, who imperiously appropriates his porter when he arrives at the Terminus Gare St. Lazare Hotel. The narrator, who is a drama critic engaged on a professional appointment to review *Notre Dame de la Lune* by Octave

⁶⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, *Criticism*, 'Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales', (1842), ebooks@Adelaide (2015).

⁶⁹ B. M. Eijxenbaum, 'O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story' in Charles E. May, ed., *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), p. 82.

⁷⁰ Arnold Bennett, 'Books I cannot look at', in *Evening Standard Years*, 18 July 1929, p. 288.

Boissy, and the playwright share more than just a professional bond; when he sees Boissy in the foyer of his hotel he immediately recognises him as a fellow school pupil.

By discretely probing the talented and successful playwright's insecurities, Bennett incrementally exposes his emotional vulnerabilities: Boissy is a neurasthenic who has a morbid horror of both confined and open spaces; he never attends any rehearsals for his plays, nor has he seen any of them performed, although he concedes that their success is attributable to his symbiotic professional relationship with his regular leading lady, Madame Blanche Lemonnier. His professional excursions into artistic creativity offer displacement therapy, since his real passion is not for the theatre but for engineering. It is not the actress, but the woman who has made his life complete and fulfilled. Gradually, the narrator becomes convinced that Boissy's happiness derives not from his material success, nor from his fame and artistic achievements, but rather from his rejuvenating and enduring emotional attachment to his leading lady. When Blanche Lemonnier arrives the concluding shock of the tale can be compared to those in Maupassant's contes, such as 'The Necklace'.⁷¹ Bennett jolts his readers' sensibilities by finally revealing that Boissy's idealised woman is the rebarbative virago who had confronted the narrator on his arrival at the hotel.

In 'The Cornet Player' (1927), which he considered to be his most original story when he wrote it in 1925, Bennett re-employs one of his most successful constructs, the framing narrative, in which the omniscient authority of the narrator is delegated to a collaborative second character. In this case, the story teller is an expert cornet player, able to expatiate on the technical virtuosity of Balfe, Berlioz and

⁷¹ Guy de Maupassant, *The Complete Short Stories of de Maupassant* (New York: Halcyon House, 1947), pp. 27 – 33.

Tchaikovsky, and frustrated by the discordant incompetence of an amateur street player outside the luxury store in which he is taking tea.

This setting is important because it is placed in contrast to the cornet player's Spartan origin. At the heart of the story is Bennett's preoccupation with the human drive to create and sustain pliable identities and palatable self-images. The cornet player's discourse is an elongated lament for his victimhood. His narrative is sustained by the consequences of his unprepossessing childhood and the vertiginous decline in his professional fortunes. It is the vicissitudes of his career which blight his chances of happiness and fulfilment. Only his adventitious meeting with a female cornet player provides him with a degree of material security. Even then, the psychological conflict in the story is contextualised by their competitive artistic temperaments and egos; both want to assume the leading role when they play together in the music halls. The deterioration of her health and the birth of their children restrict his opportunities for cornet practice, and his stifled ambition and sense of isolation are exacerbated by his retirement from public performances, so that whilst there is comfort in the attractions of settled domesticity, there remains a void in his life:

'I expect I couldn't play a cornet now if I tried. It's all gone from me. Now and then I have to come to London on little matters of business, and when I do I always carry this case. I don't know why. Yes, I do know why. It's because I like musicians to know I'm a cornet player – or was one once.'⁷²

On its most accessible level, the story demonstrates that the cornet player's pride and regret in his loss and sacrifice underpin the obligations of disillusioned compromise in marriage. A more modulated interpretation opens up the possibility, however, that the cornet player was no musician at all, and that his empty case was a symbol of a self-deluded life, which had left him bereft of purpose and dependent for social

⁷² *The Night Visitor and Other Stories* p. 35.

acceptance and emotional sustenance on any receptively credulous audience. Even Occam's incisive razor provides no final arbitration for these two conflicting interpretations, a subtle and gnomic lack of closure which to some degree explains Bennett's admiration for this story.

'The Night Visitor' (1929) is equally enigmatic. On the surface it is easy to dismiss it as a potboiling offshoot, but it is energised with ominous force because of its insinuating, chauvinistic violence. Its portrayal of a successful and affluent businessman's patronising and contemptuous attitude to his passive and subordinate wife demonstrates a conviction to which Bennett repeatedly returns in his work: that a woman's role, like Anna Tellwright's, is a renunciatory one. The conflict in this story is not over music but travel. Lucy Reels wishes to travel south for the winter; her husband Anthony refuses and feigns illness. When he confronts a cat burglar who has broken into their service flat they quarrel over his fate. Through Reels' vitriolic taunts, Bennett depicts in cameo the emotional intimidation to which weaker partners are subjected in marriage:

'Who's the most important person in this flat? Possibly you think it's yourself. Well, it isn't. Who are you, after all? What do you do? Nothing but spend, spend, spend. Did you ever earn a penny in your life? Not you! And you never will. You couldn't! You haven't got the brains to earn anything, nor the application, nor the concentration. You're nobody, nobody! And you think you're everybody. Every woman thinks she's everybody. That's what's the matter with women, and the matter with men is that they stand it, because they're so cursedly good-natured.'⁷³

The artistic power of this story rests with Bennett's refusal to operate as an overtly clamant proselytiser. Thus, the structured ambiguity at the end of the tale, when the Doctor dismisses Reels' tirade as a delirious rant, is intensely unnerving. Its minatory echoes of Elsie Sprickett's fate emphasise the insecurity of Lucy's future as the wife of an abrasive and volatile husband and, by extension, unobtrusively project

⁷³ Ibid., p. 17.

the subtlety of Bennett's muffled but audible concern for the potential fate of all women as the common, classless victims of abusive and domineering partners.

All of the stories collected in *The Night Visitor* were written after Bennett had reached the peak of his artistic powers and when he was most exposed to the Modernists' sniping contempt for his work. However, as Chris Baldick has indicated, the fortified perimeters separating Edwardians and Modernists were never impregnable:

By the 1920s, it was accepted by most commentators on fiction that a major tendency of the modern novel in its higher artistic branches was in its devotion to analysing subjective states, often at the expense of 'external' action.⁷⁴

As he also makes clear, the evocation of subjectivity as a post-Edwardian revolt against external realism ignores the 'psychological element in the fiction of Bennett and his contemporaries'.⁷⁵

Some of his stories clearly reveal Bennett in experimental mood. For example, in 'The Wind' (1928) he angulates the Victorian pathetic fallacy in a tone reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927):

The vast stretch of lion-coloured sands; the vaster stretch of tumbling gray sea; the still vaster stretch of disordered gray-inky clouds which passed endlessly at a great rate from west to east across the firmament; the wind; and one small barelegged figure on the sands. The wind had been blowing hard for days; it varied in strength from a stiffish breeze to half a gale; once or twice it had surprisingly gone right round to the east, and the clouds had uncovered the sun, and the showers been briefer and fewer; but during the whole holiday the wind had never ceased.⁷⁶

The wind is an emblem of the marital discord that troubles Frederick and Edna Lammond. The cause of the discord is the birth of a child, an intrusion into a relationship which Frederick Lammond, a successful businessman, had assumed was a contented one. Although he is delighted by, and fascinated with, his eighteen-

⁷⁴ Chris Baldick, *The Oxford English Literary History*, 10, pp. 189 – 90.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁷⁶ *The Night Visitor and Other Stories*, p. 97.

month old daughter, his values seem constrained by his reference to her as the most intrusively expensive toy on earth, and by a latent but powerful jealousy and resentment of her presence.⁷⁷ In this story, Bennett appears at his most psychologically sensitive and alert in his description of the inchoate and self-absorbed perceptions of the infant girl:

The baby, who for some ridiculous reason was usually addressed by her father as Joe, surveyed idly, as she moved, the expanse of sand. The sand was illimitable, and hence beyond her conception. She did not know it was called sand; but she knew what it was. It was a substance which yielded pleasantly to the clutch of her toes, and which amusingly worked itself up between her toes, producing an agreeable tickle. Though alone in the infinite, she was not a bit afraid, being secure in her conviction that she was the centre of the universe and the most important phenomenon in the universe.⁷⁸

Through deft contrast, Bennett reveals how the wind frets and chastises Edna's beautiful body, whipping and scarifying the raw wounds of her festering relationship. Its malevolent and minatory presence is felt more keenly as the Lammonds' misfortunes and adversity increase with the news of the sudden illness of Edna's mother:

The wind was indeed rising. It seemed to rush out in a continuous but irregular stream from some lair behind the house. Every tree – and there were many – in the vicinity waved its agitated, rustling plumes, and the wrought-iron sign of the art-pottery shop opposite the house creaked as it swung.⁷⁹

It strikes Frederick's cheeks as he self-consciously pushes his child in her pram through the streets of the coastal town, following Edna's urgent return to her mother in Sevenoaks. Ashamed and threatened by what he perceives as the derision of pedestrians and motor passengers alike, Frederick's refuge from them and the wind is a solid mill. His symbolic abandonment of his daughter, as he leaves her to watch a nearby cricket game, emphasises his self-indulgent rashness, and points to the powerful asymmetries of negligent carelessness and devoted parental love.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 98.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 100.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 108.

Edna's unexpected return and the discovery of the missing child's buffeted and abandoned pram bring the story to a menacing climax. The final threat to the marriage appears to be prefigured by Joe's disappearance, a fate apparently mocked by the wind's destructive and terrorising ferocity:

The incredible noises deafened every ear. Edna covered her ears with her hands, and shrank cringing before the might of the wind, which had now revealed the full horror of its intentions, all its previous exploits being reduced by comparison to airy trifling. The superstructure of the mill toppled over and crashed in complex ruin on the grass.⁸⁰

As the child emerges from the destroyed structure without any physical harm, both parents are reconciled. The potent symbol of their discordant selfishness, the howling wind, only subsides with the recognition of their mutual love and responsibility for their daughter. Whilst it may not offer the conflict of voices that can be heard in stories such as Katherine Mansfield's 'Prelude' (1917), Bennett's affinities with the disjointed internalisations of literary Modernism are conspicuous in this story's psychological subjectivities and symbolism.

Afterword

Bennett was never just an accomplished regionalist, and by adopting multiple identities he presented many of his stories with subtlety and finesse against rural, metropolitan and Continental backgrounds. In negotiating the relationships between editor, writer and reader, and in responding to market conditions and tightly constructed commercial imperatives, he was able to validate the cultural appetites and aspirations of a nascent but burgeoning middlebrow readership. In doing so, he frequently challenged, satirised and subverted social and moral normatives through fluid negotiations of political, aesthetic, cultural and gender conventions.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 117.

Bennett was never prominent as a radical experimenter in his short fiction, and his work never accommodated the full-blown metanarratives and radical dissonances of quintessential literary Modernism. Virginia Woolf and her acolytes saw him, mistakenly, as an arch pander to an intellectually enfeebling popular culture. Dazzled by their élitist socio-cultural agenda, the Modernists misconceived when they accused him of turning the craft of letters into a trade rather than an art. Just as they were fascinated with the sombre recesses of human psychology and the sublimated, opaque impressions of daily life, so in his short stories was Bennett – when it suited him.

In his fusion of regional, rural, metropolitan and Continental spaces, Bennett was able to capture in his stories the essence of the commonplace world with its tragic vulnerabilities, unfulfilled potential and personal compromises. This he achieved through his restless exploration of those pathways which allowed him to discover and interpret the complexities of self-identity, social hierarchy and cultural integrity. That Bennett was much more than a formulaic scribbler of short fiction for the mass markets can be seen in the number of his stories which succeed artistically through their unresolved conflicts, tantalising ambiguities and perplexing lack of closure.

Bernard Bergonzi argued in 1970 that the short story was of limited value, ‘both in the range of literary experience it offers and its capacity to deepen our understanding of the world, or of one another.’⁸¹ Bennett’s stories not only

⁸¹ Bernard Bergonzi, cited in Charles E. May, ‘The Nature of Knowledge in Short Fiction’, *Studies in Short Fiction*, 21:4 (Fall 1984), pp. 329 – 30.

undermine this assertion, but also succeed in exploiting the potential of the genre which has been identified by theorists such as Elizabeth Bowen and Charles E. May.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

When Arnold Bennett began to write his play *What the Public Wants* in October 1908, he had no doubt that he was in his creative prime.¹ It was first performed by the Stage Society in London in May 1909, and then ran for a month at the Aldwych Theatre. As Bennett noted, Lord Harmsworth was his hero and the press and theatre the objects of his mockery.² In this play, the newspaper proprietor, Sir Charles Worgan, a millionaire who originates from the Five Towns, presides like Evelyn Orcham over a thriving business with in excess of 1,000 employees. Doyen of the Yellow Press and the owner of forty publications, he has revolutionised journalism, and is driven by a single imperative: to maximise commercial revenue by providing the public with the newspapers for which it is prepared to pay. As Sir Charles puts it in Act One:

There seems to be a sort of notion about that because it's newspapers I sell, and not soap or flannel, that I ought to be a cross between General Booth, H.G. Wells and the Hague Conference. I'm a manufacturer, just like the fellow who sells soap and flannel: only a damned sight more honest. There's no deception about my goods. You never know what there is in your soap or your flannel, but you know exactly what there is in my papers, and if you aren't pleased you don't buy. I make no pretence to be anything but a business man. And my speciality is what the public wants – in printed matter.³

His best-selling newspapers the *Daily Mercury* and the *Evening Courier* are pitched at what would be defined today as the popular market and are financed and sustained by generous advertising revenues. Persuaded by Emily Vernon, a young widow from the Five Towns, to provide financial support for the play in which she is appearing – John Ford's *The Broken Heart* – and to rescue the ailing Prince's Theatre in which it

¹ Pound, *A biography*, p. 194.

² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³ *What the Public Wants*, pp. 22 – 23.

is being performed, Worgan intervenes, and restores the theatre to financial health by insisting that only popular plays, like *The Merchant of Venice*, are performed. His precious theatrical manager, St. John Holt, resigns in protest. In its title and contents, Bennett's play captures the central tensions of his career – the conflict and clashes between art, culture, mass communication, public taste and finance.

Sir Charles Worgan was not a polymath. Arnold Bennett was. He cultivated many tastes – from music to painting, from architecture to sculpture, from politics to psychology, from philosophy to religion – and he effortlessly absorbed these diverse interests into the integrated components of his career as a journalist, literary critic, novelist, dramatist and cultural guru. It is no surprise that when he died in 1931 he was energetically pursuing other creative avenues, particularly in the developing film industry.

Bennett always identified himself as a journalist. It is a significant self-ascription, firstly because his journalism provides an illuminating commentary on the diverse writers, critics, artists and philosophers who influenced him both as a novelist and as a cultural theorist, and secondly because it functions as a *vade mecum* in documenting the most notable changes to the British literary landscape over a thirty-year period. It is also significant because it demonstrates his ability to recognise the insecurities of middlebrow and middle-class aspirational culture and to respond to these through popular professional primers, self-help manuals and pocket philosophies. In addition, although he is often described as a complacent chauvinist, his journalism proves that this accusation is a canard because he was, in fact, a consistent proponent of modulated feminist polemics and a vociferous advocate for greater social justice.

Bennett was an ambitious man: he sought recognition as an artist and craftsman, but he also coveted fame and wealth. He was a conspicuous consumer, acquiring at the height of his career a Queen Anne country house in Thorpe-le-Soken, Essex and two sailing yachts.⁴ His popularity, however, sowed the seeds for the attacks which began to undermine him in his lifetime. They began early in his career – Katherine Mansfield was the first to mock him in the *New Age* in May 1911 – and they destroyed his reputation after his death.⁵ At the heart of these criticisms were the complaints that Bennett was a literary profiteer, a ‘*pisseur de copie*’, a commercial vulgarian and a tasteless self-promoter. He was viewed by his most strident critics as the streptococcal incarnation of popular culture.

Bennett was sensitive to these criticisms, especially to the accusations that his potboiling serials were trite and that in writing them he operated simply as the mercenary puppet of magazine and newspaper editors and as the servant of the culturally stupefied mass consumers which their publications nourished. Bennett’s attitude towards his serials and potboilers may have been ambivalent on occasions, but he was not constrained about publishing them because he never contended that they were high Art. He was discomfited by the occasional clumsiness of his serials and sometimes uninspired when he was writing them, but he viewed them, without embarrassment, as competent commercial ventures – valuable not just because they provided him with the financial power to concentrate on his serious fiction, his journalism and his lucrative theatrical work, but also because they helped him to develop as a craftsman. As this thesis has demonstrated, they should be viewed neither as the meretricious outcrops of popular fiction, nor as graphomaniac compensation for his inability to communicate in speech, because the more

⁴ Drabble, *A Biography*, p. 194, p. 191 and p. 251.

⁵ Katherine Mansfield, ‘A P.S.A.’, *New Age*, 9:5, 25 May 1911, p. 95.

accomplished ones presciently allude to social, political and economic tensions which still resonate in the globalised twenty-first century.

Bennett was an accomplished raconteur and in his fusion of regional, rural, metropolitan and Continental spaces, he was able to capture in his short stories the commonplace world with its tragic vulnerabilities, unfulfilled potential and personal compromises. He was, however, as the thesis has demonstrated, much more than a mere, formulaic scribbler and servant of the mass markets. His artistic achievements can be seen not just in the Chekhovian resonance of ‘The Death of Simon Fuge’, but also in the number of his stories which succeed artistically through their unresolved conflicts, tantalising ambiguities and perplexing lack of closure.

Although he became disenchanted with the Five Towns, he never completely turned his back on his regional construct; even as late as 1927, he introduced characters from Bursley (Lord Furber and his wife, Maidie) in his novel, *The Strange Vanguard*. His Five Towns fiction was a sophisticated construct because in his presentation of his enclosed communities, he combined mimetic topography and local culture with deft and complex interpretations of social and private identity. What particularly distinguishes his Five Towns novels was his ability to view them through multiple prisms, as social critic, cultural anatomist, regional historian, symbolist, feminist, psychologist, sociologist and subversively liberal polemicist.

His Five Towns novels are valuable artefacts because in them he was able to explore the universal psychological complexities which transcend the boundaries of those forced to endure unexceptional lives in commonplace provincial backwaters. They are also valuable not just because they provide localised cameos of an industrialised Victorian conurbation, but also because they authenticate the ineluctable irreconcilability of Darwinian polarities: change, transformation,

adaptation and survival as opposed to stasis, calcification, obsolescence and extinction.

The Old Wives' Tale is Bennett's crowning success as an artist because it provides an eloquent exposition of the universal interplay between youth, energy, vigour, power and physical and intellectual enfeeblement. The riddle of life and the existentialist inexplicability of the human condition can be found in this novel in the cultural forces, moral currents, physical fragilities and evolutionary inevitabilities which conspire to undermine the entrenched power and self-interest of secular, religious, political, cultural and social structures.

Bennett was never just an accomplished regionalist and, as this thesis has demonstrated, he never declined into an antiquated and beached reactionary. The issues which he had tentatively explored in his first and unsuccessful novel – social, cultural, sexual and personal liberation – preoccupied him for the whole of his career and were a fundamental part of his post-war writing. From the beginning of his career, he was always receptive to innovation, change and experimental challenges: Modernist stirrings emerged as early as 1916 in his attempts to produce new manner novels and these spilled over into his post-war career. Virginia Woolf and many of his other critics regarded him, mistakenly, as a mercenary relic of a mythical Edwardian idyll, without ever acknowledging that he shared their fascination with the repressions and sublimations which controlled social interaction, legitimised self-identity and undermined self-perception. After he had completed *These Twain*, the scientific interest which he took in the work of Freud and Rivers energised the powerful currents which shaped the emergence of his new manner fiction and demonstrated unequivocally the invalidity of Woolf's claim – one which in its durability has caused grievous damage to Bennett's reputation and standing – that he

could not write convincingly and powerfully about private interpretations and interior apprehensions of the external world. By exploring shifting landscapes of objects and possessions in his metropolitan fiction, he successfully identified the provenance of unruly neuroses and he isolated, too, the communal and individual uncertainties of human existence. The complexities of these revelations – psychological instability, credulous mysticism and metaphysical anxiety – are highly significant because with their symbolic densities they transcend both regional and metropolitan boundaries.

Bennett's most strident antagonists have failed to recognise, however, that he demonstrated (both during the war and in the 1920s) an appreciation of, and interest in, Modernism, not just as a cultural aesthete, but as a literary craftsman, artist and critic. Their collective contempt is most vividly illustrated by Virginia Woolf's comments when she was preparing to write *The Years* (1937). Whilst she was willing to accept that Bennett's forte lay in his ability to transform everyday life into art, she refused to recognise the originality of his most carefully crafted foray into literary Modernism. As she noted in a letter to Ethel Sands on 24 April 1924:

I have to read *Riceyman Steps* [Arnold Bennett] in order to consolidate a speech which I have to make; and I'm drowned in despair already. Such dishwater! pale thin fluid in which (perhaps, but I doubt it) once a leg of mutton swam.⁶

The lecture to which she refers was later published as 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown'. Bennett never deployed the obvious *tu quoque* – that his new manner fiction, at its best, was just as innovative as hers, and that in his distinguished role as literary critic he had stood resolutely and persistently as an adversary of cultural intolerance.

⁶ Nigel Nicolson, ed., *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1923 – 1928, vol. III* (London, Hogarth Press, 1977), letter to Ethel Sands, 24 April 1924, pp. 100 – 01.

As a professional writer, Bennett travelled freely along the continuum linking the artist to the craftsman and tradesman. His finest achievements – *Anna of the Five Towns*, *The Old Wives' Tale*, the *Clayhanger* trilogy, *The Pretty Lady* and *Riceyman Steps* were the artistic expressions of his innate talent, aesthetic prowess, and acute emotional empathy. As a craftsman, he drew on his experience and skill to conjure seductive (and frequently open-ended) polemical, philosophical, political and realist narratives, such as *Whom God Hath Joined*, *The Price of Love*, *Lilian*, *Lord Raingo* and *Imperial Palace*. He expressed few contemporaneous misgivings when he chose to operate as a commercial tradesman and vendor. Indeed, he fully understood the contradictory imperatives of the publishing industry and satirised them in his novella, *A Great Man*.

Given the achievements which I have set out, this thesis has amply demonstrated (even without reference to Bennett's work as a dramatist and film writer) that the breadth and significance of his contribution to English literary life remains undervalued. His enriching and polyphonous interpretations of high and mass culture are now neglected, or worse, unknown. As this thesis has demonstrated, our cultural obligations to restore and re-energise interest in this most versatile, accomplished and erudite writer are inescapable.

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