
BOOKS & WRITERS

Pessimism & Pineapples

Arnold Bennett—By P. N. FURBANK

MARGARET DRABBLE has written a biography of Arnold Bennett which is sober, solid and workmanlike like the traditional notion of his novels (though actually I slightly question their solidity).¹ Her impulse to write it sprang, she tells us, from a lifelong appetite for Bennett's work, extending to practically everything he wrote. Also, to a degree, from self-identification.

My mother's family came from the Potteries, and the Bennett novels seem to me to portray a way of life that still existed when I was a child, and indeed persists in certain areas. My own attitudes to life and work were coloured by many of the same beliefs and rituals, though they were further in the past for me, but as Bennett knew all too well they are attitudes that die hard. He might have been surprised to find how closely I identify with them, after two or three generations of startling change. So, like all books, this has been partly an act of self-exploration.

It is a "critical" biography in the old style, with regular synopses and critiques of the novels; the kind, too, which draws surmises from the novels when the facts run thin, or—a favourite device—asks rhetorical questions: "an operation in Paris (did she not trust English doctors?) for Marguerite", etc. The surmising runs into trouble every now and then, as when Margaret Drabble argues thus: Bennett's wife was fond of reciting in public; presumably Bennett cannot have liked this, though he never said so, or he would have used recitations as incidents in his novels. Too much of the dog that didn't bark in the night in this. But plot-synopses, which one skims, and surmises, which one greets with caution, are not, after all, so easily dispensed with. As Henry James says, artists are awkward creatures to biographise, for they have their back turned to us when practising their art. And there is much that is rewarding in this biography. Margaret Drabble tells us things that Reginald Pound, in his *Life* published in 1952, did not, and could not, deal with. We get a very well-drawn portrait of Bennett's wife, Marguerite

Soulié, who was a handful, indeed more than a handful, and the kind of wife famous writers attract, those with frustrated "artistic" leanings. It is a tribute to Bennett, I think, that the marriage though it turned out badly, did not turn out tragically, so that after their separation Marguerite continued to think of herself, and write about herself, as his wife. There is a lovely snapshot of her and Bennett in middle age in this book, standing side by side, heavily hatted, on the tennis court. They are exactly the same height and stand their ground separately but firmly, Bennett practically swallowing his moustache with his "don't-try-to-come-it-over-me" expression.

Margaret Drabble has also talked at length with and learned much of great interest from Dorothy Cheston, the young actress with whom Bennett lived in his later years. The story of his fathering a daughter by her in late middle age is cheering. Never was there such an arranger, such an organiser of the twenty-four hours of the day, and he fits fatherhood into his life with the same cheerful competence as his piano-playing, meditation, calligraphy, and study of Herbert Spencer. We get a striking picture from Margaret Drabble's pages of the rigidity of Bennett's character, his determination to be self-sufficient, to dictate to his mind what it should and should not think about, and to "come to a definite arrangement" with his own energy. She sees this, no doubt rightly, as having been strengthened by his cruel rebuff in 1906 by an American girl, Eleanor Green. Certainly it grew with the years, and it connects with the fascination that visible organisation—the working of great hotels and department stores—had for him. There was a penalty to pay for it, it appears. In his last months a mad obstinacy overtook him, driving him, though an insomniac and hypersensitive to noise, to take a flat immediately over Baker Street railway station.

NO DOUBT THEN, but that this is a worth-while and rewarding book. Yet I feel it is not exactly the book I want about Bennett. It does not quite bring

¹ *Arnold Bennett*. By MARGARET DRABBLE. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £4.95.

one into intimacy with him, nor on the other hand does it remove one far enough to reveal his picturesqueness. (Though, to be fair, in order not to duplicate the work of Reginald Pound, Margaret Drabble has deliberately underplayed the later, more picturesque years, in favour of the earlier and provincial ones.) To put it another way, the air is too dry, there are too few problems. Bennett, the drift is, wrote *this* novel, which was very fine, and *that* novel, which was not quite so good, and at his best he shows "creative imagination at its most powerful" and vies with, or surpasses, Dickens. ("... at times I find his protests about social conditions more moving than Dickens's, and his irony more delicately judged.") It sounds as though we all agreed what novels are and what life is and have no need to turn aside and brood on mysteries. Dickens, Maupassant, Bennett and Margaret Drabble herself are engaged on the same well-understood task: one observes some life, one feels, one invents, and then one puts it all down on paper as well as one can. The problems of art and the problems of life hardly change for a professional novelist; his is one of those hallowed craft-traditions like sail-making or designing clocks.

How reassuring if it were so. But things like the "death of a novel" or the "downgoing of the West" do obtrude, and I cannot share this timeless view of Bennett. He, and all he stood for in fiction, looks strange and remote and fascinating to me, and I want this strangeness put in focus. It is a strangeness to do with class, Edwardianism and the meeting of French and English culture. There is a good phrase in Margaret Drabble's book to the effect that Bennett was not interested in money for its own sake: what he valued was his own earning capacity, and "the continual surprise of being a wealthy man." "Continual surprise"—how that phrase rings in the ear as an expression of Bennett's enterprise as a novelist and the enterprise of so many of his fellow-writers. They were writers haunted by bad conscience. They felt uneasily in their hearts that most human life was trivial and that they despised it, yet their function as novelists was to show a romance and "glory" in it. This was the lifelong endeavour of G. K. Chesterton, and, in their own way, of Wells, Forster and Barrie.

FOR BENNETT this effort of continual surprise, bouncing oneself into visions of glory in the banal, was a matter of conscious faith—a faith which he identified, confusingly, with the theories of French naturalist fiction. He asserted that his calling as a writer was to find romance in the "Pentonville omnibus." "At bottom I am proudly content with the Pentonville omnibus",

he wrote to Frank Harris in 1908. "If I cannot take a Pentonville omnibus and show it to be fine, then I am not a fully equipped artist. (And I *am*.)" The "fully-equipped artists" to whom he went to school, however, were the Goncourts and Maupassant. And the guiding impulse of the Goncourts and Maupassant, as of so many French writers since Flaubert, was something very different: it was a bitter hatred of the *bourgeois* and the *petit-bourgeois*. In so far as they showed compassion, as they often and magnificently did, it was a rueful compassion, inspired by the knowledge of how much they, and everyone, were a *bourgeois* or a *petit-bourgeois* at heart. Their compassion sprang from an indignation at the futility of most lives in modern society. The compassion of Arnold Bennett worked differently. It proceeded from a generous wish to deny the futility of commonplace lives. The truth is he detested the Potteries and the life he would have lived had he stayed among them: it was the burning desire of his youth to escape, and he could hardly bear to revisit there. The task he set himself in his literary life, however, was to find fineness and glory in what he had left behind. Hence, I feel, a great oddness and stress of contradiction in his tone.

The general view that *The Old Wives' Tale* is his masterpiece seems to me correct, for it is a deeply appealing novel; but even here, though his model was Maupassant's *Une Vie*, Bennett's Englishness and Edwardianism is clear on every page. In some ways the connection between the novels is very close, closer than he may have realised himself. He was probably unconscious of his borrowing in the following:

Maupassant: She [the heroine, Jeanne's, mother] never lost a chance of speaking of "her" hypertrophy and talked of it so often that it seemed as if the disease were peculiar to her and belonged to her as something unique to which no one else had a right. The baron spoke of "my wife's hypertrophy" and Jeanne of "mama's hypertrophy" as they might say her dress or hat or umbrella.

Bennett: The sciatica was a dear enemy of long standing, always affectionately referred to by the forgiving Constance as "*my sciatica*"; the rheumatism was a newcomer, unprivileged, spoken of by its victim apprehensively yet disdainfully as "*this rheumatism*".

Nevertheless the contrast between the two novels is striking. For, as I have said, Bennett is out to find "romance" in the quotidian; and this may mean romance for his characters, or romance only for us, or something in between.

The book is very different from Maupassant's, of course, in being a nostalgic "period" novel, evoking the recent past with Thackerayan affection: and in this respect, of course, the "romance" is solely for us. So far, however, as his characters are concerned the main, and almost the sole,

source of romance and glory is adolescence. The moments in life which seem to Bennett inspiring, in all his novels, are those when the young say to themselves that, at last, they are "living", they have entered life's drama, they are learning the meaning of words they have hitherto merely paid lip-service to. Here is Sophia in *The Old Wives' Tale*, after her second meeting with the fascinating Gerald Scales:

She was drunk; thoughts were tumbling about in her brain like cargo loose in a rolling ship. Her entire conception of herself was being altered; her attitude towards life was being altered. The thought which knocked loudest against its fellows was, "Only in these moments have I begun to live!"

And here is Hilda in *Hilda Lessways*:

She thought how wonderful it was that she, the shaking little girl who yesterday had run off with fourpence to buy a meal at a tripe-shop, should be the cause of this emotion in such a man. She thought: "My life is marvellous". She was dizzied by the conception of the capacity of her own body and soul for experience.

It is an emotion which, with luck, is not left behind with youth. Here is the sober middle-aged Mr Prohack, experiencing "artistic" London life for the first time.

Somehow he could scarcely believe that it was not a hallucination, and that he was really in Putney [where his daughter Sissie is running a dancing-school] and that his own sober house in which Sissie had been reared still existed not many miles off.

For Mr Prohack, not continuously but at intervals, possessed a disturbing faculty that compelled him to see the phenomena of human life as they actually were, and to disregard entirely the mere names of things—which mere names by the magic power of mere names usually suffice to satisfy the curiosity of most people and to allay their misgivings if any.

... Odd as the spectacle was, Mr Prohack enjoyed it ... he enjoyed the thought that both girls and men had had the wit to escape from the ordinary world into this fantastic environment created out of four walls, a few Chinese lanterns, some rouge, some stuffs, some spangles, friction between two pieces of metal, and the profoundest instinct of nature. ... "To think", he reflected, "that this sort of thing is seriously going on all over London at this very instant."

But the power to recapture the sense that one is "living" for the first time has a corollary: that for most of the time one does *not* feel one is "living" and an actor in the shared drama of life. Thus the characters in *The Old Wives' Tale* may develop aches or wrinkles, or tragedy may overtake them, but they do not believe it. This is not age or tragedy, they feel, but some private accident peculiar to themselves. For Bennett, life is a continual adolescence. And of course he is right, in a way, and it is a truth to which another "Edwardian" writer, Proust, gave memorable

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utterance. Thus I am not saying it to discredit Bennett, but merely to emphasise how much it dominates his work.

THE VALUE ATTACHED by Bennett to this feeling of "living" is *kudos*, prestige, success. Thus in *The Old Wives' Tale*, when Sophia finds her friend, the ageing courtesan Madame Foucault, collapsed in the corridor after a quarrel with her lover, "a shapeless mass of lace, frilled linen, and corset", her first thought is "that she had encountered life on a plane that would correspond to her dreams of romance. And she was impressed with a feeling somewhat akin to that of a middling commoner when confronted with a viscount." Again, when, in the same novel, Daniel Povey murders his wife, Bennett depicts the populace of Bursley as overjoyed at the prestige of the event. For once they have figured in "real life." Bennett, characteristically, depicts a crowd, such as congregates outside Povey's house, as a composite child or adolescent.

Now this prestige or success attached by Bennett to the experience of "real life" is clearly closely bound up with his own life aims. Success was the very keynote of Bennett's life. He was a man who made tests for success. I have read somewhere that for him it was a sign of success in life if there was a fresh pineapple on the sideboard. He achieved success on a huge scale, and, contrary to the teaching of moralists, he enjoyed every moment of it and did not find it hollow. How I think he achieved this, though, was by constantly reminding himself of his adolescence and the fantasies of success that he nourished then. Here, I suggest, is a clue to his interest in "continual adolescence." He was really a very strong character, as well as a very nice one, and was never in the least spoiled by success. People, indeed, thought him ostentatious and vulgar, with his frilled shirts and gold fobs, but this may have been partly envy, and at all events he knew very well what he was doing with his appearance and his celebrity. Unlike Balzac he was chasing no social fantasies. Indeed he was a most un-snobbish man: Reginald Pound tells a nice story of how a "distinguished London physician" was dining with a Prince of the royal blood at the Garrick Club, and, seeing Bennett dining alone, said he would like to present him to the Prince. "Bennett's response to the courtesy was to draw his napkin across his mouth, turn and stare over the back of his chair at the waiting guest, call out with a casual wave of the hand: 'Hullo!' and resume his meal."

BUT IF AS A MAN he was far from a snob, as a writer the force of convention did, in a way, make him one. That is to say, try as he

might, and indeed because he tried so hard, he could not after all avoid patronising humble and commonplace life. (It required the genius of a Joyce or a Lawrence to overcome literary convention in this matter.) It is for this reason that I cannot quite accept the valuation commonly placed on *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger*. Showing the romance of the Pentonville omnibus was all too much an act of will with him. He does it on principle and, too often, against the current of his feelings; he exclaims too loudly, in his particular tone of ecstatic facetiousness. The motive is generous, but the effect is somehow contemptuous. There is something contemptuous, to my ear, in his tone towards Sophia, in the passage I have quoted, and again in this:

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!

Bennett, in so loudly proclaiming the glory of the commonplace, is actually travestying it, or at least firmly asserting his own aloofness from it. He writes as though there were something comic in a provincial girl going through universal human experiences and that he were charitably overlooking the fact. In the case of Sophia, who has charm and youth on her side, his tone can pass for geniality; but with other less favoured characters it is definitely jarring. There is no doubt that he considers Maria Insull, the ugly, efficient chief assistant in the Baines shop, in the same novel, a barely-human scarecrow of a woman, and her lover, the ill-tempered old chemist Charles Critchlow, as not much better. Yet he can write of them thus:

... for Charles Critchlow she happened to be an illusion. He had cast eyes on her and had seen youth, innocence, virginity. During eight years the moth Charles had flitted round the lamp of her brilliance, and was now singed past escape.

The facetiousness is offensive, one feels: an offence against the "life" he claims to celebrate.

The Old Wives' Tale is a more comfortable novel than *Une Vie* or *L'Education sentimentale*, partly because of its affectionate "period" interest in bygone clothes and manners, but it is also a more depressing one. For the message of its fine concluding section, memorably entitled "What Life Is", is that the one sure thing about life is that people grow old, and then they die. E. M. Forster was right to say that Time is the

true hero of the novel. Some of Bennett's most excellent writing (as Margaret Drabble notes) depicts the mere fact of time passing.

In June and July it would happen to them [Constance and her husband] occasionally to retire before the last silver of dusk was out of the sky. They would lie in bed and talk placidly of their daily affairs. There would be a noise in the street below. "Vaults closing!" Samuel would say, and yawn. "Yes, it's quite late," Constance would say. And the Swiss clock would rapidly strike eleven on its coil of resonant wire.

The pathos of mere diurnality, of the clock and the calendar, was never more lovingly caught than by Bennett. And he exploits to the limit those devices of Victorian fiction by which events are distanced for the reader, and begin to have the remoteness and appeal of his own irretrievable past. There is a passage in *Une Vie* in which the heroine old and half-crazy, finds a bundle of calendars belonging to her youth, and, pinning them to the wall, spends whole days asking herself "Now, what was I doing then? and then?" In a way, it sometimes seems, Bennett has no more to say than poor Jeanne.

IT IS, AT LEAST, a desolate message that *The Old Wives' Tale* brings. Constance and Sophia have

never truly lived, though life has passed for them. Their life has been a dream. They have had, as do all humans according to Bennett, their brief moments of telling themselves "My life is marvelous!" or "I am beginning to live." This is the best that Bennett can point to in life; and it is mere biology, a matter of belonging to the human species. They have never lived as *individuals* or felt, "I am myself, and what I feel now can never be cancelled." Poor Sophia, beside the body of her dead husband, is overwhelmed by the sense that "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. He had ill-treated her; he had abandoned her; he had been a devious rascal; but how trivial were such accusations against him! The whole of her huge and bitter grievance against him fell to pieces and crumbled. 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.

It is not so far from how Bennett himself pictured life. Such is the black pessimism that underlies his "romance of the quotidian."

Two Marxists

Fischer & Benjamin—By LAURENCE LERNER

WHEN WE THINK about Marxist theories of literature, the name which springs to mind first is invariably Lukács: he is the most influential and the most learned of all Marxist critics, and his shadow has lain heavy on the aesthetic orthodoxies of Marxism. At the end of his autobiography¹ Ernst Fischer steps out of this shadow: "I revere him as a teacher, love him as a man, and quarrel with many of his aesthetic opinions." The quarrel had not yet begun in 1945, when the book ends: it came later

"with my increasing distrust of all classical, doctrinaire aesthetics, with my gradual realisation that an earlier period of art had grown outmoded, was come to an end, and that a new one was in process of taking over."

This was an important realisation for Fischer and for scores like him: for the Lukács orthodoxy is that modernism is decadent, the art of the reac-

tionary bourgeoisie; that its irrationalism is a refusal to see man as a social being, or to admit his power over his own destiny, and that timelessness and fatalism are the essentially negative postulates of the refusal of the great 19th-century realistic tradition. I happen to think this view is largely correct, and that most of the new artistic forms of our century do not spring from a new and forward-looking vision of man in society; but it is a view that has embodied in extreme doctrinaire form all that is most distasteful in Marxism. We glimpse something of this in Fischer's encounter with Johannes R. Becher, who moved from youthful expression to impeccable Stalinist orthodoxy and became a cultural leader of all DDR: he was furious when Fischer praised his anti-Nazism at the time of the Hitler-Stalin pact.

Ernst Fischer and Walter Benjamin show us another side of Marxism: less learned but also less dogmatic, less coherent but more freely imaginative. In Fischer's autobiography a suggestive,

¹ *An Opposing Man*. By ERNST FISCHER. Allen Lane, £6.