

Universal Sympathy and Naturalistic Approach in the Novels of Arnold Bennett

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Abstract— Western literature has its roots in ancient Greek and Roman cultures, and was greatly enriched during the predominance of Christianity. As the Greek, Roman, and Christian constituents of Western culture all originated in an area inhabited by peoples who speak 'Latin' languages, the cultures and literatures of those peoples have often been referred to as 'Latin'. Whatever meaning it may have, the term 'Latin' connotes the origins of Western culture. The literature of almost every nation-state of the present Europe has in a sense been generated by this profound source of inspiration, the literature of France even more than that of England. Starting from the Middle Ages, and stretching into the present century, the link between English culture and 'Latin' has to a great extent been realized through the French. Bennett was one of those English writers who made life-long conscious efforts to transfuse French elements into English fiction. There is a class of novelist, rarer in England than in France, to whom the first principle in literary criticism is that this world is nothing but a spectacle which it is the novelist's task to record with complete detachment, looking on but making no sound either of approval or of protest. It is obvious that H.G. Wells's purpose as a writer had never been to report human affairs dispassionately. He ranks as an active and impassioned participant and protestant, not an observer merely. Arnold Bennett's purpose was very different. His masters in the early stages of his development were the French novelists Maupassant, Flaubert, and Balzac, and his aim was to record life its delights, indignities, and distresses without conscious intrusion of his own personality between the record and the reader. Like his French masters, he was a copyist of life, and only indirectly (if at all) a commentator, an interpreter, or an apologist. The present paper discusses the universal sympathy and naturalistic approach in the novels of Arnold Bennett.

Keywords— Naturalistic Novelist, Universal Sympathy, Naturalistic Approach

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the 'naturalistic' novelist, so-called, is to be as dispassionate and detached as a camera. It is often said that ugliness results from this method, but to a completely naturalistic novelist (if such a one can ever exist), there can be no ugliness as such but only varying manifestations of life to be recorded as they are seen¹. But that answer would be inadequate. No 'naturalistic' novelist can record the whole of life; nor the whole of any one life; not the whole, even, of any one extended period of any one life. He is compelled himself to determine the nature of his picture of life, because (unable to include everything) he must select certain things as relevant and significant, rejecting others as irrelevant and without significance. And it is in the process of selection and rejection that naturalism breaks down. The naturalism of real life depends in part upon the empty interspaces between life's 'significant' periods. Neither the novelist nor the dramatist can afford to indicate these empty interspaces, because tedium is the essential characteristic of such periods in

human experience, and tedium is fatal to art. The few instances on record where a complete and positive naturalism has been attempted have resulted in overwhelming dullness; while, in other instances, novelists so feared to distort their picture by making life seem too pleasant that they tended to eliminate too much joy and too little pain.

II. ARNOLD BENNETT'S NATURALISTIC METHOD

The moral sense and more especially the emotional sense of the Victorian English novelists would have led them to shrink from the idea of 'detachment'. They would not have understood (nor thought it proper to attempt to understand) a writer who regarded a wife-beater and a nursing mother as equally interesting. But the wife-beater and the nursing mother are both part of the human spectacle; therefore, in a detached and dispassionate rendering of life in the novel, account has to be taken of both. A cinematograph camera does not register

indignation over the wife-beater nor become lyrical over the nursing mother: it records both without passion or prejudice. The resulting pictures are a faithful representation of two aspects of life, and audiences are at liberty to adopt whatever attitude they choose; to find, it may be, the one distressing and the other ennobling. But with the distress as with the ennoblement the camera is unconcerned. Arnold Bennett's method was frequently described as naturalistic, though it was only partially so. It is true that as he looked upon the world he was not obsessed by life's injustices; nor was he a tormented soul driven to attempt to build a new world or to evolve a new race of creatures to inhabit it. He was, apparently, a detached figure; but his detachment was not that of an 'unconcerned spectator' of life. He was merely detached, as an artist, from the habit of protest and the passion for utilizing creative literature as an instrument of moral and social reform.

Though he repudiated the naturalistic convention, he nevertheless followed it in part. 'The notion that "naturalists" have at last lighted on a final formula which ensures truth to life is ridiculous.' Another writer might be content to remark, 'Rachel lit the gas', but Arnold Bennett describes the simple act in minute detail in a passage five hundred words long.² While he was, intellectually, well qualified for the naturalistic method, temperamentally he was incapable of sustaining it. Life was not, for him, a spectacle merely. He became easily and delightfully conscious of it as a *wonderful* spectacle, a *thrilling* spectacle, a *fascinating* spectacle, an *awesome* spectacle. Trifles became charged with a tremendous, an apocalyptic, significance. Two boys spitting over a canal bridge on the day that one of them leaves school for the last time are made symbolic of the battle of youth against 'the leagued universe'.³ Sophia Baines refuses to take a dose of castor oil ordered by her mother: 'It was a historic moment in the family life. Mrs Baines thought the last day had come. But still she held herself in dignity while the apocalypse roared in her ears.'⁴ A girl holds out a lighted spill: 'The gesture with which she modestly offered the spill was angelic; it was divine; it was one of those phenomena which persist in a man's memory for decades. At the very instant of its happening he knew that he should never forget it.' A slatternly servant-girl in the rain with an apron of sacking protecting her head, is presented as idealistically as if she were a celestial visitor wearing a bridal veil.⁵ But, lest such passages as these should stamp him too definitely as the romantic he was by temperament, Arnold Bennett 'naturalized' his novels by a disproportionate attention to disease and physical decay. In a final analysis, however, it is not life as a drab and depressing spectacle, nor as a balanced spectacle of good and ill together, that is the dominant vision in his best

books. It is, rather, life as a spectacle in which almost every sensation and every phenomenon is interpreted romantically: 'sweet, exquisite, blissful melancholy'; 'The incandescent gas-burner of the street-lamp outside had been turned down, as it was turned down every night! If it is possible to love such a phenomenon, she loved that phenomenon. That phenomenon was a portion of her life, dear to her.'

III. 'SECRET NATURE OF WOMEN' IN BENNETT'S NOVEL

Arnold Bennett, in full Enoch Arnold Bennett, born in 1867, in Hanley, Staffordshire, England was a British novelist, playwright, critic, and essayist whose major works form an important link between the English novel and the mainstream of European realism. Educated at local schools, he matriculated at London University, and was a London solicitor's clerk at the age of twenty-one. Next, after receiving twenty guineas for a humorous story in 'Tit-bits', he turned to free-lance journalism, contributed short stories to evening papers and to literary quarterlies, and became assistant-editor and later the editor of the magazine *Woman*, writing reviews pseudonymously as "Barbara," a gossip and advice column as "Marjorie," and short stories as "Sal Volatile." It is generally thought that this experience provided Bennett with good background for female characterization. He wrote 'smart society' paragraphs for 'Woman', under the name 'Gwendolen'. In various ways, that paper enabled him to get the insight into the 'secret nature of women' which he afterwards turned to account in his novels. As he became better known as a journalist, Bennett began writing reviews for *The Academy* and giving private lessons in journalism. In 1900, his journalistic income allowed him to establish a home at Trinity Hall Farm, Hockliffe, in Bedfordshire. He brought his family to Hockliffe after his father had been disabled by softening of the brain, the condition that eventually killed him. Bennett wrote prodigiously there, producing not only his admired 'Anna of the Five Towns' but also popular potboilers and journalism, including the anonymous "Savoir-Faire Papers" and "Novelist's Log-Book" series for T. P.'s Weekly. This production financed some long-desired travel and a move to Paris in 1903. Arnold Bennett lived in France for nearly eight years, steeping himself in French literature. He died in London in 1931. The best impression of his character is to be obtained from the posthumously published *Journals of Arnold Bennett* (1932-3). His books were many and their quality unequal. Three novels, *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), *Clayhanger* (1910), and *Riceyman Steps* (1923), place him high among English novelists; 'Clayhanger', the first part of a trilogy, was followed by 'Hilda Lessways'

(1925), and completed with 'These Twain' (1916); collected in one volume as 'The Clayhanger Family' (1925). *Buried Alive* (1908) and *The Card* (1911) are first-rate humorous character-novels; *The Grand Babylon Hotel* (1902) an entertaining and well-written extravaganza. His reputation was made and maintained by the first three books named above, but *Buried Alive* (later turned into a successful play, *The Great Adventure*) is a little masterpiece that deserves more attention than it has received. Next to Hardy's Wessex, Bennett's Five Towns was the most notable addition to the atlas of topographical fiction since the Brontës' Yorkshire and Trollope's Barsetshire. The Five Towns of Arnold Bennett's works are the Staffordshire pottery towns which constitute the federated borough of Stoke-on-Trent.

IV. FIVE TOWNS OF ARNOLD BENNETT

Before 1908 there were, five separate towns: Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke-upon-Trent, and Longton, appearing in Bennett's books as Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype, and Longshaw, while Oldcastle is the town of Newcastle-under-Lyme. In this small area the people of *The Old Wives' Tale*, *The Clayhanger Family*, and other books spend most part of their lives. Readers become familiar not only with the principal streets and buildings and landmarks, but also with the men and women who walked the streets, inhabited the buildings, and looked admiringly upon the landmarks. *The Old Wives' Tale* is a long panorama of the lives of two sisters, Constance and Sophia Baines, who—first seen in girlhood full of surging hope and vigour and the fire of youth—have both died in advanced age before the end of the book, which combines humour and tragedy, pathos and indignity, beauty and ugliness. Excellent character-drawing abounds, and the trivial incidents are as compulsively interesting as the great events. Sophia and Constance did not realize, says the author on the first page, that they were living in a district pulsating with interest; and at no time were they fully awake to the tremendousness of their own sensations. Though Constance did on occasion discover wonder in her domestic affairs, Sophia, even in the turmoil of the Siege of Paris, was hardly conscious of living through strange and terrible days. But what they looked upon as commonplace, Arnold Bennett regarded as full of lively and romantic possibilities. To anyone who thought *The Old Wives' Tale* drab and prosy, he would have said: 'On the contrary, this is life; and life is always marvellous.' There are few lovable characters in *The Old Wives' Tale*, but *Clayhanger* is populated by fine, friendly people. Edwin Clayhanger, the outwardly commonplace son of a Bursley printer, without loss of individuality embodies much general human experience. Most young

Englishmen of a particular mentality experience the feelings which beset Edwin, and he contributes largely to the convincingness of the book. In addition to Edwin there is the attractive Orgreave family, fortunate in the harmony of its members, and good, solid, sensible Maggie (Edwin's sister) and the inimitable Auntie Hamps.

V. ARNOLD BENNETT'S UNIVERSAL SYMPATHY

With the *Clayhanger* trilogy Arnold Bennett ended the Five Towns series. The novels which followed suggested that, in leaving his own people, he had sacrificed too much. He recovered much of his former power, however, in *Riceyman Steps*, in which a decrepit district on the edge of the City of London is made as vivid as anything in the Five Towns books. *Riceyman Steps* is not so full a book as Bennett's two masterpieces, and he was not able here to reveal the characters with so intimate an understanding as that which marks the Baineses, the Clayhangers, and the Orgreaves. Yet Elsie, a slatternly servant-girl outwardly, but inwardly an angel of light is beautifully drawn. It is she who gives the novel its chief claim to eminence, though there is also much merit in its descriptive passages. And nowhere else does Arnold Bennett succeed so well in communicating the exact atmosphere of a place as in his description of Riceyman Square 'frowsily supine in a needed Sunday indolence after the week's hard labour'. 'Riceyman Steps', though well received by the public and admired by other writers, was regarded by some as a dismal book about dismal people in dismal surroundings, a superficial judgement. Despite its drabness, the book is illuminated by that 'sense of beauty-indispensable to Creative artist' which is the soul of Bennett's novels. He said that the foundation of the novelist's equipment is 'universal sympathy'; and his possession of some measure of universal sympathy enabled him to see beauty almost everywhere and to endow commonplace people with transfiguring interest.

In 'The Old Wives' Tale', 'The Clayhanger Family', and other novels, Arnold Bennett sketches in the historical and social background with considerable skill, and with a sounder appreciation of what is really significant than he showed elsewhere in his over-insistence upon the 'significance' of trifling objects. In 'Clayhanger' the narrative is made forceful and convincing by allusions to contemporary events, allusions wide in their range, covering politics, religion, literature, and other interests. Their effect is to give the story a 'livingness' that is absent from imaginative writing when the characters are suspended (historically) in a vacuum. Other writers have adopted this device of a panoramic background, with results not always happy.

Arnold Bennett's last novel '*Imperial Palace*' (1930) was written to support his view that English novelists had given disproportionate attention to personal and emotional relationships and not enough to the interest of men and women in daily work. In '*Imperial Palace*' the intricate organization of a vast hotel is displayed in detail which some find fascinating and enthralling, others intolerably boring. But though the hotel is the central theme, there is no neglect of romantic human interest in the book, which is as abundant and generous and amoral as its creator.

For much of the 20th century, the critical and academic reception of Bennett's work was affected by the Bloomsbury intellectuals' perception, and it was not until the 1990s that a more positive view of his work became widely accepted. The English critic John Carey had a major influence on this reassessment. Carey praises him in his book '*The Intellectuals and the Masses*' (1992), declaring Bennett his "hero" because his writings "represent a systematic dismemberment of the intellectuals' case against the masses".

VI. CONCLUSION

The lifelike quality of Bennett's novels is contrived through the accumulation of carefully chosen detail. Some ugliness and coarseness are essential to his plan. He saw ugliness as part of the pattern of life; and the pattern of life without that element was too threadbare to interest him. Arnold Bennett's insistence upon the wonderment of life is partly the over-stressing of an obvious truth, supported by evidence that is often irrelevant (and still more often inadequate to prove his case if it were in need of proof); and, partly, it is a relic of his provincialism. He strove with much success to become the sophisticated man of the world who knows all the ins-and-outs of life, and to reach that degree of knowingness when each sly dig and wink is comprehended. Yet he never became altogether urbanized, nor ceased to be one of literature's country cousins, a man to whom all things were astounding. Life never lost its glamour for him. He could not regret the passing of the glory and the grandeur of Greece and Rome, for he found recompense in the everyday life of the Five Towns, his native district, upon which he conferred an almost legendary impressiveness. His naive enjoyment of society and good living were misinterpreted by those who thought him smug and bloated with success. He was in truth an abundant and generous creature who held out both hands to life.

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