

INTRODUCTION

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THE short story is the most *memorable* form of fiction. It is memorable because it has to tell and ring in every line. It has to be as exact as a sonnet or a ballad. It is, in essence, 'poetic' in its impulse. We do not forget it, indeed find more and more in it, whereas even in the greatest novels we easily forget whole chapters. Also, the short story is very suited to the nervous, glancing habits forced upon us by the hurry of contemporary life, which is so unlike the ruminative life of the nineteenth century when the novel was the dominating form of fiction. In the novel we lose ourselves; in the shorter thing we find ourselves. At the end of the nineteenth century we meet the first outstanding masters of the form in Kipling, Wells, Conrad, James; in artists like Katherine Mansfield, Saki, Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor, D. H. Lawrence, the Joyce of *Dubliners* and many others. They have read Maupassant, Chekhov and Turgenev. Their special gift is to catch the crucial moments of a life as it passes. We see people who might have been minor characters in great novels, but now enlarged and brought forward.

H. E. Bates was one of the gifted English artists in the genre, especially in what he wrote in the Twenties and Thirties. He was a poet by nature. His setting was usually the traditional life of the small farms, cottages and holdings, his people the hedgers, ditchers, thatchers and local carriers—a horse-and-cart England

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in the main, the England of rural haggings and feelings which had changed very little for centuries and often sounds Chaucerian and ripe in speech. We know how his people talk, eat, work, drink, love and die. Their habits had not yet been touched by the industrialization which changed village life after the last war. The people are not the generalized 'Loamshire' folk of radio and television, and for that reason are real in their past. If Bates's temperament was poetic, he was not a prettifier of archaic things. Bates's people and landscape are marvellously seen afresh. In the mere account of a man and boy ploughing or a woman leaning on a gate in fitful spring weather we see not only the day as it passes but how the people, inarticulate as they may be, feel their lives passing. For his evocations of such weathering of men, women and country he has been compared to Hardy; but he is without Hardy's Darwinian melancholy, Hardy's large speculations about class or social tendencies, or his sententious and fateful regard for the pagan and indifferent 'President of the Immortals'. Bates is interested in people for their own curious sakes. In one of his finest stories, *The Mill*, a tragedy is left to tell itself. It is a tragedy set in motion by the meanness of a country trader in scrap. Bates was often lyrical but here he exposed the sourness and silences of rural poverty and the unprotected sight of innocence abused. The story has remained in my mind for forty years. But Bates was a writer of many kinds of stories. He could be lyrical, dour, even luscious and comic too. In the remarkable *The Woman who had Imagination* we shall see a vulgar group of cheery villagers boozing, itching and singing on a charabanc trip to give a rural concert in the grounds of a country house; and in the series

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of stories called *My Uncle Silas* hear a genial rascalion in his nineties telling extravagant lies about his sinful life to a boy.

Do not mistake the Uncle Silas stories for old-style bucolic farce. Every detail of Silas's unwashed ugliness and of his domestic habits as the village liar and boozier is truthfully put before us, as if we were sitting in his house with him or had been sent down to the cellar to bring up another dreadful bottle of his home-made wine. And Bates has had the art to make us see the villain through the memory of a small boy who is fascinated by the old man, if also, every now and then, sceptical. Silas has the arts of the rural story-teller who drops into long evasive silences and then takes up the tale to add to its enormities, deedly watching his audience. Cats come out of the bag one at a time: that is art and artfulness. He can suggest even more by an unfinished phrase, by a mastery of innocent metaphor or *double entendre*. The boy will believe the old man is, for example, talking to a girl about duck eggs but the old man is insinuating some other attraction. He is a great guzzler, but having a boy before him he is free to boast that in his time there has been nothing he has not eaten—once, out of desperate necessity, iron nails. And not only iron nails, but nails made digestible by a paste of shavings from a rotten cellar floor. To prove it he opens his mouth and shows how the enforced diet has left rusty stains on his remaining teeth. But why *enforced*? A girl he was carrying on with shut him in the cellar when she saw her husband about to catch him. Which girl? Ah! Silence; but a glance to the scrawny, hot-tempered old housekeeper who has come in to make the old fellow strip naked so that she can give him

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something he detests—his weekly bath in a tub by the fire—suggests all.

Is Uncle Silas a preposterous exaggeration? Not entirely, for two reasons. Bates knows how to make silences pregnant and then the boy is his passive, wondering audience. The listening of the boy makes the stories almost genuine. The second justification is that Uncle Silas is an expert in the techniques of rural story-telling, that is to say he is the villager talking, when an hour will pass while one person and then the next will join in and add some fantasy out of village memory to the tale. He is rumour itself. It will succeed if told in a flat, casually dry passage; until it reaches an open-ended silence for the next speaker to go one better, out of village memory. Uncle Silas is in fact the scandalizing village memory at work. One is listening to something in the genre of *The Miller's Tale*; and, in any case, every villager has samples of every kind of man and woman in the world at hand. Well, not every kind, but some very insinuating examples. Like most good short stories from Chekhov onwards, Bates had the art that enabled him to write many kinds of story. The poet could be the comedian, saved from slapstick by his resources of style and observation. And he was always at his best in the country landscape of his childhood where the hours seemed fuller and longer.