

# EPICS IN MINIATURE

"IN GENERAL I must confess that I seldom fall for the work of a popular writer," says Henry Miller in his preface to the collection under review, while going on unequivocally to praise the work of H. E. Bates, with which he has only recently become familiar. It seems an odd kind of statement to make, even from Mr. Miller's rather new-found eminence as a highbrow high-priest, and the degree of inverted snobbery which it argues need not be gone into here.

Moreover, Mr. Bates' "popularity" dated only from publication of the Flying Officer X stories in 1942, and the series of highly-coloured, romantic wartime novels which followed (including *Fair Wind for France*, so highly regarded by Mr. Miller, with its Hemingwayan love-story expressed in deliberately flat, dead-pan dialogue; *Spella Ho* (though his long novel *Spella Ho* achieved a measure of commercial success in 1938) Mr. Bates' stories appeared in little reviewed literary journals (*Life and Letters* or *John O'London's Weekly*; the first number of *Horizon* carried the story, "The Bridge"). He was admired by intellectuals as a member of the advance-guard who made no concessions to curial fastidiousness or editorial taste; to be appreciated, in fact, only by the select few.

It comes, therefore, as a surprise to find him categorized by Mr. Miller as "a rather conventional writer". This comes curiously, too, from one who acclaims *A Glastonbury Romance*—traditional in form, to say the least—as "the greatest novel in the English language". Certainly Mr. Bates' stories could not be better removed from the fevered experimentalism of the Paris expatriates or the unrefined outpourings of the Zen-Beats who constitute Mr. Miller's present supporters; only if lucidity and economy are conventional would the label be apt. Mr. Miller furthermore accuses him of indulging in what Ford Madox Ford referred to as that "tiresome thing called descriptive material; fastidious in the English writer is as a rule so lugubriously lavish", while admitting that this scenic word-painting is intrinsic to Mr. Bates' style; fastidious in reading the stories one would be hard put to find the long descriptive passages which he mentions. On the contrary the method employed throughout seems to be the visual, impressionistic one frequently commended by Mr. Bates in his own excellent study of *The Modern Short Story* (1941), whereby the desired effect "is beautifully and swiftly transmitted; no fuss, no grandiose staving of the scene, no elaborate signalling that the reader is about to be the victim of a description of nature" (He is speaking here not of himself, but of Maupassant and Chekhov). "Both are masters in what might be called the art of distillation, of compressing into the fewest clearest possible syllables the spirit and essence of a scene", and earlier he states: "It is no longer necessary to describe; it is enough to suggest. The full-length portrait, in full dress, with scenic background, has become superfluous; now it is enough that we should know a woman by the shape of her hands."

Although in *The Modern Short Story* Mr. Bates austere and commendably refuses to analyse or discuss his own work, the reader may easily deduce, as he suggests, the formative influences by which he was shaped: not only by Chekhov and Maupassant, but also by transatlantic writers, Ambrose Bierce, Stephen Crane, Hemingway. Mr. Miller, who regards him as a typically "British" author (he admits that he is often "unfair" to these), should read the chapter entitled "American Renaissance":

Meanwhile every American short-story writer may congratulate himself on the moment in which he now lives. Behind him the conventions have been soundly and intelligently broken. He has been shown how, by turning inward, he may discover the foundations of that American tradition which a former generation sought to discover by turning outward; he has behind him a line of writers who have set his country's short story on a level with the best in Europe, and in many cases higher than the best in Britain.

According to an earlier passage, American writers "did something else which was significant":

H. E. BATES: *Seven by Five*. Preface by Henry Miller. 454pp. Michael Joseph, 25s.

They took the language, which was still English, as they found it. They took Thackeray in "The Ox", the illiterate, but doggedly ambitious Bruno Shadbolt in *Spella Ho* has it also in full measure; these characters, in their zombie-like sticism and single-mindedness, have affinities with the later creations of Faulkner, the peasants in *The Hamlet*, for example.

Obsession is in fact Mr. Bates' major theme: particularly when the characters are obsessed with physical passion masquerading as love. His awareness of passion as a dark driving force marks the difference between him and most of the "British" writers disapproved of by Henry Miller: in his best stories passions do indeed spin the plot. He has defined one of the favourite themes of Chekhov and Maupassant, in *The Modern Short Story*, as "the crushing or exploitation of a kindly, innocent man by a woman of strong and remorseless personality; in Maupassant the woman would be relentlessly drawn, sharp and heartless as glass; in Chekhov the woman would be seen indirectly through the eyes of a secondary, softer personality, perhaps the man himself." Mr. Bates himself uses both methods in illustrating the self-same theme.

Mr. Miller comments on "the author's feeling for women": they are "always females first and foremost. That is to say, they are fully sexed: they have all the charm, the loveliness, the attraction of the flowers he knows so well." They are also boldly seductive; they have big lips and big fleshy arms (invariably bare: sometimes warm to the touch on sunlit skin; at others cold and wet from the rain); not only this, their very clothes are part of their sensual allure: Blanche's kimono in the story of that title; the white-and-yellow low-cut frocks worn by "The Enchantress", the thin white dress, "like the silky husk of a seed-pod", of Mr. Harvey in "The Station"; just as the gas-cape worn by Clara Corbett in "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal" is "a symbol of her emotional deprivation, even though she feels gratitude towards this garment for having saved her life during the Blitz. The chief male characters—as in "The Lighthouse" or "Across the Bay"—become moon-struck, hallucinated beneath the female spell, which inevitably grows as evanescent as the summer heat frequently constituting the stories' climate. Although an element of decay is postulated; and often symbolized by some such image as a maggot found at the heart of a ripe peach, or a final quiver falling from the tree, "the last vanishing phial of the summer's honey", in "Death of a Huntsman", filling his mind like a golden ominous echo, Mr. Bates refrains on the whole from making moral judgments. Only occasionally are the women actively evil; these are distinguished by having masses of "pure black hair": Mrs. Broderick in *Night Run to the West* or Miss Vane in *Summer in Solandor*, both of which novellas contain an actual suggestion of vampirism and the undead; *The Enchantress*, however (a girl whose chameleon personality changes to suit that of her current lover rather than in the manner of Olenka in Chekhov's "The Darling"—a story much admired by Mr. Bates, incidentally), brings happiness to her many conquests; and if his other faithless charmers sometimes lay their lovers waste (as in the novella *The Grass God*) it is implied that these latter's masculine refusal to accept the moment of happiness for itself alone is basically to blame.

Of course, as Mr. Miller remarks, he can portray the other kind of woman as well: the frustrated, the inhibited, such as poor Clara Corbett—referred to earlier—who feels drawn to a pastry-cooking homosexual in a plum velvet jacket; but even the examples of this latter type are often allowed a measure of physical magnetism: the virginal, middle-fortyish Mrs. Mansfield in "The Golden Oriole", who hides in the garden coyly from her husband on his return from work and is known to him as "Priny", a diminutive of Princess; or Maisie Foster, "The Quiet Girl", a provincial dressmaker who combines both types and causes a certain amount of havoc among the local males by lying down in the afternoons naked "except for a necklace of glowing purple fire" until disrupted, herself, by a traveller

Mr. Bates' early characters such as Alice in "The Mill" or Mrs. Thurlow in "The Ox", the illiterate, but doggedly ambitious Bruno Shadbolt in *Spella Ho* has it also in full measure; these characters, in their zombie-like sticism and single-mindedness, have affinities with the later creations of Faulkner, the peasants in *The Hamlet*, for example.

Mr. Miller has remarked on the author's "obsession with pain. Pain stretched to the breaking point, pain prolonged beyond all seeming endurance", and this is certainly true of the wartime stories, while endurance is undoubtedly stressed as a quality

in sewing machines with a dreadful line of patter. Outstanding in this category is the astringent seventeenth-year-old Laura Burnett who narrates "The Queen of Spain Fertility" (a feat of literary transvestism almost unequalled except by the late Joyce Cary), and flirts dangerously with a sixtish butterfly-collecting bachelor whose proposal of marriage she rejects, thus condemning herself to the sterility and loneliness of the spinster next door, whose suicide (by cyanide out of a killing-bottle) she has unwittingly caused.

Mr. Miller in his preface seems at times to be puzzled why Mr. Bates' work gives him such pleasure: the reason is not far to seek. His other "favourites among contemporary writers"—Céline, Blaise Cendrars, Knut Hamsun—all possess epic qualities; and on close examination many Bates stories can be recognized as epics or sagas in miniature: "The Enchantress", for instance, spans nearly half a century and several social levels in about 15,000 words; it is daunting to think how many pages a really "popular" novelist might have covered to make, with less success, the same point. Mr. Miller also expresses surprise that so few of Mr. Bates' books have been filmed: ever more surprising is the fact that his novellas and stories have not yet been adapted for television. The contents of this volume alone offer a richly dramatic cross-section of English life during the past three-and-a-half decades, and one hopes that future generations of viewers may enjoy, visually, the best of Bates as we enjoyed the recent programme based on Maupassant. For the words he has used to describe the latter's work apply equally to his own:

So you can see that nothing delights him so much as a world of flesh and trees and clouds and food, leaves and limbs. That fact gives his every material and physical description a profound flavour. When Maupassant talks of sweat you not only see sweat but you feel it and smell it; when he describes a voluptuous and seductive woman the page itself seems to quiver sensuously.

Certainly, their considerable historical value apart, the stories of H. E. Bates—in spite of their author's present "popularity"—deserve the consideration and praise of any literary critic in the years to come.

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