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# AN OSBERT SITWELL STORY : JOAD on SATIRE

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# JOHN O' LONDON'S WEEKLY

Vol. XLIV No. 1,138

FRIDAY, JANUARY 31, 1941

Three Pence

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## HONOURABLE ENVIES--(3)

### Women and the Modern Short Story

By H. E. BATES



Mr. H. E. Bates.

When Shakespeare spoke of himself desiring "this man's art and that man's scope" he voiced a feeling of honourable envy that is shared by most writers, even the greatest. The purpose of this series is to discover the "honourable envies" of a number of well-known authors. We have already published articles by Mr. Frank Swinnerton and Mr. Gerald Bullett. Future contributors will include Mr. James Agate, Miss Rosamond Lehmann, Sir Hugh Walpole, and Mr. G. M. Young.

SOME time ago I had lunch with an eminent writer of controversial philosophy. We were talking of the way a writer evolves a style of his own. "I," he said, "often read a page or two of Shaw before starting to write. It helps me to stimulate and sharpen the accent of what I want to say."  
I daresay that Shaw, forty years ago, might similarly have been finding stimulus in Samuel Butler. There are few, if any, original writers. They derive from each other; they sprout like the branches of a timeless genealogical tree. So my friend the doctor of philosophy is a branch springing from the now hoary trunk of Shaw, as Shaw himself was once a

whimsical sprout of the bough that bore *Erewhon*.

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THERE are, however, few writers who do not begin by envying another writer, go on to imitate him, and end by acknowledging the debt. Even Shaw humbly confessed an irredeemable debt to Tchegov and spoke as if he would have given his beard to have written *The Cherry Orchard*. Arnold Bennett, very surprisingly, confessed he had virtually been suckled on Turgenev. Katherine Mansfield had the satisfaction of being acclaimed in her life-time as a highly original writer, whereas she had done little but evolve a formula combining the essence of Virginia Woolf and Tchegov. Mr. Hemingway as a stylist made perhaps more impression than any other writer of the twenties and thirties; yet a glance at Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein will show his pedigree. "Hardy," said George Moore wickedly but with a pinch of salty truth, "is another of George Eliot's many miscarriages"; yet Moore himself had so little quality at the beginning of his career as a writer that the early novels might have been written for *Sunday At Home*. Mr. A. E. Coppard, acclaimed with Katherine Mansfield as the most original short-story writer of the early post-Great War years, owes more than half that originality to Henry James, on whom he imposed what has been nicely called "a flavour of nutmeg." In England the writers who could acknowledge a debt to Dickens are an army; in Russia "we all spring," said Tolstoy, "from Gogol's *Overcoat*."

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THE number of writers to whom I shall remain eternally in debt are very many. As a short-story writer I would have given my head to have written *The Darling* (Tchegov), *Boule de Suif* (Maupassant), *The Triumph of the Egg* (Sherwood Anderson), *The Open Boat* (Stephen Crane), *The Fox* (D. H. Lawrence), *Twenty-Six Men and a Girl* (Gorki), *Midsummer Night Madness* (O'Faolain), and what is perhaps the finest short story of our time, *The Dead* (Joyce). I would rather have written one of these stories than all the novels by those eminent pulp-merchants who appear in toolled morocco about Christmas time.  
But most of the writers of these stories are dead. What of the living? It is possible to admire a writer very much, to get pleasure out of his work, and yet remain uninfluenced by him as a writer. Thus among living

writers of stories I admire the work of Mr. V. S. Pritchett, Mr. H. A. Manhood, Mr. Frank O'Connor, Mr. Leslie Halward and Miss Elizabeth Bowen with a pleasure that does not entail a debt. I admire them as it were from a distance, without envy.

On the other hand some writers are like drugs; they get into the system, and become a habit. They are the writers of strong flavour: Conrad, Dickens, Hemingway, O. Henry, D. H. Lawrence, Hardy, Cobbett, Kipling. They inject something into the blood. A writer, stricken by an early habit, may find it hard to give them up. The beat of their own particular style becomes, if he is not careful, part of the rhythm of his own.

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THERE are few English writers of the short story whose work, at some time or other, I have not sampled. Once, trying to learn all I could of the technicalities of the craft, I used to spend hours putting writers like Maugham, Conrad, Crane, Tchegov, Maupassant and Tolstoy under the microscope. From such a close study of the short story I was bound, in time, to find myself formulating a number of conclusions. And one of the most interesting of these conclusions was that women writers have played an astonishingly large part in the growth of the modern short story.

That partly explains why, if I look round at the hundreds of contemporary short story writers, it is the work of four women writers that, in an unaggressive way, I envy most consistently. None of these writers could be called famous; none of them has revolutionized the short story, though all have given its progress distinction. One, Miss Dorothy Edwards, the author of a single volume called *Rhapsody*, is no longer living; her story *The Country House* is a masterpiece. Another, Miss Pauline Smith, also the author of a single volume, *The Little Karoo*, has written little for ten years; yet her story *The Pain* was on its publication acclaimed all over the world. The third, Mrs. Malachi Whitaker, is a Yorkshirewoman with four volumes of stories to her credit; the work, I think, of about a dozen years. The fourth, Miss Katherine Ann Porter, is one of that group of Southern American writers whose work follows that of Sherwood Anderson in delineating the native American scene.

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THE achievement of all four of these writers is, if measured by quantity, quite small; compared with the novelist who, as he writes one novel corrects the proofs of another and reads the press-cuttings of a third, their output is trivial. Yet compare the quality of the novelist who for thirty years has perpetrated phoney, fairy-naive redundancies with the quality of *The Pain*, which touched even the materialistic heart of Arnold Bennett with its tragic simplicity, its almost Biblical rhythms and its air of the eternal folk tale. Posterity plays odd tricks, and it would not in the least surprise me if posterity set this single story, as universal in its beauty and meaning as *The Prodigal Son*, high up above

the obese products of the mass-producing novelist.

Outstanding from its other qualities, *The Pain* has the humble simplicity of folk-lore. It is wholly unsophisticated. Miss Edwards' story *The Country House* is also simple, but the simplicity is oblique; it is the delicate refined simplicity of a cultivated mind; its naivety is a pretence, clouding an irony that is poetical. *The Country House* is altogether a masterly essay in implied statement, of the style in which the chosen order of the words, rather than the words themselves, create the flavour, the atmosphere and the final meaning of the tale. \* \* \*

MRS. WHITAKER is what I should call a pixilated writer; she looks at humanity with a touch of inspired daftness, and as a consequence sees it more clearly and more truthfully than most of us. Her work is capricious; what she has to say runs on the finest line between banality and inspiration; it falls flat or it lifts the feet of the reader off the earth. In her stories there is little that can be called style, yet precisely because of this her work has the touch of natural poetry. Her method is that of an etcher; swift, incisive strokes, an effect of suggestion. "Everywhere in Mrs. Mollineaux's house there were great branches of coral." "Arthur Pringle fell in love with a barmaid whose name was Minny . . . Pringle was troubled." "The end carriage of the train waggled like the tail of a duck." Perhaps only the writer of stories, driven always by the necessity of saying something important in as impressive but as short a way as possible, can fully appreciate the art of these sentences.

Mrs. Whitaker, Miss Smith and Miss Edwards all have a specialized and enviable style, a select and natural method from which they never deviate. It is notable that their work never develops; it can never improve on the initial perfection. Miss Katherine Ann Porter has on the other hand as many styles, apparently, as she pleases; she is like a fully trained singer who is at once equally at home with the opera, the hymn, the lyric. She writes, as in her story *Noon Wine*, in a style smelling of the cow-yard; or, as in *Old Mortality*, in a style that has been pressed between sheets of lavendered silk. Of both methods she is complete mistress; both come to her with absolute naturalness. As long as she is writing she is also developing; and as long as she is writing, the short story will, I think, go on developing too. \* \* \*

THESE, then, are the writers with whom, sometimes, I feel I should like to change places. In the formula of their work each possesses an unknown quantity, an "x" which no amount of literary algebraists will work out. Whether this is synonymous simply with femininity I do not know. That our own age has produced more women writers than any other, finding natural expression in the short story is, however, indisputable. These writers, it is also worth noting, mostly lack showmanship. They are what are called quiet writers. Unlike Kipling they do not front the world with a flag in one hand and a drum in the other; unlike Henry James they are not interested in stitching elaborate embroideries in words. They are not interested in telling stories of high, bold action. But they do happen to be very interested in human beings.

It is not certain what posterity will say about these writers or about their kind of story, so bewildering sometimes to those readers who like everything painted with bold line and detail and can never fill in the unpainted distances for themselves. But it is certain that other writers will derive from them; that new branches will spring from the old. In that sense alone they are writers to whom it is an honour to owe, and pay, a debt.

His breath like silver arrows pierced the air  
The naked earth crouched shuddering at his feet  
His fingers on all flowing waters sweet  
Forbidding lay—motion nor sound was there—  
Nature lay frozen dead, and still and slow,  
A winding sheet fell o'er her body fair  
Flaky and soft, from his wide wings of snow.

FRANCES ANNE KEMBLE: *Winter*.

# The Poison Gas Bogy

By JOHN HARLEY-MASON

THERE has been more nonsense written in the press and in supposedly scientific novels in recent years about the subject of poison gas and its employment than about any other modern development in the technique of warfare. Before the outbreak of the present war the public were regaled, monthly—or even weekly—with tales of a new and extremely deadly super-gas just discovered by some obscure research worker in the chemical warfare laboratories of a foreign power—a substance so deadly that, to quote Professor Kendall, "a drop of it placed on the tongue of a dog will kill a horse." Apart from these sensational announcements of the discovery of new gases, we have writers like Mr. H. G. Wells—who should know better—and the ultra-pacifists, who have given us gloomy and horrific prophecies of the devastation that could be wreaked upon our cities by a remarkably small number of bombers carrying a remarkably small amount of mustard-gas or lewisite dropped as a "dew of death" upon our heads.

What is the actual position with regard to the discovery of new gases? How real is the danger of gas being used against us, and what can we expect as a result of its use? Let us examine these questions in order.

## The possibilities are limited

First, it must be realized that the term "poison gas" is a loose one and can mean either a toxic solid, liquid, or gas. Thus, at ordinary temperatures, Adamsite is a solid, mustard "gas" is a liquid, and phosgene is a gas. To be useful in modern war a chemical agent must combine in as high a degree as possible the following properties: it must be highly toxic (poisonous); it must be cheap and easily manufactured; it must be stable over a moderate range of temperature and not readily decomposed in contact with air or water or metal containers.

During the last war and the inter-war period a great many substances were examined on both sides for their suitability in chemical warfare: of the thousands examined, only some thirty fulfilled the above conditions to a sufficient degree to make them practical propositions, and only about a dozen of these are likely to appear in this war, if chemical warfare is employed at all.

Furthermore, systematic research has shown us the types of grouping that must be present in a substance if it is to be effective. Now, the condition of ease of manufacture—and a very important consideration this is under war-time conditions—precludes the use of anything but fairly simple compounds, and since almost all the simple combinations of known effective groupings have been prepared and examined—most of them actually during the last war—the likelihood of the discovery of a new and practicable super-gas is remote.

## Can we expect a surprise?

Chemical-warfare experts in most countries are, of course, aware of this fact, and consequently research is directed in other directions, mainly towards the improvement of methods of manufacture of known substances and new and improved methods of employing them. The second of these two lines of inquiry is clearly of immediate interest to us; if chemical warfare is used against us, can we expect the enemy to deliver the goods in some new and surprising way? Let us examine three typical examples; first, a true gas such as phosgene.

A lethal or dangerous concentration of this gas could easily be set up locally by dropping a sufficient number of bombs containing it in a restricted area: there is nothing particularly new about this, and since the gas

disperses rapidly, has a fairly strong smell and is easily absorbed by the respirator, the only people who are likely to become casualties are those who do not find their gas-masks in time.

The German occupation of the ports has raised two new possibilities: the release of a gas cloud on the French coast, which would, carried by a suitable wind, drift across to this country, and the use of gas shells into this country by long range guns. Practical difficulties are very considerable. For a gas cloud to be used successfully, a very large amount of gas would be required—an amount of five hundred or a thousand tons. The cloud would have to drift at least five miles without becoming so dispersed as to be ineffective. A steady south-easterly wind would be required, as the prevailing wind in the Channel is the south-west, it is only rarely that a wind would be available.

## The wind might change

Furthermore, there is always the possibility of the wind changing after the gas has been released, thus blowing it out to sea, or worse (from the point of view), blowing it back over the point. Another difficulty is that the wind is not always so suitable for projection in the form of a gas cloud. Winds are all more or less easily decomposed by water, so that the passage of a gas cloud miles across the sea would result in the loss of a considerable amount.

The difficulty about long-range gas shells generally is that the guns used must be bored after firing about fifty times. The experience of the last war showed that, if a gas shell is used, random shelling is useless. It is necessary to fire a very large number of shells into a small area to set up a concentration. This being so, it is not likely that with a necessarily limited number of suitable guns, not very much can be done in this direction.

## Mustard gas and lewisite

Passing on to our second example, we expect the enemy to spring any number of surprises on us with vesicant liquids such as mustard gas and lewisite? It is over the use of these substances that the speculation of these substances that the speculation previously referred to have really themselves go. One must concede the hypothesis of a vast amount of gas being dropped from the air like rain on to the ground, contaminating everything with which it came into contact and condemning to a longed agony or death anyone on whom a drop fell would give just cause for speculation—were it not for the fact that in actual practice all this is completely impossible.

When a liquid is released from an aircraft, the issuing stream is immediately broken up into a mist of extremely small droplets by the air currents and the turbulence behind the machine. This mist of droplets coalesce into drops large enough to fall rapidly under gravity and itself sink to the ground slowly, if at all. Thus only a small proportion, if any, of the total amount of liquid released at a considerable height will reach the ground at all, since most of it is evaporated during its long fall. The earth will account for most of the gas released.

Moreover, the longer the droplets fall, the greater will be the scattering of wind and air currents, so that the gas released from a single source will not actually reach the earth will be over an extremely wide area many miles away from the original point of release.

To be of any value, liquid vesicants must have to be sprayed from aircraft in not more than four hundred feet. This method is used by the Italians in the spraying of fruit trees in Calabria, the method being used by the Italians in the spraying of fruit trees in Calabria, the method being used by the Italians in the spraying of fruit trees in Calabria. As the Abyssinians were

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