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It was probably due to the dominance of Coppard that during the Twenties the short story in England often appeared as a specifically bucolic form registering a scene and ways of life that had scarcely changed since those depicted in Hardy. Parallels with Georgian poetry abound. At his best, Coppard himself rose above these criticisms and, at his best, his true successor was H. E. Bates. He never, as Coppard does from time to time, surprises with a fine excess but he was an exceedingly careful craftsman who kept up a consistent excellence. In his book, *The Modern Short Story*, he described Stephen Crane's method as that

> by which a story is told not by the carefully engineered plot but by the implication of certain isolated incidents, by the capture and arrangement of casual episodic movements. It is the method by which the surface, however seemingly trivial or unimportant, is recorded in such a way as to interpret the individual emotional life below.

He was describing his own practice, which he had learned from Chekhov. And this careful craftsmanship was infused with a sensitivity to beauty and character that led David Garnett to write that 'his best stories have the extreme delicacy and tenderness of Renoir's paint'. Having been read once, some of his stories exist in the mind as pictures, often as still life, as does 'The Gleaner', probably the most famous of his early stories. Movement in it seems arrested almost to the point of having been frozen.

> Her fingers were rustling like quick mice over the stubble, and the red wheat ears were rustling together in her hands before she had taken another step forward. There was no time for looking or listening or resting. To glean, to fill her sack, to travel over that field before the light is lost; she has no other purpose than that and could understand none. . . .
>
> But later, in the heat of the afternoon, with her sack filling up, and the sun-heat and the bright light playing unbrokenly upon her, she begins unconsciously to move more slowly, a little tired, like a child that has played too long. She will not cover the field, she moves there,

> always solitary, up and down the stubble, empty except for herself and a rook or two, she begins to look smaller and the field larger and larger about her. . . .
>
> At last she straightens her back. It is her first conscious sign of weariness. She justifies it by looking into the sky and over the autumn-coloured land sloping away to the town; she takes in the whole soft-lighted world, the effulgence of the wine-yellow light on the trees and the dove-coloured roofs below and a straggling of rooks lifting off the stubble and settling further on again.

The impression he creates of stillness, of stasis, seems at times akin to the rendering of a state of trance, as in the late long short story 'Death of a Huntsman', published in 1957, almost a quarter of a century after 'The Gleaner'. 'Death of a Huntsman' shows admirably, by the way, Bates's range of social types and scenes, which is considerably wider than one at first thinks. It begins:

> Every week-day evening, watches ready, black umbrellas neatly rolled and put away with neat black homburgs on carriage racks, attaché cases laid aside, newspaper poised, the fellow-travellers of Harry Barnfield, the city gentlemen, waited for him to catch – or rather miss – the five-ten train. . . .
>
> 'Running it pretty fine tonight.'
>
> 'Doomed. Never make it.'
>
> 'Oh! Harry'll make it. Trust Harry. Never fluked it yet. Trust Harry.'
>
> All Harry's friends, like himself, lived in the country, kept farms at a heavy loss and came to London for business every day. J. B. (Punch) Warburton, who was in shipping and every other day or so brought up from his farm little perforated boxes and fresh eggs for less fortunate friends in the city, would get ready, in mockery, to hold open the carriage door.

Barnfield lives for his life in the country and his riding. His wife is gin-soaked, and he falls in love with a girl who habitually rides across his land. She proves to be the daughter of a neighbour, a woman of his own age who was one of the circle he mixed with as a young man. They are sitting, he and the woman, in his stationary car after a hunt ball.

> 'I think she has to be told,' she said, 'that you and I were lovers. Of course it was some time ago. But wouldn't you think that that was only fair?'

He could not speak. He simply made one of his habitual groping gestures with his hands, up towards his face, as if his spectacles had suddenly become completely opaque with the white sickening smoke of her cigarette and he could not see.

'Not once,' she said, 'but many times. Oh! yes, I think she has to be told. I think so.'

He is so much beside himself at the woman's attempt at blackmail that he loses control of himself and blindly hits out at her. Then he begins furiously to drive away and as she screams and prepares to jump out of the car she has a moment of memory:

> Out of the darkness sprang a remembered figure of a Harry Barnfield in a white straw hat, white flannel trousers and a college blazer, a rather soft Harry Barnfield, simple, easy-going, good-time-loving, defenceless and laughing; one of the vacuous poor fish of her youth, in the days when she kept a tabulation of conquests in a little book, heading it *In Memoriam; to those who fell*, her prettiness enamelled and calculated and as smart as the strip-poker or the midnight swimming parties she went to, with other, even younger lovers, at long weekends.

It is a good example of Bates's ability to dramatize vital information about the past of a character in such a way that the progress of the story is not held up but indeed furthered.

The woman jumps out of the car, having struck out at Barnfield and knocked off his spectacles. Reduced to near-blindness he crashes the car into a telegraph pole and is killed. At his funeral, with which the story ends, everyone joins in to pay tribute to 'a good huntsman, a good sport, a great horse-lover, and a man in whom there was no harm at all'.

'Death of a Huntsman' has a grave and subtle beauty. The relation between Valerie and her mother, who treats her as though she were still a schoolgirl, is very well conveyed and that between her and the business man twenty-five years older than herself is admirably rendered. In the following passage of what I have called stasis, the middle-aged man and young girl appear somehow transfigured:

> 'I think I know every path here now. There's a wonderful one goes down past the holly-trees. You come to a little lake at the bottom with quince trees on an island – at least I think they're quince trees.'
>
> If he had time, she went on, she wanted him to walk down there. Would he? Did he mind?

> He tethered his horse to a fence and they started to walk along a path that wound down, steeply in places, through crackling curtains of bracken, old holly trees thick with pink-brown knots of berry and more clumps of birch trees sowing in absolute silence little pennies of leaves.
>
> At the bottom there was, as she had said, a small perfectly circular lake enclosed by rings of elder, willow, and hazel trees. In the still air its surface was thick with floating shoals of leaves. In absolute silence two quince trees, half-bare branches full of ungathered golden lamps of fruit, shone with apparent permanence on a little island in the glow of noon.
>
> 'This is it,' she said.
>
> Neither then, nor later, nor in fact at any other time, did they say a word about her mother. They stood for a long time without a word about anything, simply watching the little lake soundlessly embalmed in October sunlight, the quince-lamps setting the little island on fire.
>
> 'I don't think you should go away,' he said.
>
> He answered her in the quiet, totally uncomplex way that, as everyone remarked, was so much part of him, so much the typical Harry Barnfield.

Generally, prose-poetry is a pejorative phrase: that Bates's prose has a genuine relation to poetry is shown by the frequency with which his rendering of nature in its minute particulars especially, as in the description of the quince-trees on the tiny island, reminds us of poets, of Tennyson for example. At the same time, he wrote some splendid heroic stories. This was a development in his talent brought to fruition during the war, when as 'Flying Officer X' he was commissioned in the Royal Air Force to write stories of the war in the air. The finest of these is perhaps 'The Cruise of *The Breadwinner*', which appeared over his own name in 1946. *The Breadwinner* is a characteristic British wartime improvisation. A small lugsail fishing boat, she patrols the Channel looking for the pilots and crews of shot-down aeroplanes. Her skipper is Gregson who appears to Snowy, the cabin-boy as a 'man of unappeasable frenzy', and Jimmy is the engineman.

When the story opens, Snowy is still a boy, pining for a pair of binoculars (for he is also the plane-spotter), but when he returns from the day's cruise he is a boy no longer. They have picked up a wounded RAF pilot, who replies to Gregson's 'Summat go wrong?':

'One of those low-level sods. . . . Chased him across the Marsh at nought feet. Gave him two squirts and then he started playing tricks. Glycol and muck, pouring out everywhere. Never had a bloody clue and yet kept on, right down the deck, bouncing up and down, foxing like hell. He must have known he'd had it.' The young man paused to look round at the sea. 'He was a brave sod, the bravest sod I ever saw.'

'Don't you believe it,' Gregson said. 'Coming in and machine-gunning kids at low-level. That ain't brave.'

'This was brave,' the young man said.

He spoke with the tempered air of the man who has seen the battle, his words transcending for the first time the comedy of the moustache. He carried suddenly an air of cautious defined authority, using words that there was no contesting.

At his behest, *The Breadwinner* turns about to look for the German pilot and in the end finds him and picks him up very badly wounded. 'In a moment of painful and speechless joy' Snowy notices that he carries binoculars. The boy is back in his galley about his never-ending job of brewing tea when *The Breadwinner* is shot up by an enemy fighter, which sheers off, having put the engines out of action and killed Jimmy the engine-man. Engines are a mystery both to Gregson and the boy, and they strive in vain to get her going. A storm gets up rapidly and Gregson unfurls the sail. He orders the boy to go below in order to look after the two wounded men, and Snowy watches them die.

In the late afternoon *The Breadwinner* comes in under the shelter of the dunes. She is safe. Snowy grasps the binoculars in his hands and presses them against his stomach. He goes over his talks with the RAF pilot. He remembers the German pilot in the end mainly as the man who carried the binoculars, 'the only things that had come out of the day that were not sick with the ghastliness of foul and indelible dreams'. Standing beside Gregson, the dead pilots 'became for him, at that moment, all the pilots, all the dead pilots, all over the world'.

Gregson continued tenderly to hold him by the shoulder, not speaking, and the boy once more looked up at him, seeing the old tired face as if bathed in tears. He did not speak, there rose in him a grave exultation.

He had been out with men to War and had seen the dead. He was alive and *The Breadwinner* had come home.

'The Cruise of *The Breadwinner*' is an austere work in which there are no heroics and no sentimentality. Among other things, it is a story of initiation into manhood. The characters are drawn boldly and simply, and this gives them a representative quality. The British officer partakes of the stereotype of the RAF pilot of the day, and Bates allows for this. He sees the pathos and the paradox of the stereotype: '. . . his words transcending for the first time the comedy of the moustache'. Gregson is beautifully rendered and Snowy is the epitome of boy at that moment in national history: he is defined completely in terms of one or two simple symbols, his prowess as a plane-spotter, his lust after the binoculars, his awe of Gregson. 'The Cruise of *The Breadwinner*' is among the masterpieces of the years it celebrates.