ATMOSPHERE IN THE STORIES OF H. E. BATES

by DEAN R. BALDWIN*

From the early 1930's until his death in 1974, H. E. Bates was considered one of the finest short story writers in England. A prolific author, he published well over two hundred stories in seventeen volumes, in addition to novels, novellas, country essays, and an influential study of the short story.[1] An output this large necessarily means that his works are of uneven quality, but as a short story writer he maintains an astonishingly high level of achievement in a wide variety of moods and subjects. On the one extreme are stories of harsh naturalism like "The Mill" and "The Ox," while at the other are tales of unabashed romanticism like "The Cowslip Field" and "The Watercress Girl." Most of his stories are in a tragic or sombre mood, but in two collections of Uncle Silas stories[2] and in occasional flights of high spirits like "A Couple of Fools" and "A Party for the Girls" he shows a rare and genuine comic gift. Considering both the quantity and quality of Bates's output, it is surprising that he is not better known or more highly regarded among academic critics or historians of the genre. Very little has been written about him, though there are signs that his achievement is finally gaining recognition.[3] This trend deserves to continue, as Bates is unquestionably a master story-teller whose excellences have thus far been largely overlooked.

On the surface, stories by H. E. Bates seem extremely conventional and straightforward. Readers will instantly recognize the influence of Chekhov in his technique of building stories out of trifling events and suggestion rather than through dramatic plot; in the rural stories of the 1930's particularly, the influence of A. E. Coppard is equally obvious.[4] But to categorize Bates as a purveyor of rural idylls or Hardyesque studies in pain and endurance is to deny the wealth and variety of his achievement and to miss the individual stamp of his talent. Perhaps it is the surface simplicity

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1. *The Modern Short Story* (London: Nelson and Sons, 1941); rev. ed. (London: Michael Joseph, 1972).

2. *My Uncle Silas* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939) and *Sugar for the Horse* (London: Michael Joseph, 1957).

3. For example, Walter Allen, *The Short Story in English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), and William Peden, "Realism and Anti-Realism in the Modern Short Story," *Proceedings Comparative Literature Symposium*, 13 (1982), 47-62; and Dennis Vannatta, *H. E. Bates* (Boston: Twayne, 1983).

4. Bates alludes to his debt to Coppard in *The Modern Short Story*, rev. ed., p. 140. Readers may also recall the series of Bates and Coppard stories broadcast under the title "Country Matters" by PBS on *Masterpiece Theatre*.

which is deceptive. Bates seldom deals in complex characters or subtle psychology; his people are drawn from the lower social and economic strata where feeling and impulse dominate, thought has little subtlety, and ideas are few. The young, the inarticulate, and the innocent are the usual subjects of his stories. His plots are similarly straightforward and direct: a fall from innocence or the eternal love triangle are at the center of a great number of his stories which are spun out with few complications and a minimum of elaboration. Complexities of emotion rather than of plot or character are his trademark, and he almost never ventures into political commentary, social criticism, or abstract ideas. The interactions of people with one another and their immediate, natural environment are the focus of his interest. Yet for all their apparent simplicity, Bates's stories have an intricate structure and a subtle texture that makes them curiously powerful and resonant. By and large their substance derives from his handling of atmosphere; the intricate interplay of mood and scene in relation to character and event is the basis of Bates's considerable art as a short story writer.

One aspect of Bates's romanticism manifests itself in stories of luminous natural beauty, often set on warm spring or summer days. "The Mower" is typical of these, depicting a hot June day on which a family of three is cutting a field of hay by hand. The physical atmosphere of the story is permeated by images of heat and light:

> In the midday heat of a June day a farm-boy was riding down a deserted meadow-lane, straddling a fat white pony. The blossoms of hawthorn had shrivelled to brown on the tall hedge flanking the lane and wild pink and white roses were beginning to open like stars among the thick green leaves. The air was heavy with the scent of early summer, the odour of the dying hawthorn bloom, the perfume of the dog-roses, the breath of ripening grass.[5]

Throughout the story the colors yellow, white, and green appear and reappear, as do reminders of the sun's relentless heat. Reflecting these motifs are the woman and a hired hand named Ponto, a mower of prodigious skill and strength emanating danger and sexuality. Their illicit passion is joined to the natural scene by the woman's white blouse and green skirt, green being an ancient symbol of fertility.[6]

In addition to this link between the heat of the day and the passion of Ponto and Anna, there is an air of expectancy and tension that permeates the story. At the beginning, this is created by uncertainty over whether Ponto will actually come to help with the mowing. Once he arrives, the question shifts to whether they will be able to complete the mowing that

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5. "The Mower," in *The Best of H. E. Bates* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p.16. All subsequent citations are from this collection and will be given in the text.

6. Valentine Cunningham, "Pastoral Perfick," *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 January 1981, p. 27 calls attention to numerous instances in which Bates dresses his women in green.

day. These two feelings, expectancy and passion, are joined in the relations between Anna and Ponto, for in spite of the physical attraction that draws them together, they are prevented from consummating their love by the prying eyes of her husband, her boy, and even the sun. At one point they snatch a few moments alone, but that is all. Moreover, Ponto's swaggering confidence in his own sex appeal contrasts sharply with the woman's submissive devotion, adding another layer of tension to the atmosphere. All three are maintained throughout the story, but gradually a fourth emerges, the suggestion of death. The act of cutting hay itself recalls the Biblical proverb, "As for man, his days are as grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth,"[7] while the swaggering, carefree Ponto in his skill and power suggests the grim reaper. In the end, none of these tensions is resolved so that the story culminates in a remarkable effect — that on the one hand nothing significant has happened on this hot, lazy summer day, yet everything is quivering with suggestion and possibilities. Thus the story's effect lies not in its characters or incidents so much as in the aura created by the interaction and tension of its various elements.

Another story of illicit passion, "The Station," achieves its effects in quite different ways, though some of the same motifs appear. Like many writers of the 1930's Bates was influenced by film techniques, which are used to good effect in creating the atmosphere of this story. It begins with a still moment, when a delivery truck has pulled up to a small dark cafe on a sultry summer night. As the driver and his mate step down from the cab, the woman inside the cafe turns on a light, illuminating the two men and revealing the mate as "young, but beside the driver he was boyish, his cheeks smooth and shiny as white cherries, his hair yellow and light and constantly ruffled up like the fur of a fox-cub" (p. 69). Thus is introduced a light-dark dichotomy which is maintained throughout: the blond young man and the dark woman, the brightness of the cafe in contrast with its surroundings, the stabbing light of a flashlight as the driver picks plums from a tree behind the building, and finally the garish blinking of a neon sign which the woman had previously neglected to turn on. These dramatic cinematic effects intensify the sudden attraction between the woman and the young man and are in turn heightened by the heat of the kitchen and the odor of ripening fruit and grain, both of which suggest sexuality. The climax occurs in the garden, with the woman holding the flashlight and the driver in the tree picking plums:

> "Where's your hand?" she was whispering. "Here. It's a beauty." The soft ripe plum was between their hands. Suddenly she pressed it hard against his hand, and the ripe skin broke and juice trickled over his fingers. "Eat it, put it in your mouth," she said. He put the plum

7. Psalms, 103:15.

> into his mouth obediently, and the sweet juice trickled down over his lips and chin as it had already trickled over his hands. (pp. 76-77)

A moment later, the two men are once again on their way, the younger eating plums as the flashing neon light of the station recedes into the darkness. The remarkably erotic moment in the garden is partly the result of the woman's actions, but its effect is made possible by the atmosphere Bates builds out of the contrast between light and dark and the combination of odors and heat that occur in apparently casual descriptions.

Among Bates's best stories are a number which recreate scenes of his boyhood, a time just after the turn of the century when the ancient world of horsepower and manual labor was being replaced by automobile and machinery. In tales like "The White Pony," "Alexander," "Great Uncle Crow," and "The Cowslip Field," the atmosphere is usually as golden and sunny as that of "The Mower." In evoking this Eden, Bates calls upon his considerable powers of description and his intimate knowledge of the countryside. "The Watercress Girl" joins this sense of innocent beauty to an air of mystery in a tale uniquely evocative of childhood and overlain with a melancholy nostalgia of rare piquancy. The story begins with apparent casualness as the writer recalls traveling by horse and cart to visit his Aunt Sar' Ann. Like most children, the boy cannot keep straight the names and faces of his elderly relatives, but after several wrong guesses and additional hints from his grandfather, he recalls her as a woman with "a voice like a jackdaw's" and her sister as Aunt Prunes (Prudence). The confusion of Prunes and Prudence is part of another mystery in the boy's life: language. His grandfather speaks a strange dialect with words like "quartern," "simly," and "bulls' noon" which his teacher does not use, and there are phrases like "so long," which seem to mean the opposite of what they say. There are additional mysteries in the adult world. Aunt Prunes has a moustache, but grandfather denies this obvious fact with the assertion that, " 'Females don't have moustaches — you know that' " (p. 348). He is accused of eating too much and of having eyes bigger than his stomach, though he is still hungry; and he can only wonder at why adults sleep in the afternoon when night is the time for rest. Later, there is yet another mystery when Sar' Ann calls the girl he met at the brook nothing but a "Gyppo," someone who "nicks" things, when he has found her friendly and generous. The eventual point of the story is the contrast between the golden world of his childhood and the jagged, faded modern world of television and pre-fab bungalows, but an important element in developing this theme is the atmosphere of childhood confusion which Bates creates essentially by focusing on the perplexities a child feels in trying to fathom the ways of adults. In fact, that atmosphere carries over into the theme of regret, suggesting that the "progress" of the last several decades is as mysterious and contradictory as the confusions of childhood. Thus once again there is an interaction of atmospheres: the golden glow of summer, mingled with

the child's sense of the world's wonder and mystery, combined with the adult's feelings of nostalgia and loss.

"Love in a Wych Elm" is a story similar in theme to "The Watercress Girl" but entirely different in construction and atmosphere. Here, the first two paragraphs establish a tone of carefree casualness by describing the house lived in by the Candleton family and sketching the background of Mr. Candleton. This is achieved largely by the indolent rhythms of the prose, which appears almost haphazard in its syntax, lazy in its perceptions. The verbs are conditional — "gave the impression," "felt," "seemed" — and these reinforce the feeling that the writer is taking no more pains over his story than the Candletons did over their erratic lives. The story progresses through a series of loosely connected episodes and observations so that in structure it reflects the atmosphere established by the opening paragraphs, and this in turn is mirrored in the Candleton way of life, typified by Mrs. Candleton whom the author describes as "looking like the jaded mistress of a rag-and-bone man" (p. 325). Bates's purpose is not to depict his subjects as slovenly misfits, however, for their casual way of life stems from a fundamental innocence. This is symbolized by the family's physical traits: pale violet blue eyes and hair the color of yellow oat straw. It is also seen in their casual attitude toward sex. For example, when the eldest daughter elopes with a soldier who turns out to be married, she returns home as if from a delightful adventure, showing not the slightest sense of shame. Similarly, the narrator at the age of nine is one day received by one of the daughters, at that time about twelve years old, wearing only her petticoat. She invites him to her room for "a man's opinion" of her dress. The title of the story refers to the fact that the author and Stella were "married" at the age of nine or ten in a Wych elm, where he was then informed that it was his duty to make love to his bride, though neither of them knew why or how. This family innocence is eventually destroyed through financial ruin, and the author learns that the Candletons were not aristocrats as Stella had claimed, but rose from the worst street in town through Mrs. Candleton's money. Thus the theme of lost innocence is joined to and reinforced by the atmosphere of casual living and uncomplicated sexuality inherent in the style and structure of the story itself.

In the sharpest possible contrast to the sunny romanticism of these stories is "The Mill," one of Bates's undisputed masterpieces of naturalism. From first to last it maintains a relentlessly grim atmosphere which Bates himself once described as "emotionless negativity." At the center of the story is Alice Hartop, an adolescent girl so browbeaten by her father that she has literally no personality or will of her own. To supplement the family income, she is sent to care for Mrs. Holland, suffering from dropsy and living in a disused mill. Bates's description of Alice's arrival typifies the story's mood of static nullity:

> Beyond the piles of rusted iron a sluice tore down past the mill-wall on a glacier of green slime. She stopped and peered down over the stone

> parapet at the water. Beyond the sluice a line of willows were shedding their last leaves, and the leaves came floating down the current like little yellow fish. She watched them come and surge through the grating, and then vanish under the waterarch. Then, watching the fish-like leaves, she saw a real fish, dead, caught in the rusted grating, thrown there by the force of descending water. Then she saw another, and another. Her eyes registered no surprise. She walked round the parapet, and then, leaning over and stretching, she picked up one of the fish. It was cold, and very stiff, like a fish of celluloid, and its eyes were like her own, round and glassy. (p. 38)

This is typical of the story, with Bates narrowly avoiding excessive cruelty in depicting the characters and the setting in which they move. The comparison between Alice and the fish is perfectly apt, for throughout she is a passive victim, being sexually used by Mr. Holland and then jealously abused by his wife. She is also described as having a face "moulded in clay" and an expressionless countenance; her movements are mechanical and automatic. The rushing water of the mill and the pervading damp of the house represent an inexorable, Hardyesque fate over which she has no control, and the cold and barren mill with its surrounding junk yard and rank weeds is linked to the general atmosphere of chill indifference. The weather itself reinforces the atmosphere of gloom: at the beginning of the story, the Hartops are driving through a lashing rain storm, and later much of the action occurs during dull Midlands winter:

> Darkness began to settle over the river and the valley in the middle afternoon: damp, still November darkness preceded by an hour of watery halflight. From Mrs. Holland's bedroom Alice watched the willow trees, dark and skeleton-like, the only objects raised up above the flat fields, standing half-dissolved by the winter mist, then utterly dissolved by the winter darkness. The afternoon was very still; the mist moved and thickened without wind. She could hear nothing but the mill-race, the everlasting almost mournful machine-like roar of perpetual water, and then, high above it, shrieking, the solitary cries of sea-gulls, more mournful even than the monotone of water. (p. 43)

Taken together, the rushing water of the mill, the pervading chill of the house, and the flat, spiritless landscape create a mood of universal indifference. There is only momentary release from this feeling when the Hollands' son returns from the army and takes a friendly interest in Alice, but this only serves to heighten the tragedy when she must finally return to her parents — pregnant — and for the first time breaks into tears.

Equally severe is the atmosphere of plodding futility that surrounds every human activity in "The Ox." The mood is set at the beginning in the description of the Thurlow's house:

> The Thurlows lived on a small hill. As though it were not high enough, the house was raised up, as on invisible stilts, with a wooden

> flight of steps to the front door. Exposed and isolated, the wind striking at it from all quarters, it seemed to have no part with the surrounding landscape. Empty ploughed lands, in winter-time, stretched away on all sides in wet steel curves. (p. 120)

Here the loneliness and exposed situation of the house suggest the condition of the Thurlows themselves, particularly Mrs. Thurlow who exists in an endless round of cleaning and washing for other people, daily pushing her bicycle laden with laundry and other burdens from house to house. "Her relationship to it was that of a beast to a cart" (p. 120). Her husband is equally alienated, having suffered a head wound on the Marne which left him with a silver plate in his head and periodically excruciating headaches. The Thurlows are not even a family but a collection of isolated individuals with no affection for one another. The only bond is Mrs. Thurlow's mindless dedication to the future welfare of her sons as she slaves at her cleaning and laundry, hoarding her money under a mattress. This is the environment in which the rest of the story takes place: Thurlow's murder of a man who doubts the existence of the silver plate, his theft of his wife's money, his capture, trial, and conviction. In the process, Mrs. Thurlow loses even her sons, for they prefer living with their prosperous uncle. In the end, she is left with her bicycle, her work, and the dull Midlands mud, which "seemed to suck at her great boots and hold her down" (p. 137).

Between these extremes of romanticism and naturalism are a great number of stories, usually involving love triangles, which combine elements from both approaches. Atmosphere in these stories is less obvious but no less important in determining the overall effect. Of these, "Across the Bay" is typical in building up an atmosphere from a series of repeated images and objects. The story takes place at a seaside hotel in France just after World War II and focuses on an Englishman named Harris who is vacationing for as long as his money lasts; after that, he has no plans and no prospects. This setting and Harris's situation create at the outset a tension between expectation and vacuity, hope and nothingness. These are mirrored in two patterns of imagery, the first of which centers on references to light and sun. "Sealight from the wide hot bay sparkled on Madame Dupont's spectacles as she lifted her face," and "An afternoon of indigo and snow-white brilliance blew in exhilarating bursts of wind that flowered into occasional running whirlwinds of sand" (p. 265, p. 274), are but two of many examples. Related to these numerous references to food, particularly small pink lobsters called langoustines, and fruit, especially grapes and peaches. As the story develops, Harris's relationship to the food and the light signify his moods and suggest the state of his love-affair with Yvonne, a young woman staying at the hotel alone during the week, but on weekends occupied with a man claiming to be her father, but who is eventually revealed to be her lover. The other pattern of images relates to corruption and vulnerability, seen in the repeated instances of maggots in the peaches

and in references to Harris's scar, described at one point as "tight and dead" (p. 267). The repetition of these two groups of images maintains an atmosphere of tension throughout the story. In this atmosphere the love affair between Harris and Yvonne alternates between periods of happiness and pain caused by separation. The other motifs in the story, particularly Harris's repeated allusions to taking a trip across the bay, support this overall feeling. In the end, the tension is resolved tragically, with Yvonne returning to Paris with the man who keeps her, and the story concludes by repeating the two groups of images in singular fashion:

> Harris looked away from the sea to where Jean-Pierre, splitting a gold-pink peach in halves, was prodding with the point of his fruit knife a trundling fat maggot that had fattened on the blood-brown shining heart of flesh.
>
> "Kill it! Kill it!" Madame Dupont said. "Put it away! Take it out of my sight. I can't bear it! For God's sake put it out of my sight!"
>
> Across the bay the sea flashed with its deep noon beauty and in the dining-room Madame Dupont, quite pale behind her golden spectacles, buried her face in her hands. (p. 285)

It would be wrong to suggest that Bates's talent as a short story writer lay solely in his ability to create and manipulate atmosphere, for he possessed complete technical mastery, including a flexible and lucid style, a rare gift for natural description, and the ability to draw convincing characters with great economy. However, his use of atmosphere distinguishes many of his stories and marks them as among the best produced by any British writer in this century.