Writing Against the Nostalgic Grain: H. E. Bates in the 1950s

Dominic Head University of Nottingham

The most familiar account of fiction in 1950s England emphasizes class and social change. In this version of literary history, the liberal humanist vision, epitomized perhaps in the work of Angus Wilson, is eclipsed or superseded by the new social energies of the gritty Northern realists, especially John Braine and Alan Sillitoe, who built on the 'angry' or comic renunciation of class conventions found in John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1953) or *Lucky Jim* (1954) by Kingsley Amis, those Movement writers reacting against the austere formal experiments of the modernists. In a parallel development, the seeds of post-Empire (if not multicultural) Britain can be detected in the work of writers of the 'Windrush' generation, Sam Selvon being one of the most notable. These are just some of the headline themes of a decade of rapid change, in which novelists sought to register the effects of enormous upheaval in British social life – some manifest, some incipient – and to forge new forms of literary expression for the purpose.

While this overview is broadly accurate, it has the tendency, like all overviews, to install a narrative that can become unhelpfully inflexible. This is particularly the case where literary history emphasizes change, and the formal innovation (or reaction) that is prompted by it: this kind of narrative can overlook those writers who, at first glance, do not seem to be at the cutting edge of the 'new'. As for writers who are sometimes apt to cling to tradition, they are likely to be consigned to the margins by that dynamic in literary history that seeks to draw lines in the sand. One such writer is H. E. Bates.

The paradox here is immediately evident, since H. E. Bates, by several obvious measures, is a very significant English writer. He was a prolific author, publishing over a hundred titles between 1926 and his death in 1974, including novels, plays,

short stories, novellas, literary criticism, autobiographies, children's books, and books celebrating England and the English landscape. He is probably best known as the writer of rural or regional novels, or as a writer of powerful and wistful short fiction, an English Chekhov. Yet he has also written novels set in India and Burma, wartime fiction (commissioned by the Armed Forces), comic novels (the Larkin sequence), and all of his work is characterized by an understated (and in some ways sub-Lawrencean) celebration of sexuality that is, in his earlier work, quite radical. Much of this output is ground-breaking in different ways.

From a purely sociological point of view, then, there is good reason to include Bates in a literary-historical overview of twentieth-century English writing. His work embraces some of the key themes of change that have dominated discussion of literature through the century, and especially since the Second World War. In his output of the 1950s, there are excellent examples of Bates's treatment of these themes: the legacy of imperialism; social mores and class change; the relationship between rural and urban existence; and the perception of place. In terms of subject-matter then, the work of the 1950s provides a faithful snapshot of Bates's entire *oeuvre,* and an important case-study for the larger claims that can be made for him.

On this point, I should emphasize that the argument I am adducing is simply opened up by the correspondence between Bates's preoccupations, and those which have exercised literary historians. I am seeking to go beyond this correspondence, and to make a case for the value of his literary treatments of these familiar topics. It is widely recognized that Bates wrote some of his better shorter fiction in the 1950s; so this essay will be confined to the novels of this decade, the better to determine whether or not there are grounds to resuscitate Bates's reputation in this era. My feeling is that the perceived weaknesses of some of Bates's longer fiction – and this point applies to his whole career – help, paradoxically, to pinpoint his importance, from a literary-historical perspective. In short, there is an element of misperception about his achievement, and this helps to explain his neglect in academic criticism.

If we begin with the least convincing element of Bates's output in the 1950s the lines of the argument will immediately become apparent: the tension between commercial success and critical acclaim. Bates's 1945 tour of India and Burma gave him the material for a trilogy of far Eastern novels, the last of which, *The Scarlet Sword*, was published in 1950. These novels on colonial themes are not usually deemed to be amongst Bates's best work, though their dramatic narratives ensured popularity. (*The Purple Plain* (1947) was adapted for the screen in 1954, with Gregory Peck starring.) It would be wrong to suggest that Bates is the most acute observer of colonial themes; yet, as Dean Baldwin remarks, the focus of *The Jacaranda Tree* (1949) is 'colonialism and its attendant virtues and vices', even though this is made to govern the portrayal of character too mechanistically.[1]

The Scarlet Sword lacks narrative interest because the interior life of the characters remains inscrutable throughout. The novel is set in a Catholic mission, under attack by Pathans at the time of the Indian partition, and the action depicts the gruesome violence endured by the mission inhabitants before they are evacuated by the Indian army after a ten-day ordeal.[2] If the treatment is chiefly sensational, 'the stuff of best-

sellers', in Dennis Vannatta's words, there is still a noteworthy attempt – prescient for the time of publication – to analyze the colonial dynamic.[3] If the portrayal of the journalist, Crane, is perfunctory, his perspective can be used purposefully in this connection, as here where he is assessing Julia Maxted as a representative of 'the colonial female':

> She was growing up to be another nice infuriating superior English mem-sahib, he thought, like her mother and ten thousand pukka mem-sahibs before her from all the bridge clubs and tennis clubs and swimming clubs and gossip clubs, from Bombay to Calcutta, Delhi and Darjeeling and wherever else they clanned together. She was another one who had flounced her way through the war with no other wounds but the sores on her finger-tips from tying Red Cross parcels. She was another one who fancied herself in the high places.[4]

The lucidity of the analysis, which links social advantage and the colonial order – underpinned (crucially) by the delusion of altruism – is tempered by the apparent misogyny. Yet Crane is in the process of falling in love with Julia, so this process of psychological denial serves the purpose of laying bare the shocking disjunction between the personal and the political in times of crisis. The passage also opens up the book's chief revelation, again through the extended condemnation of the colonial female. It continues:

> She was another daughter of the Philistines: except that it was another sort of philistinism, another sort of prostitution, the sort at which the colonial female was as always more deadly than the male. Give me the lady in the sari, he thought, I've had enough.[5]

The lady in the sari is the Bombay prostitute, Kaushalya, who arrives at the mission at the same time as Crane, and who initially attracts the disapprobation of Father Simpson, the junior of the two priests. In the conclusion of the novel, Kaushalya is the catalyst of a religious revelation for Father Simpson. He comforts her after she has (it is implied) been raped by two Pathans.[6] The revelation is centred on Father Simpson's recognition of his earlier misjudgement, and the need for community solidarity, without prejudice, in the face of adversity. As a continuation of Crane's earlier reflection on the colonial female, the revelation is obviously secular, underscoring the inversion of the idea of prostitution so that the colonial structure is the seat of deception, providing only a corrupt place for the female in its order.

The second element of Bates's writing that courts popularity, but which also conceals a hidden value, is his comic writing. At the end of the decade, Bates published the first two of his Larkin novel sequence, *The Darling Buds of May* (1958) and *A Breath of French Air* (1959), and these represent another significant element of his output. *The Darling Buds of May* can be taken as representative of this expressly populist venture, which has helped to keep his work alive into the twenty-first century in the popular imagination, on account of the very successful 1990s television adaptation of these novels, with the afterlife of repeats and a DVD release. The television series relies on an escapist fantasy of the rural good life, though in

the novels more interesting tensions are also at play. *The Darling Buds of May* is, on the face of it, a comic pastoral entertainment in which the 'perfick' scene of natural abundance (in the idiom of Pop Larkin) supplies an unashamed feelgood setting. Generic conventions are fully satisfied by the felicitous ending: we reach 'full, high summer' after 'the buds of May had gone'[7], with the announcement of a wedding, and a new baby for Pop and Ma Larkin.

Given the time of publication, the comic pastoral credentials of *The Darling Buds of May* suggest an easy town/country opposition. The unorthodox lifestyle of the Larkins is defined by their flouting of social convention: they are unmarried, and they resist centralized social organization. The Larkins embody a hedonistic, non-judgmental *joie de vivre* that is made to correspond with the rhythms of the countryside. However, part of the comedy depends on the extent to which this correspondence is undermined – indeed, a less innocent rural economy is at work.

At the outset, the beautiful daughter Mariette believes herself to be pregnant (mistakenly), and sets about the seduction of the tax inspector, Mr Charlton, who is on an impossible mission to secure a tax return from Pop. Pop and Ma connive with Mariette's designs on Mr Charlton, a possible husband, and a solution to Mariette's problem. This concession to social decency, and the attempt to buy it with sex, jars with the impression of sexual freedom and openness. As the gradual seduction of Charlton begins, a TV discussion of prostitution is playing on the family's television.[8]

The hint of sexual bargaining is a comic touch, the effect of which depends upon the undercutting of the innocent pastoralism. In the same way, the success of Pop Larkin as a hyperbolic comic creation hinges on the ultimate disjunction between his love of the natural world and his particular genius for money-making in the black market economy. With his enthusiasm for technology, Larkin is a benevolent social outlaw, a champion of individual freedom, rather than a bucolic hero. *The Darling Buds of May* is not, in fact, the pastoral fantasy it seems to be, but rather – with the memories of post-war rationing still alive – a projection of contemporary sentiment against state interference onto the good life. Bates concludes his autobiography with a celebration of the Larkin novels, calling *The Darling Buds of May* 'Chaucerian', which betrays his anxiety that the novel might not be seen to have the sheen of literary respectability.[9] As a popular comic novel its longevity hinges on the way it taps into an enduring English enthusiasm for anti-conventionalism, which is class-based. Its literary significance, especially for an understanding of Bates's *oeuvre,* is that it is not what it seems to be: the satirical impulse is masked by the trappings of pastoral; and the comic effects sometimes depend on the ways in which perceived pastoral conventions are undermined.

Comparable effects are discernible in the more typically Batesian novels of the 1950s, the regional novels with a Midlands setting. However, such effects are harder to identify and to account for in these works, which in some respects appear to be anachronistic. In fact, it is tempting to conclude that Bates is resting on his laurels in this phase of rural fiction, since he made his reputation in the 1930s in the heydey of English regional writing.

The Sleepless Moon (1956) is a useful point for assessing Bates's regional work in this decade, because it is a watershed work for him: its poor reception, made him vow never to write another novel for a time.[10] There is certainly something derivative about the book – the influence of Hardy seems especially strong in *The Sleepless Moon* – and something melodramatic about its conclusion, which strains for a tragic effect that is unconvincing. Yet it is these elements of disjuncture in the novel – which reveal it to be a literary anachronism – that are also its important features.

Regional fiction is associated with rural experience, or experience focused on provincial towns in rural settings, a genre that has tailed off after the Second World War, in this traditional form, for the obvious reason that regions are less self-contained than they were.[11] It is worth noting, however, that the anachronistic impression of Bates's regional writing is just as much a factor of his novels of the 1930s (such as *The Poacher* (1935), with its action spanning the period between the 1880s and the 1920s) as it is in his return to this mode in his later writing.[12] Indeed, the key aspect of this feeling of historical dislocation, and the consequent generation of contradictory effects, is also an essential feature of the genre: nostalgia.

Nostalgia is plainly an impulse that does not fit the model of progressive literary history that I sketched at the outset of this essay, where the line in the sand demarcates the old and the new, and where a key attribute of the new is formal and stylistic innovation. The pervasive presence of nostalgia in regional fiction will then, inevitably, render it invisible to the radar of normative literary history. Certainly, it is easy to see how, at any particular moment of analysis, nostalgia in the treatment of rural themes might be taken as a lament for a way of life now lost, and also – crucially – a lament for the accompanying loss of creative possibilities for this literary form. This, however, may amount to a misperception of nostalgia, assumed to be a retrograde phenomenon, redolent of a social conservatism that refuses to embrace change. The persistence of nostalgia in regional fiction requires us, instead, to explain its function. In fact, as John Su implies, this kind of nostalgic impulse may be an inherent feature of civilization, since 'the longing to return to a lost homeland', as 'a central feature of the Western literary tradition', is easily traced back to Homer. Su's immediate purpose is to rehabilitate nostalgia, to explain its recurrence in later twentieth-century fiction. It may be, however, that Su's analysis has a wider application where nostalgic fantasies 'provide a means of establishing ethical ideals that can be shared by diverse groups who have in common only a longing for a past that never was.'[13]

As in his fiction of the 1930s, Bates's nostalgia in *The Sleepless Moon* is exposed, quite self-consciously, as both contradictory and yet an essential feature of human identity. The reader is thus required to adopt a form of double-consciousness in which an understanding of the temptations of nostalgia is tempered by a realization of its self-destructive tendencies. Moreover, this double-consciousness governs an understanding of the formal constraints of the novel alongside the reception of the action.

Bates's regional novels habitually follow the tendency of Hardy and are set in an

earlier era. *The Sleepless Moon* is set in the 1920s, in a town based on Higham Ferrers (fictionalized as Orlingford). The apparent continuity of life in the country town serves as a counterpoint to the ill-fated love story, 'this tragedy of incompatibility', in Bates's words. He conceived Orlingford as 'a town of provincial conventions and gossip, of small intrigues, of church-going on Sundays and fox-hunting in winter.'[14] Of course, a generation on, Bates is able to register the broader social dynamic that renders Orlingford porous, and on the cusp of change. In the mind of the former soldier Hyde, after his confinement in an asylum, the rural lore of the poacher is somehow separated from the present by Passchendaele.[15] The appearance of cars in the town is said to herald 'the end of horses'[16]; and the infiltration of the region from London, in the person of the brassy publican Mrs Corcoran and her daughter Phoebe, turns out to be hugely destabilizing.

At the heart of the human tragedy, as Bates conceived it, is the unconsummated marriage of Melford and Constance Turner.[17] Their respective affairs, and the gossip and social intrigue these affairs generate, eventually lead to the attempted suicide of Hyde (after which he is committed to the asylum), and the deaths of both Phoebe Corcoran, and Constance who throws herself from the church roof at the novel's conclusion. That conclusion, and the feeling of melodrama it creates, is the key to the unsettling effect of this novel. The final words are given to Melford, the grocer-mayor who is rooted in this town and region, and who stands for tradition. In the moment his heart-broken wife throws herself from the church, he is disapprovingly regarding the church clock, oblivious to her plight, noting it to be three and a half minutes slow: 'I fail to understand it ... It was never like this in my father's time', he says.[18]

Bathos displaces the attempted tragic effect – which is tacitly revealed as anachronistic in itself, inapplicable to lives constrained by petty social and sexual mores. And just as the impercipient Melford reflects that 'it was never like this in my father's time', so is Bates implicitly drawing our attention to the fact that things have moved on from the time of his own father (and grandfather) and the memories of the Northamptonshire/Bedfordshire setting that supply his favourite inspiration. This is typically Batesian: the observed disjunction between the descriptions of place, often governed by a straightforward evocative nostalgia, and the action of his novels, which reveals the nostalgia to be a source of self-delusion, and a factor in the unhappy events. This is the double-consciousness upon which Bates's meaning usually depends, in the regional or rural fiction, and which invites us to think beyond the limitations of genre.

A comparable double-consciousness is created in the reader of Bates's best-known novel of the 1950s, the slightly earlier *Love for Lydia* (1952). This is one of Bates's novels set in Evensford (a fictionalized Rushden), a town dominated by boot factories and chapel-going. Bates's nostalgia is not for the town itself, but for the surrounding landscape that is threatened by it. The prospertity (and expansion) of Evensford then becomes a cause to lament, as when a view over fields and hedges embodies 'the kind of land that Evensford had taken away from us', in the narrator Richardson's view.[19] Indeed, urbanization is perceived as despoliation: 'continually

new roofs spawned along clay hillsides, encrusting new land, settling down on the landscape in a year or two with the greyness of old ash-heaps under rain.'[20] When he is recovering from Lydia's rejection of his proposal of marriage, Richardson finds that hard toil on his friend Tom Holland's farm affords him a healing process, a kind of benediction.[21]

There is certainly a strong autobiographical element in the creation of Richardson; but that does not mean that it is right to assume a simple correspondence between the views of author and narrator. If such an equation is always problematic, it is clearly signalled in *Love for Lydia* by the presentation (and, often, the self-critique) of Richardson, who is a callow youth learning about life and love. As Bates explains in his autobiography, part of his purpose was to reflect on the 'ecstasies and uncertainties' of his youth, and his 'impatient disposition to judge people ... by prejudice, before giving them a chance'.[22]

Although Richardson often articulates his own acquisition of self-knowledge – inviting the reader to trust in his authority – there is still a gathering sense of unreliability about his actions and his impetuousness, and this, inevitably, colours the reception of his retrospective account. Richardson's nostalgia for the Northamptonshire countryside is, therefore, complicated by our sense of his unreliability. This does not entirely negate the invitation to celebrate the evocation of place, or to indulge in nostalgia for a simpler rural life; yet the Batesian descriptions of nature are often already conditioned by a presentation of the inevitable marriage of/tension between the natural and the human: 'Spring came to Evensford about the end of April with shabby flowerings of brown wallflowers on allotment grounds, with dusty daffodils behind the iron railings of street front gardens.'[23] A further factor in the human mediation of nature, inevitable in a love story related by a young and often benighted narrator, is that 'nature' acquires an anthropomorphic function, as the reflector of mood.

Nostalgia is, then, part of the characterization in *Love for Lydia*. It is bound up with our understanding of Richardson's progress; and, as such, is partly an extension of the narrative stance. This is not to say that nostalgia can be equated with an incomplete understanding of the world, or that it emerges from the novel as a naïve state, merely. In a way that parallels the evolution of Richardson's love for Lydia, nostalgia supplies a more complex way of articulating the interaction – or clash – of past and present. At the end of the novel, Richardson's self-regarding obsession is transformed into a more complex form of acceptance of another. This becomes clear when he recognizes a new form of love for Lydia as he is on the point of rejecting her, in a spirit of self-preservation. Like Richardson's love for the mercurial Lydia, nostalgia has to be perceived as an unavoidable aspect of consciousness, even where it contradicts personal inclination or self-interest.

An analogous process, also dependent upon our assessment of Richardson, conditions the judgements made of the social life of Evensford (Rushden). When the narrator dismissively summarizes the life of a town dominated by the shoe industry, we may be tempted to read off the opinions of an author more attracted to things rural: 'Evensford ... is something like a grey beehive in which every worker has his

own cell of concentration for a single-minded purpose, exactly like an instinctive and brainless bee.'[24] The dismissiveness is qualified by the context, here, where the narrator is reflecting on the vulnerability of Evensford to the financial slump of the late 1920s; moreover, this has to be read as a young man's disaffection for the home town he has grown beyond.

There is an earlier, equally succinct, yet more biting summary of Evensford society:

> Evensford was full of Sandersons. Like leather, they were everywhere, branching out, making money, dedicating chapel foundation stones, strong in Rotarian and golfing and Masonic and bridge-playing circles, living in red gabled villas having conservatories filled with scarlet geranium and drawing rooms with Tudor radio sets.

The *embourgeoisement* of Evensford, summarized in this cultivated alliance of social, class and religious interests, is a sardonic and instant condemnation of how social advantage is established and preserved. Again, the way in which the implied authorial view seems to coincide with the narratorial stance makes this seem, initially, part of Bates's perspective. The passage continues:

> Their wives began by being sleek and good looking and ended up, in a few years, wadded with corsets that revealed pimpled suspender buttons, frothy with fox furs whose bony skulls were chained under chins of mauve-powdered flesh, healthy and puffed and in a rubbery way voluptuous.[25]

As a caricature of the face of class interests, this is both economical and cutting. It is also, in its gender focus, a jaundiced male point of view which plainly contributes to our understanding of Richardson's limitations as much as it contributes to the developing picture of Evensford. This is an excellent example of the technical problem that the novel presents overall: the punchy presentation of the society, in a historical novel, invites a face value acceptance; yet the development of character-narrator requires a simultaneous dynamic of resistance. As with the ambivalent cultivation of nostalgia, there is a double movement that advances our understanding on two fronts that are not entirely compatible.

The other Bates novel of this decade that seems to play on his established reputation as a regional novelist is *The Feast of July* (1954). Dennis Vannatta is right to observe that the important elements of the novel's plot – 'the girl made pregnant by the slick villain, the rural setting and seasonal rhythms, the inevitable violence, the flight with the lover and his eventual capture' – are 'variations on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*', in a novel that lacks the 'power, scope, and complexity' of Hardy's tragedy. Vannatta may also be right, however, that the strengths of *The Feast of July* lie not in 'plot, characterization, or theme', but rather in 'the richly textured cultural and historical milieu'.[26] The engine of the plot serves Bates's purpose well, however: Bella Ford, made pregnant by Arch Wilson, loses her baby on an unsuccessful trek to find him that nearly kills her. Arriving in Nenweald she is taken in by the Wainwright family, and becomes the object of the three sons' amorous attentions.

It is this love entanglement that provides the vehicle for the equally arresting treatment of place.

Bates sets this work at the end of the nineteenth century, in the familiar locale of a shoemaking town (Nenweald) where the effects of industrialization sit uneasily with the persisting rhythms of rural life. One such rural tradition is the feast that gives the novel its title, held on the first Sunday in July to celebrate the first peas and new potatoes of the season. Inevitably, the feast day is also the climax of the tragedy. On the Saturday before the feast, the eldest Wainwright son, Con, has taken Bella to Bedford to buy an ostentatious new hat with a feather, to complement the green dress he has already bought her. Bedford, 'a big town', seems to become an emblem of the dangers of progress.[27] It is on this trip that she runs into Arch Wilson, playing billiards, and he tries to make an assignation to see her at the Nenweald feast the following day.[28] Con and Bella do chance upon him fishing by the river, while they are out boating; and the tempestuous Con, picking a fight, kills Wilson with an oar.[29]

It would be easy to see a straightforward nostalgia for a simpler life in this sequence of tragic events: even the local superstition that a green dress is unlucky seems to be confirmed by the events of feast Sunday, another warning against change or the flouting of tradition.[30] Yet we cannot pinpoint what this 'simpler life' might be. We might be tempted to contrast the life of Bedford (the home of the billiard-playing seducer) with the life of Nenweald, where matters of subsistence are the focus, and where rural lore and the business of farming at least co-exist with the effects of the industrial revolution. (The shoemakers are also involved in gathering the harvest.)

Bates, however, evokes the severe hardships of a one-trade town, vulnerable to harsh winters and to an adverse economic climate. And because he has set this book back at least half a century, the effect is to present human hardship in a long historical perspective. At the same time, there are local details that are celebratory of a way of life that is fading; and this embraces the craft and skill of the expert shoemaker as much as the natural world. There is even a dynamic that invites us to see a delicate balance between the two: 'like all the shoemakers [Con] loved the river. He loved the valley and the open country that was an escape from the low shabby defiles of the town.'[31] It is this fragile tension that is fatally disrupted when Con kills the emissary of the big town beside his beloved river. As a historical novel, *The Feast of July* stages in miniature the larger effects of modernity – understood as the development of industrialization through the nineteenth century and beyond. It also enacts the impulse to nostalgia that this history can sometimes provoke, whilst simultaneously questioning the rationale for nostalgia.

One explanation for the apparently contradictory effects of Bates's work is that he is sometimes straining for the kind of seriousness that is not easily achieved by a writer with his rate of productivity, or with his striving for popular success. Another interpretation for the kinds of effect I have been sketching in this essay, therefore, is that they are a sign of artistic failure, the point at which the disjunction between ambition and achievement is revealed. However, I am certainly not proposing, here, a form of apology for bad writing. It is the conscious element of these various

effects – which demands a comparable 'double consciousness' in the reader, as I have suggested – that makes them worthy of note.

Bates was also acutely conscious of artistic under-achievement. At the beginning of the decade he published a short biography of Edward Garnett which reveals the great pride he took in being one of Garnett's discoveries, alongside Conrad, Galsworthy and D. H. Lawrence, as well as the haunting fear of failing to live up to the expectations that went with these associations – of being, in his phrase, a 'prodigy-charlatan'.[32] Garnett, in fact, had conjured this spectre of artistic failure in his foreword to Bates's first published novel, 'The Two Sisters', where he issued a waning to Bates that he was to evoke in subsequent criticism of Bates's less successful drafts: 'there is the path of art endlessly difficult and the path of facile achievement and it depends on the youthful writer's star which he shall follow.'[33]

What is not properly registered in this dichotomy is the changing perception of literary 'seriousness' after the Second World War, and the narrowing gap – and increasing overlap – between the popular and the serious, epitomized, perhaps, in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* with its middlebrow (anti-)hero Jim Dixon. Bates contributed strongly to this re-drawing of the literary map, although he was never able to articulate this, haunted as he was by the great expectations of an earlier era, a burden consequent upon being one of the later writers to come out of the Garnett stable. And it is the original aspect of this contribution to popularization – the return to (and re-assessment of) traditional forms – that has made Bates's achievement invisible to literary history. An indication of this apparent lack of innovation is in the return to his earlier achievements. Bates himself drew attention to the fact that the plot of *The Sleepless Moon* is a re-hash of his earlier novel *Catherine Foster* (1929);[34] yet it is not the plot as plot that interests Bates in any of these novels. As I have shown, it is the interaction – often the tension – between the traditional elements and a contemporary world-view that is the chief interest.

The re-working of a familiar plot is then analogous to the (continual) process of re-arranging traditional folk songs, where the traditional core is a (necessary) vehicle for creative elaboration. Indeed, the creative paradox of the folk tradition is similar to the paradox of Bates (and here the parallel with Hardy is, again, impossible to ignore). The narratives of folk songs are invariably tragic or sorrowful (occasionally comic), usually detailing failed loves, deaths, or just human hardship. They are related in an aesthetic form that celebrates artistic tradition, while calling for the virtuosity of the individual performer to reclaim them, and make them new. The regional fiction of Bates enshrines this paradox, as well as the related difficulty of human inhabitation, where ideas of belonging and the needs of subsistence are seen repeatedly to be at odds. It is this aspect of Bates's work which will, I think, give him a new currency. Just as in the 1960s and 1970s Bates was able to write works that chimed with the first wave of popularization for green politics, so will his dramatization of the competing claims of belonging and subsistence, in the long history of modernity, have an increasing relevance to our contemporary concerns.

Notes

1 D. R. Baldwin, *H. E. Bates: A Literary Life* (Selinsgrove, 1987), pp. 168–9.
2 *The Scarlet Sword* anticipates J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (London, 1973) in some respects, but suffers by comparison: it lacks the more complex perspective on colonialism available to a later generation and, to Farrell in particular, with his Anglo-Irish identity.
3 Dennis Vannatta, *H. E. Bates* (Boston, MA,1983), p. 72.
4 H. E. Bates, *The Scarlet Sword* (London, 1950), pp. 40–1.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
6 *Ibid.*, pp. 232–5.
7 Bates, *The Darling Buds of May* [1958] (London, 1979), p. 158.
8 *Ibid.*, pp. 33–5.
9 H. E. Bates, *The World in Ripeness* (London,1972), p. 150.
10 Bates, *The World in Ripeness*, p. 123.
11 A case can be made for the continuation – even the expansion – of regional writing more broadly understood. Keith Snell, notably, has argued that the regional novel in Britain and Ireland – and especially England – has been on the increase since the 1980s. See K. D. M. Snell, 'The Regional Novel: Themes for Interdisciplinary Research', in *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1800 – 1990*, ed. K. D. M. Snell (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 1–53.
12 H. E. Bates, *The Poacher* [1935] (London, 1953).
13 John Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: 2005), pp. 1, 3.
14 Bates, *The World in Ripeness*, p. 122.
15 H. E. Bates, *The Sleepless Moon* (London, 1956), pp. 295–6.
16 Bates, *The Sleepless Moon*, p. 255.
17 The failed honeymoon night, in a hotel by the sea, is echoed in Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* (London, 2009). There are further echoes in the way that night, and the dysfunctionality behind it, resonates in the minds of the principal characters throughout the novel; and further faint echoes in the father-daughter relationship of Edward and Agnes Twelvetrees, which has a hint of the oppression and abnormality that characterizes Florence Ponting's upbringing in the McEwan novella.
18 Bates, *The Sleepless Moon*, p. 384.
19 H. E. Bates, *Love for Lydia* (London, 1952), p. 139.
20 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
21 Bates, *Love for Lydia*, p. 189.
22 Bates, *The World in Ripeness*, p. 126.
23 Bates, *Love for Lydia*, p. 56.
24 *Ibid.*, p. 249.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
26 Vannatta, *H. E. Bates*, p. 96.
27 H. E. Bates, *The Feast of July* (London, 1954), p. 71.
28 Bates, *The Feast of July*, pp. 165–6.
29 *Ibid.*, pp. 179–80.
30 *Ibid.*, pp. 149, 175.
31 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
32 H. E. Bates, *Edward Garnett* (London, 1950), p. 63.
33 Edward Garnett, 'Foreword' to H. E. Bates, *The Two Sisters* (London, 1926), p. 10.
34 Bates, *The World in Ripeness*, pp. 121–2. Dean Baldwin's judgement of *The Sleepless Moon* seems to be invited by Bates's unashamed re-working of his output from an earlier era: 'its excellences are those of a generation previous, and its milieu seemed quaint to a world under threat of atomic extinction.' See *H. E. Bates: A Literary Life*, p. 194.

Address for Correspondence

Professor Dominic Head, School of English Studies, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD
Email: dominic.head@nottingham.ac.uk