12 The Enduring Land: H. E. Bates

The symbolic narratives of Powys contrast revealingly with the far more popular tales of an equally fastidious craftsman, H. E. Bates (1905–74), to mention whom is to refer not only to a skilful novelist, but also to one whose career showed him to be something of a literary barometer. His work went on changing, if not developing, in response to the pressures and outlooks of the times, his war novels[1] and the opulent Larkins saga of the 1960s[2] being alike pointers to the moods and tastes of the periods in which they were written. But Bates's most popular work has probably been the group of rural stories which he published in the 1930s.[3] While written with all the grace and refinement of *The Two Sisters* (his first, intensely romantic novel, published in 1926, when he was twenty, with an introduction by Edward Garnett), these books are of their time in their concern with the hardships and practicalities of country life. Deborah Loveday, the farmer's wife in *The Fallow Land* (1932), and Luke Bishop in *The Poacher* (1935) are types of human endurance, of a basic simplicity that acts directly according to its nature and without the prevarication and complex motives of urban dwellers. They thus provide a kind of twentieth-century heroic ideal. Rosie Jefferys, the barmaid turned farmer's wife in *A House of Women* (1936) is another.[4] Bates's attitude to his people has none of the uncertainty of Booth or Trevena; they are treated with great naturalness, above all with a feeling for their inherent dignity. The background of the Nene valley, beautifully described though it is, remains a background; people are more important in these novels than landscape.

The books proceed on a straightforward narrative course; one thing happens, then another; there is no exaggeration, no implausibility, no rustic cliché. But also there are no obvious morals and no conflicting themes: the individual is presented as a world to himself. This is why,

within its limits, *The Poacher* is such a satisfying novel. Luke Bishop, who panics at the thought of being suspected of murder, and who finally commits manslaughter as a result of an inevitable lapse back into a way of life he had in vain sought to repress, is a representative figure, one whose life is naturally parabolic and the centre of an austerely tragic picture of which the hardships and beauty of country life are inseparable components.

The strength of country life does indeed, in these novels, mean its capacity for tragedy. It provides a challenge not to be found in the life of towns. As Deborah, the embodiment of the spirit of work, passionately declares,

> 'What's wrong with the land, I should like to know? It's the same land – the same weather – the same seasons, everything the same except the people farming it. The people have changed, that's all. . . . If you're not master of the land the land will be master of you.'[5]

The enduring nature of the land is a feature of all these early novels. They are full of a sense of the timelessness of rural life. This can be conveyed through a delicate descriptive skill:

> In the pub, down in the town, with its narrow streets and the early mists coming up the river, she knew that it must already be winter. She could see and feel it all if she thought for only a moment; the fire in the bar, the gas bubbling and hissing, the glasses cold as ice to her hand first thing in the mornings, the smell of rain-wet horses waiting against the curb outside. There was a thickening in the flow of the pub's life in winter whereas on the farm . . . life seemed to thin and quieten and almost, at times, to come to a stillness entirely, turning in upon itself and coming to rest like a snake curling in for winter. In late summer the clack of the binder and a thousand sounds beside it had kept the air alive and the life in motion; now if there were sounds at all they were dying sounds, the somnolent fall of leaves, the mournful moan of cows housed-in, the dull rumble of muck-carts, sounds which sucked up and magnified the quietness as the hum of bees had stirred and magnified the silence of summer afternoons.[6]

The assonances and alliteration of this are evidence of the careful mind behind it. But the care can elicit a more prosiac timelessness.

> He was almost an old man; his hands were twisted and skinny and the veins blue and prominent . . . he walked with a slight hobble and a heavy stoop of his shoulders, as though all his life he had been carrying loads too heavy for him. The skin of his arms and neck and face were deep and soft, and his eyes, coloured an old pale blue shade turning to grey, were mild with a profound tolerance. There was nothing aggressive about him. He had the same air of patience and servitude as an old horse, too old to canter but still strong enough to work until he dropped. He had worked for over sixty years and had never taken a holiday except on his wedding day.[7]

When one compares this with Trevena's account of old Barseba, or even Brett Young's of the ancient labourer in *The Black Diamond*, one sees the essentially detached nature of Bates's art: nothing is being 'made out of' the subject; the author has not a trace of the showman.

In *Spella Ho* (1938), the last and most conventional of this group of novels, Bates takes the well-worn theme of the self-made man. Bruno Shadbolt, the self-educated labourer who becomes a successful businessman, eventually buys the mansion in whose shadow he has grown up. It is a typical nineteenth-century story of endeavour; but Bates gives it a wry conclusion.

> Standing between the house and the town he stood between much that had been created by twin forces in himself. Looking down, he could see the huge, more than tangible mass of his material endeavour for almost fifty years: the sprawling record of his undefeated ignorance, courage and strength. Looking up, he could see nothing but the house. . . . There was no record, except in his own mind, of things that had happened there. There was no record of the best in himself.[8]

Again, the representative nature of these novels is made clear; and the point is made still more insistently at the close. A young girl, sketching the house, attacks Bruno for the ugliness of the town, an ugliness for which his own prosperity is largely responsible.

> 'It just happened.'
>
> 'I know,' she said. 'A bit here, and a bit there. A street and then a hotel, and then something else. Anyhow. No plan. I know. Terrible . . . Didn't it ever occur to you to make it beautiful while you were at it?'
>
> 'I don't know. I don't think so.'

> 'Didn't you ever do anything beautiful?'
>
> He did not answer. There was nothing he could say to that. If he had done anything beautiful there was no record of it. There was no record of beauty, he thought, and affection, love, happiness, things like that. . . . Everybody is shut up; part of everybody is shut away from everybody else.[9]

This fragmentation is what the rural writer condemns in the age of the city.

Such chaos, such slovenly lack of plan, is clearly antipathetic to Bates, the fastidious artist in words, whose own favourite literary form is the short story.

> Its flexibility, almost unlimited range of subject and sympathy, and its very brevity, make it as perfectly suitable to the expression and mood of this age as the heroic couplet was to the age of Pope. To my mind it is in every way a finer means of expression of our age of unrest, disbelief and distrust, than either the novel or poetry.[10]

In view of this it is not surprising that Bates's own short stories should be among his most successful rural fiction. There is a total detachment in their artistry, an absolute objectivity, even in the frequent elements of violence; the reader is left free to draw his own deductions. The most satisfying stories are, however, the shortest, tales like 'The Plough', 'Harvest Moon', and 'Cut and Come Again'; for the objectivity, telling though it is, has an alienating effect when pursued at too-great length. 'The Mill', with its unremittingly sober account of a servant girl's seduction and dismissal, comes to mind here. The author's reticence works better in a story like 'Cut and Come Again', a brief vignette of a young newly-married labouring couple, or 'Cloudburst', in which an elderly pair see their barley crop destroyed in a storm; these are virtually prose poems, their whole theme being conveyed through carefully disposed detail. The overall picture of life is an austere one, despite Bates's preoccupation with ripeness, full-breasted women, well-stocked farm-houses and crusted characters like 'My Uncle Silas'. There is no softening of the realities of daily life, and a tale like 'Beauty's Daughters' skilfully conveys the tension within a single household in which the old rural and the new suburban values are in conflict. There is great immediacy of physical impact in the stories – more so than in the novels – and in this they suggest, rather than assert, the superior vitality of country life. And they do not gesture at their readers; they

do not have the slightly self-conscious 'folk' quality of the tales of A. E. Coppard,[11] many of which also handle rural subjects with vividness, if with rather too obvious charm. 'Charm' indeed is a quality refreshingly absent from Bates's early stories; but nonetheless the author's refusal to comment or to colour his material other than by physical detail leads finally to a slight impression of futility. The detachment, the artistry diminish the sense of urgency, of personal engagement; and we do not find the sense of a living folklore, such as the best of Kipling's rural tales convey. Bates has nothing to compare with 'The Wish House' or 'Friendly Brook'. In his work the rural theme subserves the art presenting it.

However, art does make for clarity; and Bates, more than any other rural novelist, would seem to have understood the precise issues attendant on the writing of this kind of fiction. As a record of country life his work takes a high place; in it there is a perfect ease in the relation of author to reader, and it is entirely lacking in the self-indulgent exaggeration that can be detected in Trevena and Phillpotts, being written, one feels, as much for the country reader as for anyone else. In it the rural tradition becomes part of the general tradition of the novel. From being a genre, a specific literary product, it becomes a means of furthering genuine understanding of the countryman, his problems and attitudes; it thus fulfils a social as well as a purely literary function. Indeed, since the Second World War the most memorable rural writing has been documentary in character:[12] one thinks of books like Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield* (1969), a portrait of an East Anglian village, and of the work of George Ewart Evans, such as *The Pattern Under the Plough* (1966). The influence of George Sturt has grown, not lessened, with the years, and his lament for a bygone way of life was to prove prophetic in every sense.

This note of regret is absent from Bates's fiction, which is always firmly of the present. If in his very realism he can match the representative nature of T. F. Powys's work, he has an understanding of the term 'the land' more precise than that of Constance Holme, in whose novels it likewise frequently recurs. There it represents tradition, permanence. In Bates's work it stands for challenge, energy, life.

> The land was something more than the earth; the earth was something vague, primitive, poetic; the land was a composite force of actual, living, everyday things, fields and beasts, seed-time and harvest, ploughing and harrowing, wind and weather; bitterness and struggle; the land was an opponent, a master.[13]