INTRODUCTION

The Old Wives' Tale has three claims to fame. It is one of the most successful attempts, if not *the* most successful, to rival in English the achievement of the French realistic novel from Balzac down through Flaubert, Zola and Maupassant. It is one of the most complete and satisfying novels of English provincial life. And it is a standing proof that a writer of the male sex can write with real perception about the imaginative and emotional lives of women.

As time hastens by, this rich and bountiful book takes on added benefits. Bennett was an historical novelist, not in the sense that his characters wear period costume and utter strange oaths, but in the sense that the main subject of his important works is the effect of time on human lives. Above and beyond his chosen human subjects, there is always the goddess History herself, benign, sardonic, accusing, according to her mood. '*The Old Wives' Tale*,' the young J. B. Priestley noted, 'has two suffering heroines, Constance and Sophia Baines, and three conquering heroes, Time, Mutability and Death.' Knowing that History must be the over-arching presence, Bennett planned his story to begin in the misty distance of the 1860s and to finish at the moment he took up his pen to write it, in 1907. He wanted it, that is, to span the immense gulf from Ancient to Modern. But to us, who see the modern of 1907 as separated from us by seismic upheavals and long, slow marches, its historical patina is enriched. The up-to-date, progressive elevation from which Bennett viewed mid-Victorian England is now further behind us than mid-Victorian England was behind him. Which means that his novel must either be forgotten, hopelessly out-dated and flung aside, or must survive as a classic – that is, an abiding statement, a work of art that speaks for its time so effectively that it will be read as long as that time has any place in the collective memory.

Of these two alternative fates for the book, the reading public has already chosen the second. Hence this edition.

IV

So far, I have been writing about Bennett as if everything he did had been achieved by working to a formula. Imitate the French novel. Keep your prose grey and truthful. Make use of home background. Focus on middling humanity. In fact, of course, all art, in proportion as it *is* art, achieves its enduring vitality by virtue of the individuality, the indispensable crumb of uniqueness, that the artist puts into it. The mark of any genuine work of art is that it could only have come from that one person, among all the teeming millions who inhabit the earth.

The sources of Arnold Bennett's inspiration, and the tradition in which he placed himself, are clear enough to see. Equally obvious is the high seriousness of his objectives. In that *Journal* entry about the germ of *The Old Wives' Tale*, one notices the willingness to measure himself against the highest standards of European letters. The two works that occur to him as pace-setters are Tolstoy's 'The Death of Ivan Ilytch', possibly the greatest short story ever written, and Maupassant's 'Histoire d'une fille de ferme', a classic story of Normandy peasant life. He did not, however, propose to scale the heights merely by imitating the best models. He had something uniquely his own to contribute; there is a Bennett flavour as there is a Fielding flavour or a Jane Austen flavour or a Conrad flavour. It inheres partly in his honesty, partly in his compassion, but perhaps most of all in his irony.

An ironist Bennett certainly was. Almost every sentence he wrote is tinged with an irony that must have been an integral part of the constitution of his mind, as natural to him as breathing. It is never easy to define irony, unless it is the *saeva indignatio* of Swift or the delicate rapier-play of Wilde. I think the nearest I can get to it is to say that Bennett's was a kindly, a tolerant irony. He saw human beings as inclined to be silly and fussy, but he did not hate them for it. He was free of any temptation to set himself on a pedestal and look down on the rest of humanity; he knew that, seen through any other pair of eyes, he was just as funny as anyone. Beyond that, his touch is so light as to make critical description seem ponderous and blundering. Take, for instance,

the moment when Mrs Baines and her sister are preparing for the funeral of John Baines.

> Dress and the repast exceeded all other matters in complexity and difficulty. But on the morning of the funeral Aunt Harriet had the satisfaction of beholding her younger sister the centre of a tremendous cocoon of crape, whose slightest pleat was perfect. Aunt Harriet seemed to welcome her then, like a veteran, formally into the august army of relicts.

This is undoubtedly ironic, and irony is always to some extent associated with mockery, but if we ask, 'What is being mocked here?' we see at once that the question is much too crude. Nothing is actually ridiculed. Human beings react to great issues, like death, by concentrating very hard on small issues, like the meticulous pleating of a crape garment. Widows live out their widowhood with a kind of disciplined dignity that makes them, in some ways, resemble an army. The word 'relict' itself, much used in self-approvingly formal, not to say pompous, Victorian circles, rests on certain assumptions about marriage that now seem comical, and did in fact seem so to Bennett (if the surviving female partner is a 'relict', the implication is that the active, responsible partner was the male; a widower is never described as a relict). All this clutter of social and sartorial procedure, set against the stark backdrop of eternity, makes human beings appear somewhat small-scale, like scurrying Lilliputians. Bennett sees this, but he sees it with kindliness. If human beings are Lilliputian, that is not their fault. He noted in his *Journal* his firmly held belief that the 'distinguishing mark of a great novelist' was 'a Christ-like, all-embracing compassion'.

This compassion is so closely interwoven with Bennett's ironic attitude that the two are a seamless fabric. Where we find the one, we find the other, except on the exceedingly rare occasions when he is writing about something he wishes overtly to attack and feels the need to make his irony cutting. (Example: the description of the thought-processes of the Marquess of Welwyn on p. 268.)

Setting aside such very rare sallies, Bennett's irony, which makes up the greater part of his individual flavour, is pronounced

and all-pervading without being hostile or condescending. Take, as a slightly more extended example, his description of the betrothal of Miss Elizabeth Chetwynd, the remote and formidable aunt of Sophia's schoolmistress, to the celebrated preacher Archibald Jones.

> For Archibald Jones was one of the idols of the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, a special preacher famous throughout England. At 'Anniversaries' and 'Trust sermons', Archibald Jones had probably no rival. His Christian name helped him; it was a luscious, resounding mouthful for admirers. He was not an itinerant minister, migrating every three years. His function was to direct the affairs of the 'Book Room', the publishing department of the Connexion. He lived in London, and shot out into the provinces at week-ends, preaching on Sundays and giving a lecture, tinctured with bookishness, 'in the chapel' on Monday evenings. In every town he visited there was competition for the privilege of entertaining him. He had zeal, indefatigable energy, and a breezy wit. He was a widower of fifty, and his wife had been dead for twenty years. It had seemed as if women were not for this bright star. And here Elizabeth Chetwynd, who had left the Five Towns a quarter of a century before at the age of twenty, had caught him! Austere, moustached, formidable, dessicated, she must have done it with her powerful intellect! It must be a union of intellects! He had been impressed by hers, and she by his, and then their intellects had kissed. Within a week fifty thousand women in forty counties had pictured to themselves this osculation of intellects, and shrugged their shoulders, and decided once more that men were incomprehensible. These great ones in London, falling in love like the rest! But no! Love was a ribald and voluptuous word to use in such a matter as this. It was generally felt that the Reverend Archibald Jones and Miss Chetwynd the elder would lift marriage to what would now be termed an astral plane.

Who is the target here? The dignified couple? The women all over the country who picture this 'osculation of intellects'? The airs and graces of successful preachers, in that day when successful preachers were much as television personalities are now? Marriage itself, even? Yes, all of them. One is, in the end, driven back on the banal statement that Bennett's irony is directed at life itself. But it is an irony of acceptance, not of rejection.

There remains the question of Bennett's success in depicting female characters from within rather than, as most male writers necessarily must do, from without. I do not know any way in

which this matter can be judged except by the counting of votes. No literary judgement is capable of proof, in any case, any more than our judgements of people are capable of proof; we get to know others as well as we can, and then we like or dislike them according to our own needs and sympathies. Flaubert is generally said to have succeeded triumphantly with the character of Madame Bovary; if I say that I accept this belief, all I am actually saying is that he, a middle-aged Frenchman, drew a portrait of a young woman which I, a middle-aged Englishman, find entirely credible. On what am I basing my judgement? Simply on my own notion of what young women are like, which might be a tissue of misapprehensions. In the end it is humanity that decides. People have gone on reading about Madame Bovary because they find she comes across as a real person in a real setting, and that therefore her touching story continues to affect them.

In the case of Bennett, the same test will be applied; it has already been applied, for two generations. He wrote very often about women, putting them in the central place in his novels. These full-length portraits are not always equally successful; *The Old Wives' Tale* is the acknowledged masterpiece, *Leonora* an under-rated achievement, *Anna of the Five Towns* more interesting for its sketch of a social scene than for its portrait of Anna, while *Hilda Lessways* by common consent is, at best, a pardonable failure. But in these novels, not to mention other and slighter stories such as *Helen with the High Hand* and *Lilian*, he places the woman at the centre and devotes to her the book's main insight and sympathy. Partly he may have been following the example of the French novel (for French nineteenth-century fiction concerned itself very much with women), but the basic reason must have been his interest in them, his willingness to see their point of view. Ernest Hemingway wrote a volume of short stories called *Men Without Women*. Bennett could have reversed this and called his masterpiece *Women Without Men*. He bundles the male characters offstage as fast as possible, in order to allow the unrestricted play of feminine character. John Baines enters the story as a hopeless invalid and shortly dies. Samuel Povey hardly reaches middle age. Gerald disappears, except for

one death-mask scene, after having set in motion the machinery of Sophia's life. Chirac has scarcely time to declare his love for Sophia before being whisked up in a balloon and never heard of again. Cyril Povey is an important character, but his life mainly happens offstage – indeed, it could be said that the essence of Cyril's importance, the essence of his effect on Constance, is precisely that his life happens offstage. As soon as he is old enough to study art in London, he slides gently out of the story, never having shown much wish to be in it. Only Mr Critchlow, an allegorical figure of mocking old Father Time himself, enters the book already old and survives, 'fabulously senile', determinedly occupying a central part of the stage, till the end.

This ruthless pruning away of the male characters, making us feel sometimes that we are in a world of spiders rather than human beings, leaves Bennett free to show his women as reacting to life directly, and not through the intermediary of men. I personally am convinced of the accuracy of his view of women, but, as I say, my opinion may be worthless. The best critical method, if you are a male reader, is to get your women friends to read the book and pass judgement on the female characterization. I have done this for twenty-five years, and the suffrage has been overwhelming: it is good; it tells the truth; it sees us as we are – or, bearing in mind that Bennett is an historical novelist, as we were.

V

When Arnold Bennett lay dying in his flat in Chiltern Court, Baker Street, the road under his windows was thickly spread with straw. This, a traditional method of muffling the clop of hoofs and the grinding of iron-rimmed wheels, was increasingly irrelevant in the motor age, and its employment in Bennett's case must have been one of the last. Still, employed it was, in an effort to give the dying man some rest; and in the early hours of the morning a milk van, loaded as they were in those days with heavy metal churns, capsized outside Chiltern Court – perhaps because the straw concealed the line of the kerb – with a clanging and grinding and gonging that must have been audible a mile away. Bennett's earthly existence was already over, for he had died

before midnight; but perhaps his spirit, looking down, found some quiet enjoyment in the small ironic comedy. It was so much the sort of thing he always *expected* to happen.

JOHN WAIN