

Knots About Knots



Whence and Whither?, Cyril E Power, 1930

For the first half of my life (so far), I feared that I had no personality to speak of. I had nothing to say to anyone whom I did not already know well; and entering a room full of complete strangers I suffered agonies of apprehension that they would find me a bore. Everyone seemed so self-confident, and if they stood about in little knots conversing with one another I feared to join any of them because I thought I would be an unwelcome intruder who would destroy the flow of conversation. I did not know what to say or how to begin. Moreover, if by some chance I did start to speak, I did not know how or when to stop. Frequently I found to my great embarrassment that my anecdotes would be interrupted before they had reached their denouement and therefore, left hanging in mid-air as it were, seemed completely pointless.

Doctor Johnson says somewhere that shyness is actually an inverted form of self-importance, in so far as the shy person imagines that what he says and how he appears to others is a matter of great moment. He thinks that people will remember and discuss him, rather than merely forget him, after he has gone. He thinks that what he says will remain in the minds of those who hear it. The shy person is thus a pale kind of egotist.

I found it easier to retreat into solitude, preferably accompanied by a book. When I first read Somerset Maugham's short story, *The Book Bag*, I recognised myself at once in the opening paragraph:

Some people read for instruction, which is praiseworthy, and some for pleasure, which is innocent, but not a few read from habit, and I suppose that this is neither innocent nor praiseworthy. Of that lamentable company am I. Conversation after a time bores me, games tire me, and my own thoughts, which we are told are the unfailing resource of a sensible man, have a tendency to run dry. Then I fly to my book as the opium-seeker to his pipe.

Maugham does not actually tell us that social inadequacy was what laid behind his constant resort to reading (he preferred, as I do, a railway timetable to no printed matter at all), but he suffered all his life from a stammer which made normal social intercourse something of a trial for him. By contrast, I suffered from no stammer of the speech, but I suffered quite severely from a stammer of the mind.

The person who resorts to the printed word to hide or assuage his social inadequacy often thinks of himself as superior to those whose ease in the society of others he secretly envies: but Maugham does not allow us this patently false consolation:

Of course to read in this way is as reprehensible as doping, and I never cease to wonder at the impertinence of great readers who, because they are such, look down on the illiterate. From the standpoint of what eternity is it better to have read a thousand books than to have ploughed a million furrows? Let us admit that reading with us is just a drug that we cannot do without. Who of this band does not know the restlessness that attacks him when he has been severed from reading too long, the apprehension and irritability, and the sigh of relief which the sight of a printed page extracts from him? And so let us be no more vainglorious than the poor slaves of the hypodermic needle or the pint-pot.

I leave it to psychologists to decide whether the restlessness, apprehension, and irritability that severance from reading causes in great readers is the same as that of those who experience such feelings when parted too long (five minutes, for example) from their smartphones. However, that even if psychologists were to decide that the two cases were similar or even absolutely identical—the same areas of the brain lighting up in some kind of scan or other during the experience of those feelings—readers would still feel themselves morally superior to the smartphone addicts. And, of course, I would agree with them.

I was browsing in a second-hand bookshop when I happened on a book titled *The Truth About An Author*. It was published anonymously in 1903, and is the account of the early literary efforts and career of a writer who was now (in 1903) moderately successful. In fact, it was written by Arnold Bennett, who was soon to become one of the most successful authors in the English-speaking world, and many of whose novels are still in print. My eye fell at once on this sentence, which I think captures very well the stance many writers who are obsessed by the need to write have to the world:

I, who habitually think in articles, who exist by phrases; I, who seize life at pen's point and callously wrest from it the material which I torture into ... essays, stories, novels and plays; who perceive in passion chiefly a theme, and in tragedy chiefly a 'situation'... I, in short, who have been victimized to the last degree by a literary temperament, and glory in my victimhood ...

No journey, however banal, is undertaken by such a person without imagining, or hoping, that it might furnish material for an article. For example, yesterday, on my way by train to London, I overlooked the tablet that a man who was perhaps a few years younger than I, and who was obviously intelligent, was reading (I was the only passenger in the carriage with a book, which made me feel a relic of a bygone age). At first he read an article titled *Transmission channels of monetary policy*: he was some kind of bureaucrat, then, whose job it was to obfuscate economics by polysyllabic jargon. *Monetary channels of policy transmission* would have done just as well, or *Policy channels of monetary transmission*. But, having read the article, he changed subject matter to *Can cataract surgery treat dementia?*

It being rather difficult to imagine a imagine a field of studies to which both these articles could be relevant, I began to feel rather more sympathetic to the man than if he

were merely a bureaucrat: perhaps he had a relative—an aged mother say—who suffered from both dementia and cataract, and he was clutching at straws in the hope of curing her. One must always remember what one is inclined to forget or disregard, that even persons with whom one does not initially sympathise are subject to tragedies of the normal kind, and suffer just as much people whom we like more.

On my arrival at the station, I (along with everyone else, of course) was subjected to health propaganda of various kinds. A huge liquid crystal screen, too big to be ignored in the way that some banks are too big to fail, demanded that the public answer in their minds a question, namely how many extra junk-food snacks a child who watches at least three hours of commercial television eats per year by comparison with children who watch fewer hours? The choice lay between 36 and 520, and one would have to be exceptionally naïve in the ways of propaganda not to have chosen at once the most dramatic of the possibilities offered.

Then the screen said 'Obesity causes cancer,' and we are told that the advertisement was paid for by the campaign to ban television advertisements of junk food to children.

I at once felt irritated. Practically no one who went his way through the station would have the time or inclination to question the propaganda or the reasoning behind it: television advertising of junk food causes children to eat junk food, junk food causes obesity, and obesity causes cancer. This reasoning *might* be correct from the empirical point of view, but equally it might not. After all, it is easy enough to imagine reasons why watching a lot of junk television might be associated with eating a lot of junk food other than that advertisements shown on junk television induce children to eat junk food who otherwise would not eat it. There is the pretty obvious consideration that children who are parked in front of the television for hours a day tend to come from certain kinds of homes, that is to say homes in which healthy eating and

intelligent striving are not the first priorities.

Having absorbed this propaganda, I went on to an escalator, to the accompaniment of a series of instructions relayed over a public address system telling me (and of course everyone else) how to ride it safely. There were so many safety instructions that they were finished only when it was too late to follow them, for by then we had stepped off the escalator, having been careful in the meantime not to put our fingers in the mechanism or do any of the many other things we were advised not to do, such as try to run up the escalator in the wrong direction. There were also injunctions to denounce our fellow-citizens to the police if we saw any of them behave in a strange or suspect manner. How much life is saved, how many accidents prevented, by this bullying barrage of information, pseudo-information and propaganda about hazards that turn an ordinary journey to London seem like an expedition into the heart of Borneo?

But back to Arnold Bennett. He had been a little on my mind recently because a friend of mine whom I meet regularly for lunch at a certain restaurant chosen by him told me that he had chosen it because he had seen that it offered *Omelette Arnold Bennett* on its menu, and no restaurant that offers this delicious dish, so named because Arnold Bennett always insisted upon it when he lunched or dined at the Savoy, could be other than good—and at least in this instance, he was right.

Anyhow, Bennett says in his anonymous account of his ascent to literary eminence that he followed 'the incredible parasitic trade' of literary criticism, which is an oddly crass thing for him, who was very far from being crass (he was a sensitive and genial literary critic), to have said.

Of course, the Russian Revolution was still fourteen years off when he wrote it, the revolution that brought to power men who took seriously Marx's theory that there was an economic base

(the forces and relations of production of goods) and an ideological and cultural superstructure, the former determining the latter, allowing a small proportion of the population to live parasitically at the expense of others. It was a short psychological step from the theory to the notion that all those involved in anything other than the production of coal or pig iron—how the Soviets came to love pig iron!—were parasitic upon such production.

Bennett's use of the metaphor of parasitism shows how far this mode of thinking had penetrated that of people one might have supposed were naturally immune from it. And indeed, hardly any of us now fails to use the metaphor about some of our fellow-beings at one time or another. Tell me who you think the parasites are—bankers, politicians, trade unionists, priests, financial advisers, managers, mortgage brokers, insurance salesmen, economists, social workers, the unemployed, the number of candidates for the application for the term is almost endless—and I will tell you, if not who you are exactly, what at least your social and political opinions are.

Wherever there is interdependency, there is scope for the use of a metaphor which never has any positive connotations. Indeed, it has a dehumanising quality: we are generally revolted by parasites and parasitism and wish to disembarass ourselves of them as soon and as thoroughly as possible, by whatever means necessary. To call someone or some group of persons parasites is one step below calling him or them vermin.

As parasitism goes, that of literary criticism on literature is a pretty mild form. But within a comparatively few years of the publication of Bennett's book, literary critics were having to toe a line or risk extinction as a species, as they do in many western countries nowadays and in many western universities.