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THE TIMES *Saturday* REVIEW

Autumn 1919 was a momentous season for the young Northamptonshire schoolboy, brought up in the predominantly sensual sights and sounds of the English countryside. He discovered the great native classics when the English master returned from a shattering war and was amazed to have revealed an ability to use the language of Milton himself. More important, he found his first Muse, his listening voice—the passionate Con. "'She's my cousin', my friend said, and it was like the onset of a new disease". An extract from H. E. Bates's forthcoming first volume of autobiography.

Illustration by Pauline Ellison

AWAKENING

by H. E. Bates

The war ended. The grey and dismal morning of the official proclamation was as vivid, for me, though falsely, as the golden days of orchard and harvest-field. The church bells in the ancient and structurally unsafe steeple of the church at Rushden, unpealed in all probability since the relief of Mafeking, pealed gallantly but again, as if to say "We have won. Ring out wild bells! and damn it all". And damned indeed we were to be.

At school there was little or no evidence of any change for a term or two. Then gradually our erstwhile mistresses began to drift away. (One of them at least was well-sculptured and pretty and there used to be stories of favoured members of the upper sixth being invited to her flat to enjoy the seductive solitude of tea and buttered crumpets; but I was too young for that line of luxury.) Soon we had a staff seven-eighths of whom were men, most of them soldiers from the wars returning but one of them, a Welsh International soccer player of much skill who once helped me put the ball into the opposing net eight times for the first XI, for whom I played when I was fourteen. In *The Old School* [an anthology of reminiscences, edited by Graham Greene, 1934] I have stated firmly that "I believe I still thought of becoming a professional footballer . . . but I longed most of all to leave the place and never see it again".

Then in the autumn term of 1919 the hand of the Divinity moved again and something of a miracle occurred. Our instructress for English, a gaunt carroty Scotswoman, under whom I had suffered in steadily mute retrogression of interest in that subject, had left us at the end of the summer term. Anything of even the minutest improvement would have been welcome to us as we reassembled for that autumn, but greatly to our surprise (in my case a stunned surprise) there eventually walked into the classroom a young ex-infantry officer who looked, facially, at any rate, as if he had been mercilessly battered by the shovel of a drunken navvy. He limped; he also had some difficulty in holding the chalk as he wrote on the blackboard, a fact not surprising since he had lost three of his fingers.

Nevertheless the painful distortions of the face, already showing signs of healing from a sort of disordered parchment map into something recognizably human again, couldn't conceal that here was a very English face, once good-looking and still alert, kindly and unembittered by all that war had done to it. The injuries to face and hands had been caused by a single German hand grenade and the limp in the legs by the presence of uncountable bits of shrapnel, many of which continued to roam about the flesh for some years to come, now and then appearing on the surface in order to provide some proof of their existence besides pain.

Edmund Kirby, son of a Northamptonshire farmer, has somewhere described, I believe, the hypnotic presence in the classroom of a pair of vividly blue, enraptured young eyes, ceaselessly watching him as he taught. If his own were thus keenly observant, those of the young pupil he was watching, also the possessor of a very English face, can only be likened to the "transmogrifying magnifying glasses" whose use was urged by the elder Weller, in Mr. Pickwick's unfortunate court case, on Samivel.

If it is possible to change human vision, or at least to waken it, by the stimulus or even shock of a single experience, then this is a perfect example of it. I do not think I am putting it either too highly or fancifully to say that in that one morning in the autumn of 1919 I not only grew up; I grew up into what I was to be. Fanciful as indeed it may sound, I date my literary career from that moment. "Write me", the young ex-infantry officer said to us, "an essay on Shakespeare. I mean from your own point of view. Don't tell me he was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564. I already know that. Don't tell me either that he wrote *Macbeth* or *The Merchant of Venice*. I already know that too."

In case my already expressed self-criticism as the possessor of a rebellious nature may have been misinterpreted as indicating that I was constantly in a state of war against something (though I don't deny that I often am) I ought perhaps to explain here that by rebelliousness I simply mean being told or ordered to do something by somebody in somebody else's way rather than be left alone to do it in my own. For this reason I have never discussed a word of a poem, play, story or novel with anyone before writing it, a process that D. H. Lawrence called "the give away" and which was once excellently illustrated by Miss Rosamund Lehmann, who confessed that whenever she was asked what her next novel was to be about always replied simply "Two women and a man".

Thus left to my own resources, instead of being chivvied about, I succeeded in writing an essay about Shakespeare without mentioning Shakespeare. Whether this was good or bad I have now no notion of knowing. But one thing is quite certain: it was exactly as if, not having run a race in my life, I had suddenly run a hundred yards in 10 sec. dead. I suddenly knew, incontestably, that I was, or was going to be, a writer. This empowering fact (it belonged neither to the region of hope nor desire but simply *was*) I confided to no one, first because I had as yet no one in whom to confide, though this omission was shortly to be remedied, but also because of the outrageous impossibility of such a fact would have seemed as senseless to others as if I had suddenly revealed that I had stumbled on a process of turning strawberry jam into gold.

Secrecy in ambition is a great fertilizer and in secrecy, for a time at least, my ambition flourished. It now seems to me both interesting and odd that whereas I can remember clearly the various examples of compulsory reading I had endured under the stern gaze of the carroty Scotswoman, among them *A Tale of Two Cities* and a whole year, if you please, on *Kenilworth*, I find myself in some confusion in trying to place exactly the first year's reading under Kirby. I am inclined to think that it consisted in some kind of hypersensitive diving into a magical hat: a sweep and a whirl that produced Keats, Shelley, Drayton (*Fair Stood the Wind For France*), Shirley, Herrick, Lovelace, Milton, Chaucer, Tennyson and so on, a great jewelled jumble coming teeming out of what had been, until then, thin, arid air. Of specific books I recall only one, Milton's "a speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing in the Parliament of England": *Areopagitica*.

That book, short though it is, first brought me face to face with the greatness of the English language, so flexible and capable of constant flowering in comparison with the unflowering, grammar-ridden French or the impossible surety garrulity of German; a neatness so ordered and yet musical, so lucid and yet pictorial. As I read Milton's logical but impassioned plea (and it would do us no harm to remember it from time to time) it is not too much to say that I was not only dazzled as by a great vision but that I realized for the first but by no means the last that prose, in our malleable, delicate, incomparable English, can also be poetry:

"I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies forth and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for not without dust or heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary."

. . . It is curious that though I was so carried away on the bright flood-stream of English poetry and the poetic prose of Milton and the Authorised Version I had as yet given no conscious thought to the idea of writing verse myself. I have long supposed that poets write not merely with their own and often secret voice; they need a comparable voice, often secret too, to listen to them. That voice, as far as I was concerned, was still missing. The warm, encouraging voice of a schoolmaster, together with a guiding hand, was admirable but not enough. I needed, without knowing it, another voice, together with another volcanic bang of transformation.

Presently, in the late autumn of 1919, these both arrived: in the shape of a girl.

Before I put down a word about the second of these revolutionary influences I ought to say a little of a third. Somewhere about this time there one day appeared on the morning school-train a complete stranger. For some days we spoke of him merely as "the chap in the green cap". As a gang the dozen or so of us catching the early morning train were inclined to be both clannish and boisterous. We sang popular songs all the way to school, among the ditties being one which Anthony Powell was apparently hearing at the very same time at Eton, namely *K-K-K-Katie, beautiful Katie*, together with that moving tribute to young beauty: *The Tender Blossoms on the tree cannot compare with Mary-Ee*. One of our number was also ingenious and daring, preferring very often to spend the journey swinging from carriage to carriage on the outside of the train, hanging on with his nails at 50 or 60 miles an hour, instead of sitting comfortably inside.

But the boy in the green cap, a couple of years my senior, was neither clannish nor boisterous. He seemed to be coolly exclusive, serious, apart. His pale bespectacled face gave him the appearance of being swotty. He always carried an armful of books in his hand and was always reading, instead of singing, in the train. Soon he had changed his green school cap for our own and soon he and I were walking part of the way home together.

Henry James Byrom was a Lancastrian who had moved from an older and much more distinguished school than our own in the southern part of the county by reason of the fact that his father had died and he was now living with his mother and uncle, who had come to be headmaster of that very same National School where my father had played his tricks so long before and where in fact my future wife was also to spend her schooldays. One of his ancestors had been John Byrom, composer of that Christmas carol still so often sung, *Christians awake! Salute the Happy Morn*. There seems in fact to have been a strong musical streak in the family and Henry himself was musical too.

The pale face and spectacles did indeed conceal a character that was not merely swotty; it was fantastically brainy too. It was also, as it turned out, warm, witty and affectionate. The brains were of the kind that makes off with high honours in exams as easily as most children lap up ice-cream. This did not prevent him from being, like me, a tolerably good footballer and a great lover of music and the countryside and, unlike me, a good amateur actor. He was the sort of young man who inevitably plays the part of Brutus, Richard II and Macbeth in school plays while the Bateses of this world hang about at the back of the crowd scenes, growling like unfed dogs and now and then crying out miserably *Hail Caesar!* or something of that sort.

His scholastic background was unmistakable. In his uncle's house the regular daily newspaper was The Times, which Harry read with the solemnity proper to a London club-man rather than a country schoolboy, whereas ours, as befitted a good Nonconformist Liberal family, was The Daily News. For the rest of his time at school Harry's scholastic lustre outshone that of all the rest of us, until he finally departed for London University under "Old Gollancz" and subsequently to a mastership at Stephen Spender's old school, U.C.S., where Spender confessed in Graham Greene's anthology that his father allowed him sixpence a week pocket money. I can only say here that Spender was lucky. I am pretty sure I am right in saying that I had fourpence, for which I was expected to clean a few shoes and chop a few sticks in return.

But Harry Byrom was, for me, a most lucky turn-up. He was, at that very moment, the very person I needed. His mind, though brainy, was not sticky. In summer we launched out into long country rambles, revelling in the blossoming of bluebell woods, the coming of hay and harvest, the darling buds of May and the beauty of old churches. In the longest days of summer we were up at six, clad in running shorts, ready for a three-mile training session. In winter we sang Handel. Schubert, *There was a Lady Sweet and Kind* and *Riding Down From Bangor* at the piano and gobbled greedily at the only musical fare the town in those days had to offer, a choice generally lying between *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation* on the one hand and *Patience* and *The Pirates of Penzance* on the other.

As is the fashion of growing youth we argued with passion and what we thought was subtlety, thinking ourselves great fellows, and looked down on girls, who in those days mostly wore their hair tied in large funereal black bows at the back, as an unfortunately necessary nuisance to be tolerated distantly. It will perhaps complete the picture of Harry Byrom if I say that he read Ovid as other boys read Edgar Wallace and was on occasion prone to quote Latin to the summer skies or, if we found mushrooms of incomparable quality on some dewy September morning, address them with Keats' joyous cry, "*Ah! the true, the blushful Hippocrene!*"

If you conclude from all this that "the narrow road to a certain demesne of secluded priggishness" was about to open to me you will conclude correctly. Brains are not all; brains, as a critic has recently pointed out with some wisdom, are not for instance necessary for the writing of novels, whereas imagination is; brains may father The Theory of Relativity but not Sam Weller. The business of creating fiction, which at the time of which I am writing was only three or four years away from me, is not one of mathematical exactitudes or soluble equations, but one of lying and distortion. Art, as Picasso has rightly remarked, is not truth.

Fortunately I was about to be turned from the narrow path leading "to a certain demesne of secluded priggishness" into one as totally different as it was unexpected; a circumstance brought about by a combination of accident and Shakespeare.

I have never been ardently fond of school plays. The painting of scenery, the ramifications of stage-lighting, the dressing up, the learning of long speeches, the smell of dust and grease-paint have always given me a certain pain. Painful too has always been the presence on the Great Night of fond parents, ready with handkerchiefs to suppress stinging tears if a nervous offspring should fail with "the quality of mercy", and adoring young ladies from neighbouring schools worshipping some new and newly moustached Mark Antony. My heart still thuds for an extremely small boy given the task of entering the stage from the auditorium at the cue, in Julius Caesar, of "Here comes one in haste", only to see him fall, at the critical moment, flat on his wretched face.

Nevertheless school plays, like church and funerals, have sometimes to be compulsorily attended, at least by pupils. What play we were giving in the autumn of 1919 I have now forgotten, but a certain uneasiness in the memory suggests that it may well have been that messy last infirmity of a noble mind, *The Tempest*. Be this as it may, I went to the Saturday afternoon performance with another friend (Harry Byrom being conspicuously on the stage of course) and much reluctance, no doubt thinking of football.

After a few minutes the play bored me. Certain of my friends tell me that when I am bored, either by conversation or persons, two pale blinds slowly come down over my otherwise brilliantly blue eyes, successfully shutting me away. On this occasion the exact opposite happened. In the semi-darkness of the school-hall I was bored but my eyes were opened. I found them constantly drawn not to the stage and the doings of Ariel, Prospero and Caliban but to the dark-haired handsome head of a girl sitting in the seat immediately in front of me.

It is not too much to say that I was hypnotized by this head and the smallish, dark-eyed face which now and then turned sideways. In the inevitable agony of such occasions I also found myself tortured between the notion that this sidelong movement of the head was either merely casual or that she was covertly and flirtatiously trying to look at me. By the interval I could stand it no longer; I had to know who she was. "She's my cousin", my friend said, and it was like the onset of a new disease.

At the end of the play we were introduced to each other; I was dumbstruck and, wordless, duly departed. All that weekend the liquefaction—I humbly borrow Herrick's perfect word from one of the most perfect of all lyrics—of those dark eyes refused to let me rest. I was, as countless generations of men have been before me, a goner, held in the bonds of calf-love. Though we had hardly met, I found myself already tortured by the repetition of such lines as "parting is such sweet sorrow" and "Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing". Monday and school seemed a million years away.

When both came I got hold of her name and address and, in trembling and trepidation, wrote to her. To my utterly confounded astonishment there came a reply. It was in an envelope, fashionable in those days, lined with deep, rich purple tissue paper. I was addressed as "my dear". The ecstasy of this piece of intimacy immediately drove me into a distracted secrecy; I could speak to no one; I could hardly join in the singing on the train and there are still times when the repetition of Anthony Powell's ridiculous K-K-K-Katie, beautiful Katie haunts me almost as much as Purcell's *When I am Laid in Earth*. Indeed if there had been no reply to my second letter I believe I would gladly have followed the example of that most melancholy of lines.

But there was a reply; we were to meet. We met, as I remember it, in the First Class waiting room on Number Three platform at Kettering station. There is no practical reason whatever for there ever being erected a plaque on a house in London saying *H. E. Bates lived here*; but if there were any justice whatever in the history of railways and twentieth-century novelists there should be a plaque on the door of the First Class waiting-room on Platform Number Three at Kettering station, saying *H. E. Bates loved here*.

Con appeared to me even more hauntingly beautiful, on that second meeting, than at the first. With her black shining hair, her liquid black-brown eyes and her strong well-developed figure, her gym-slip accentuating the shape of her fine young bust, it seemed that Byron's line *She Walks in Beauty Like the Night* was the one most fitted for her. Confronted with this vision, two years older than myself, I was shy, trembling, stiff and troubled.

We promptly talked, astonishingly, of literature; she loved, it seemed, poets such as Mrs. Hemans but also Shakespeare. Indeed she loved all poetry and had herself actually written some. Had I?

Again if there were any justice in the history of twentieth-century literature these two words would go down with the immortality of *Et tu, Brute?* and *Dr. Livingstone I presume?* Had I?

No, I said, I hadn't. I had never even thought of it.

"Why not?"

"Well, I don't know—I don't think I could."

"Of course you could."

"What makes you think so?

"Oh! I sort of *know* you've got it in you."

"How do you know?"

"Oh! you've *got* to write a poem. You've *got* to write a poem for me. Or else—"

This is not, of course, a truthful transcript of the conversation that took place between us but both the sense and tension of it are all there. I say tension advisedly, for, as I was later to discover, this beautiful young girl was also dominant, insistent and a schemer, passionately set on having her own way. I use the word tension because somewhere in that conversation lay a burning threat that if I didn't write her a poem it was more than possible that she would never see me again. The thought was something I couldn't bear.

It might well have been that, in such circumstances, I should have gone flying for solace and inspiration to the Elizabethans, taking something like Suckling's *Tell me not, sweet, I am unkind* as a model or that stricken piece from an anonymous writer of 1658 which starts:

Oh! what a pain is love:
How shall I bear it?

and ends:

I cannot work or sleep
At all in season:
Love wounds my heart so deep
Without all reason.

Instead, I did nothing of the kind. I have already indicated that the outbreak of war had an effect of saddening gloom on me; its end was even worse. Happily my father had neither sister nor brother, and was himself unfit for service, and my mother only one sister: so that from the point of view of wounding or bereaving us we had been spared the more grievous of war's trials. But the effect of those long, black, mortifying lists of killed, wounded and missing that filled column after column of every morning newspaper had made a searing impression on me that has never left me; nor can I ever forget the little improvized street shrines decorated, as one still often sees in little Italian cemeteries, with faded photographs of the dead and a few jam-jars of fading flowers.

Thus affected, I wrote a poem on *The Tomb of the Unknown Warrior*. I suppose it had the piety of extreme innocence about it, but in its way it was not only the first thing I had expressed in verse but probably the most serious I ever was to express in that medium. Shown not only to Con but to Edmund Kirby it suddenly brought me much adulation.

"*There*—I told you you could do it. I *knew* you could. They're going to print it in the school magazine, aren't they?"

Yes: they were going to print it in the school magazine, that universal graveyard of so many budding poets, and they duly did. For myself it was the first of a host of embarrassments of seeing myself in print; for Con it was a moment of triumph. She basked in reflected glory; I was her discovery.

"You see, I *told* you you could. You've got it *in* you. Now you've got to write *more* poems. Lots and lots. Promise me. Lots and lots and lots and lots".

It was all rather like being pushed into playing in a football match without knowing anything about the game and then doing a hat trick. Suddenly, ridiculous as it may now seem, I felt myself propelled along by bounding waves of inspiration. Most of this was instigated by Con and *the love that wounds my heart so deep without all reason*, and the rest by the more reasoned sobriety of Edmund Kirby's praise. A man of few words, even to the point of being phlegmatic, sometimes even sardonic, Kirby was by no means an easy mentor to please.

For the next several months I not only wrote poems. Con and I entered into a long and passionate correspondence. Sometimes our letters went by post, at others by less orthodox means. I should explain here that the Grammar School and High School at Kettering in those days were contained in one building, boys in one half, girls in the other. Though this did not mean that we were in any sense a co-educational establishment it did mean that girls and boys perforce shared certain classrooms though at different times, notably the chemistry labs., the library and the art room, so that it was by no means uncommon for the progress of the boys' upper fifth towards the chemistry lab., on the second floor, to find itself barred on the stairs by the jostling descent of the girls' lower sixth on its way to a lecture on Wordsworth in the library. As a result there was inevitably much confusion, dropping of rulers and note-books, giggling and a great rustling of paper.

As an echo of all this I recently had a letter from a lady, now in her sixties, who wrote: "I am married to Dickie X., who was one of your classmates. I wonder if you remember me? I used to carry Con's love-letters to you up the leg of my knickers." So does the romanticism of first love sometimes survive, with at least some little part of it undiminished over half a century.

But it wasn't until the following spring that there occurred the first real moment of conflagration in first love. Con, as I have said, was a schemer, a feminine characteristic not unknown even in schoolgirls ("Their need is great", I once heard a girls' headmistress say, and the words still seem to me to have in them a truth bordering on poignancy), and one of the first of her schemes was to arrange for me to spend weekends at the house of my friend her first cousin, who lived in the same town a couple of streets away. At first the cousin and his sister, a pretty girl dying of consumption without fully knowing it at that time, used to make a wandering foursome with us to explore the surrounding fields and woods, where wild purple rhododendrons and primroses grew in great profusion. But soon the cousin and his sister were learning to exercise an anti-gooseberry diplomacy, so that Con and I were left more and more to ourselves. This seemed to me marvellous; I grasped at every opportunity of being alone with her, simply to talk of literature, flowers and my new poetry. It was all I needed; I never even remotely imagined that there could be anything more.

One warm fine spring evening we wandered along the wooded banks of a brook, probably a small tributary of the River Welland. Primroses, kingcups, white and purple violets and Shakespeare's Lady-smocks bloomed everywhere about the marshy earth. After some time I stopped to climb a stile and then, suddenly turning my head to look for Con, found myself caught up in an unexpected, swift and passionate embrace, and then kissed long, fully and ardently on the lips.

Continued on page IV

H. E. Bates

How I recovered from this totally unexpected but delicious ravaging of my boyhood innocence I find it hard to say; it sometimes seems to me not at all impossible that I might have been left speechless for the rest of my life. There was certainly, at that ecstatic moment, nothing to say; nor could I have said it if I had wanted to; instead I could only offer my lips in further sacrifice, surrendering to an ardour returned by lips ecstatic, compulsive and not wholly inexperienced. It was no longer a question of sweet, devoted friendship; the moment was more like the fusion of two white-hot wires. I was more than slightly shocked and intoxicated in consequence: it was now a case, in Herrick's words again of:

Thou Art my Life, my Love, my Heart,
The Very Eyes of me;
And hast command of every part,
To live and die for thee.

The over-sensitive intimacies of first love demand, as I have already indicated of poetry, a particular kind of secrecy. The other mundane, timetable ridden, meal-ridden, family-ridden world must be shut out. First love develops in its own sacred, suspended, breathless, often wordless vacuum. It generates, and revels in, its own pain. It has no language of any known syntax or coherence that can express to others outside the vacuum what ecstasy it feels, always believing that others have either not felt it or not in the same way, never pausing to enquire after the fact, as old and inevitable as dawn, that a million million others have.

So we began to meet in secret, or what we thought was secret: under dark railway arches, in remote woods, in hayfields, under wet oak trees dripping with rain, in railway carriages and inevitably, when all else failed, in the First Class waiting-room on Platform Number Three. (We chose the First Class waiting-room because there were never any First Class passengers.) We deluded ourselves that only the most intimate of friends and confidants knew of these things; of course everybody knew. Even the porters at the station knew and occasionally came to spy gleefully on us as we were locked in blind embrace in the First Class waiting-room. The masters at school knew. Now, however, I was no longer bombarded in class with sallies of crushing reprimand such as "I see our friend Bates is dreaming again". The approach was more subtle, the sarcasm infinitely heavier. "I see that our friend Bates has his head in the clouds again. No doubt with eyes on something of more pressing importance than the Treaty of Paris". The word "pressing" of course would draw much laughter.

I did not care if Scott [the headmaster] knew; but I think Con was perpetually alarmed at the prospect of discovery by her Headmistress, a certain Miss White, of secret meetings in corridors and the passage of *billets-doux*: hence the constant need for the clandestine up-the-knickers postal system. On my fourpence a week I couldn't afford many stamps, though Con, who already earned money as a pupil-teacher, my entry into which realm of education would have given Scott so much pleasure, could afford both elegant notepaper and gifts to me of the works of Shelley and Keats richly bound in purple or olive suede at Christmas or on my birthday. In return I once presented her with a sixpenny bar of Cadbury's Milk Chocolate for which I had saved up for three weeks, only to have it rejected on the grounds that I ought not to waste my money. My remorse at such intolerable spurning of my gift was so great that my entire soul was lacerated, a tragedy that didn't prevent my eating the whole chocolate bar myself on my lonely way home in the train.

All this time, egged on by Con, and almost silently encouraged by Kirby, who in his wisdom would rather say nothing at all than outrightly condemn or praise, I was writing poetry. That this poetry was infinitely and execrably bad I have now no doubt; mercifully all of it is now lost. A few years later when Edward Garnett had read and approved my first novel, *The Two Sisters*, which I am happy to say is still in print after more than 40 years, he asked if I had written much poetry and if so would I send him some. Eagerly I replied that I had indeed and sent off a great batch of adolescent MSS. for him to read. Though he had praise for one or two pieces it was not of an exuberant kind. Garnett was rarely wrong in his judgments and I scarcely wrote another couple of dozen stanzas in my life.

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